

**New Farmer Initiative Roundtable**  
**Food Secure Canada Assembly, Halifax NS**  
November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014

*1. Background*

In Edmonton in 2012, FarmStart and FarmON.com convened a group of new farmer practitioners to share and discuss opportunities for new entrants. The session featured 12 presenters from across Canada sharing snapshots of their new farmer work, with a total of 41 participants.

Under Food Secure Canada (FSC) there has been interest in supporting the next generation of farmers under a broad, national, food security umbrella. The work of convening new farmer leaders in 2014 built upon these fledgling initiatives, which, together, form a foundation of collaborative new farmer work in Canada.

*2. Rationale*

**Canada's farmers are aging rapidly.** Half are over 55; in the next 15 years we will see 140,000 farmers exit, transferring an estimated \$86 billion of farm assets, leaving 93,000 farms and 72 million acres of land with no clear transfer plan. Heavy debt loads and retirement funds tied up in the land make it difficult for retiring farmers to pass on their farms.

**There are significant barriers for new entrants into farming.** Access to land, start-up and operating capital are often difficult if not impossible for new farmers, even more so for those without a farm background. Tight profit margins and uncertain conditions (market, weather etc.) make it hard for new farmers to make a living from their farms; often they are discouraged from continuing. Training, mentorship and extension programs, which require an investment in knowledgeable staff, lack capacity and core funding. Labour is difficult to source and fund. These myriad barriers to new farmer success require broad-based action.

**We are facing a crisis in farm and farmer renewal.** The consistent loss of farmland and farmers over decades demonstrates the need to rebuild rural communities, rural economies and local food production capacity, starting with the producers. Across the country organisations are working to encourage a new generation of farmers, but they are not supported by federal policy. Because of this lack of support, they do not have the resources and the tools to act as effectively as they need to.

*3. Who is involved?*

The New Farmers Initiative (NFI) is a Food Secure Canada project in support of new entrants into agriculture (new farmers). Work thus far has been directed by FarmStart in collaboration with FarmON.com (2012) and the National Farmers Union Youth Caucus (2014) and has been funded by the JF McConnell Foundation.

#### 4. Objectives

To engage a diverse group of new farmers and new farmer stakeholders on a national and regional basis, with the overarching aspiration of increasing the number of successful new farm businesses in Canada. This will be accomplished by consulting with, convening and distributing resources for new farmer leaders across the country and building a network of RL's with capacity to move forward with regionally.

#### 5. Roundtable

Building on the 2012 FSC New Farmer Roundtable (NFR), the sessions on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014 brought new farmer leaders together to expand the national knowledge base of needs and opportunities for new farmers and build a platform for new regional and federal developments. Many of the 75 participants were farmers themselves with experience in the field, as well as being representatives of organisations across Canada involved in new farmer work .

The day unrolled in three parts:

- 1) *Access to Land and Finance*, with 3 speakers, Anne Marie Royal of Terre de Liens, Paul LeComte of FIRA, and Christie Young of FarmStart;
- 2) *Information Sharing and Policy Mobilization*, with one primary speaker, Sophie Ackoff of the National [US] Young Farmers Coalition and short talks from the NFI's 6 regional leads (RL's) and the NFU Youth/National New Farmer Coalition (Canada); and
- 3) *Roundtable Breakout Groups* with four groups, Land, Training, Finance and Coalition Building.

Subsidized travel for 35 of the NFR participants gave the new farmer community an unprecedented opportunity to gather in one place (see [attached Invited Regional Attendees](#)). During the sessions, at lunch (provided in the NFR room by the FSC Assembly), and at dinner at the Wooden Monkey restaurant in Halifax, there was ample opportunity for networking, idea-generating and getting deep into the issues at hand.

The presentations from Terre de Liens, FIRA and FarmStart walked participants through viable program models of new farmer land access and finance, sparking questions and providing vision. The webinars that followed the NFR continued this dissemination of models from across North America and globally that improve the capacity of new farmers. The National Young Farmer Coalition presentation was extremely well received and generated a lot of excitement about how to advocate for new farmers in Canada.

*"Really useful and motivating presentations."*

*"I really appreciated the NYFC presentation, which was very inspirational"*

The RL presentations provided perspective into specific challenges, successes and programming available in each area and the invited new farmer leaders from those areas filled out the group's understanding in formal and informal discussion. Conclusions drawn from the breakout groups are

brought together in the attached NFI Policy Round-up and a summary of programs/models in the attached New Farmer Programs document.

*"I loved the regional coordinator updates. Hearing a short presentation on each region's new farmers situation was great (in particular from the Territories since I rarely hear that perspective)."*

*"Good engagement, looking forward to more conversations"*

Some constructive feedback was that much of the session time was taken up by presentations and more space could have been given for networking and facilitated discussion during the sessions. This will be taken into account in regional and national new farmer gatherings in the future.

*"There was good informal networking opportunities but more "day time" should have been dedicated to engaging/working with the attendees."*

## 6. Outcomes

The NFR inspired a lot of dialogue among new farmers and new farmer practitioners. There was consensus that another such gathering would be useful, especially with more time for facilitated sessions and open discussion of the issues. The RLs agreed that the consultation processes were very helpful for characterising the new farmer experience, but that far more in-depth work was needed. This was to be expected since the investigation was short-term and aimed to produce a regional "snapshot" of the people, services, programs, challenges and possible solutions for new farmers. The work was also intended to create an appetite for more research, networking and engagement in policy. In this it was successful as we have a team of people willing to engage going forward.

The webinar series following the NFR filled in some gaps by adding information on finance, training and land access as per the breakout groups. The National New Farmer Coalition (Canada) has continued its grassroots networking stemming in part from action planning during the NFR and FSC has convened a stakeholder call on new farmers to discuss their election platform, with the participants and key players identified during the NFI consultations and NFR. At the Broadbent Institute's Summit in March 2015, one of the RL's participated in FSC's lunch with the Food Movement session, communicating some of the learning from the NFI to politicians and strategic food thinkers.

The NFI and NFR process were useful in building another layer of knowledge and capacity into the new farmer movement, unearthing gaps (geographically and otherwise), and identifying those with the energy to carry things forward during the election year and going forward. It has left sparks of hope and passion for this work in each region and nationally. These sparks will continue to grow and benefit agriculture, food security and job creation in Canada.

~ written by Margaret Graves, FarmStart