

Report on New Farmer Challenges/Barriers and New Farmer Policies in Ontario

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Background

The farmer population in Ontario, as in other parts of the country, has seen a steady decline; this decline along with the increasing age of farmers is two of the major issues that the farm sector faces today. Currently only 1.5 per cent of the total population of the province are farmers, while the number of farmers that are 65 years and older is increasing. This is in spite of possessing almost half of the class 1 farmlands in the country and being able to support a diverse range of agricultural enterprises (Ontario, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2012; Statistics Canada, 2006). In spite of its importance, this issue has only recently begun to attract the attention of those working in the agricultural sector and policy makers. There have been a number of civil society organizations that have been working towards supporting and encouraging a new generation of farmers for more than two decades (for example: Everdale), it was only on 2010 that the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture released its resources for new farmers. While this is a welcome trend, more definitely needs to be done at the governance and policy levels if we are to address the problem of a disappearing and aging farmer population. Further, almost 30 percent of Canada's farm operators are expected to retire in the next 15 years and many of them do not have a successor to take over their farm enterprises (Seccombe, 2007, p.12). While there are no separate numbers for Ontario, anecdotal evidence indicates that numbers are similar in Ontario. Lost in the statistical data is the fact that along with the loss of farmers the province is also losing valuable experiential knowledge of local agro ecosystems. This knowledge is irreplaceable and was traditionally transferred intergenerationally.

The solution to both, the land succession, and declining and aging farmer population lies in infusing new farmers into the sector. Traditionally, intergenerational farm transfers were the norm with sons/daughters taking over the farm enterprises from their parents. Due to socio-economic factors, which include reduction in requirement for human labor, farm viability, increase in farm size and rural urban migration, this traditional succession method is not fulfilling the need for new farmers. Clearly there is a need to engage with other cohorts from outside farm families to fill this growing gap. There is potential for young people from urban areas, new immigrants and second career farmers fill the growing gap and infuse new ideas and innovation into the farming sector. This will need a better understanding of the challenges and barriers that these cohorts face when they try to enter the farm sector. While some of these barriers can be solved at the ground level (for example: training) others like land access and start up capital need policy level interventions and changes at the structural level.

New Farmer Profile

New Farmers in Ontario, based on the cohorts that organizations like Everdale, FarmStart, Just Food and other new farmers support networks serve, can be broadly classified under three categories:

Young People – this cohort primarily consists of those who have little or no connection with the farming sector. In most cases they are below the age of 30 and predominantly reside in urban areas. Some in this cohort may have parents or grandparents who were farmers before they moved on to the cities. Those in this category are fairly well educated and have taken active part in some food related activities that exist in the cities, for example urban farming, community gardens.

Second Career – This cohort consists of mostly older people (40 and above) who decide to take up farming as a second career. Anecdotal evidence points to many in this group becoming interested in food and subsequently farming for their own health reasons or their families health. Many in this category either have had high paying jobs or are still working.

New Canadians – Ontario has traditionally been the province of choice for new immigrants to Canada. While in recent year there has been a drop in the total number of immigrants coming to the province, the numbers are still substantial. International migration is poised to contribute to population growth in the country. China and South Asian constitute form the major portion of current immigrations streams. People from these regions have close connection to farming. The potential for new immigrants to enter into the farming sector has received scant attention; nevertheless there is ample scope for this cohort to contribute to the farming population, but the barriers they face need to be understood and the right support structure established.

The New Farmer Initiative (NFI)

Goal

The goal of the New Farmer Initiative is to reduce barriers facing new entrants into farming using a national cross-sector consultation process. The New Farmer Initiative intends to be an advocate for policy changes that will help new farmers succeed, by consulting key people across Canada to help figure out what barriers exist for new farmers, and what policy areas should pursued on a national level to overcome some of these barriers.

NFI - Phase One

Phase one of the NFI strives to identify and document the barriers and challenges that new farmers face from an organizational perspective. The organizations that will be part of this phase are those working on new farmer issues. They will form key stakeholders that the NFI must engage with in the long term to achieve its goal.

The organizations that were contacted in Ontario were broadly grouped into three categories:

- Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
- Farm Associations and Commodity Groups – Ontario Federation of Agriculture, Grain Farmers of Ontario
- Not for Profit organizations working with new Farmers - Everdale

Key personnel in the above three categories (see Appendix A), who were either working with or interested in new farmer issues, were contacted and interviewed. In total nine personnel were interviewed. Most of the commodity groups did not respond to email or telephone calls in spite of repeated requests. Please see Appendix B for list of interview question.

New Farmer Barriers and Challenges

Some of the main barriers listed by the interviewee are listed below in order of importance:

1. Lack of farm management knowledge – new farmers lack the awareness of the time and investment, both in terms of knowledge and resources, it takes to start a farm enterprise
2. Access to land
3. Land values
4. Cost of entry, farming is capital intensive
5. Land tenure options – control and security of land assets
6. Access to start up capital from traditional lending institutions
7. Access to training and other timely resources at the exploring and start up stage
8. Business and marketing skills

9. Availability of experts in the relevant fields and at the right times
10. Entrepreneurial spirit and innovativeness – not just jumping the bandwagon
11. Red tape and administrative work load as part of regulatory requirements
12. Supply managed systems acts as barrier to entrant

Policy Directions

The interviewees suggested a number of policies that they thought would be helpful in addressing the barriers new farmers face and support them in their entry into farming. Given below is a comprehensive list of all the policy ideas.

- New entrant programming for the supply managed sector
- Access to credit for new farmers
- Fiscal incentives for retiring farmers to facilitate farm succession – like tax credits
- Investment fund to support start up stage – preferably nation wide
- Prioritizing healthy food systems at provincial and federal level
- Policies for non-family succession
- Policies to improve financial literacy among farmers
- Creation of clear career pathways for new and young farmers
- Regulatory review to look at land zoning
- Higher cost share for new entrants under GF2
- Support for access to land
- Creation of public – private investment fund to help new entrants with little or no collateral
- Create cross sectoral policy initiatives to support new entrants
- Small holder quota for chicken and turkeys
- Agriculture and food awareness in school curriculum

Important Stakeholders in Ontario

It is clear that the work around new farmers should encompass all sectors. It was clearly stated by an interviewee that immaterial of the differences that exist on the production side, namely organic vs. conventional, the sector has the potential to work together on the issue of the need for new farmers. In Ontario some of the main organizations that could form a valuable part of the NFI are:

- Commodity groups
- Farmer associations

- Food and farming related non-profit organizations
- Food policy councils
- Selected community colleges

While it will be easy to pinpoint the possible stakeholders in each of the above categories, at this stage, it is advisable and will serve the initiative better to reach out (once more) to as many as possible before narrowing it down to those who might champion the cause of new farmers and those who will not be interested.

Overall Views of the Regional Lead

Based on the conversations and analysis of the data collected in Ontario, acquiring the appropriate knowledge and skills, and awareness of the time and cost involved in farming seems to be the number one barrier. Access to land seems to be on par to the above for most of the interviewees. This followed by access to financial capital especially at the start up stage. This clearly indicates that the soft skills, which include production training, business planning and budgeting, innovativeness and marketing skills are as important as the physical resources like land and capital. Clearly there is the need to address these barriers through a suite of programs and not one before or after the other. In Ontario, the new Canadian farmer angle is all but absent, none of the interviewees raised this issue. This will require bringing in stakeholders outside the agricultural sector, if not done, will be a lost opportunity.

The need for new farmers has the potential to build the bridges between the different agricultural sectors. The time to seize the opportunity in spite of the seemingly impossible difficulties, numerous hurdles and differences is upon us, as doing nothing is no more an option, as at stake is the future of our food and farming systems.

References

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APPENDIX A

Organizations Interviewed

Ontario Federation of Agriculture

Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario

Union des Cultivateurs Franco-Ontariens

Ontario Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs – Policy and Farm Succession Division
Everdale

Grounded Business Solutions

Kingston Food Policy Council

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. *Our goal is to identify the most pressing challenges facing new farmers across the country across sectors.*

Question: Please share with us the barriers facing new Farmers in your sector/region?

2. *Our goal is to find policy initiatives that we can all support or work on together (or alongside one another) that will serve new farmers across sectors.*

Question: Please share with us your top 3 policy initiatives are that you are currently working on or would like to see.

3. *We are building a National New Farmers Initiative that will include stakeholders from across sectors and organizations. We would like to coordinate a series of roundtables to share information and to coordinate each of our efforts so we can see political, practical and movement that will support farm succession, sector renewal and better serve a new generation of farmers.*

Questions:

- 1) **Would you like to be involved? In what way?**
- 2) **What kind of information, resources and capacity could you bring to this effort?**

4. *We are developing a survey - the purpose is to engage and capture real and useful information about new, beginning, prospective, and even failed new farmers - across the county. We want the survey to be flexible and tailored enough that we can capture regional and provincial information as well but also consistent so we can aggregate national level information.*

Questions:

- 1) **What demographic and nuanced data are you looking for or unable to find regarding new farmers in your sector?**
- 2) **Would you be interested to provide feedback on the survey development?**
- 3) **Would you be willing to distribute the survey to your members and networks?**