

# Harvesting a lifestyle of pride, economics

Ontario farmers help create \$63 billion in sales, employ more than 767,000 people

**WAWN HIMMELSBACH**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

It's not an easy life: They work long hours, they rarely get a day off, and they're at the mercy of Mother Nature. So why do farmers do it?

Phil Tregunno is a fourth-generation farmer, who grows tender fruits such as peaches, nectarines, plums and grapes, along with his wife, two sons and daughter-in-law in Niagara-on-the-Lake. He's also chair of the Ontario Tender Fruit Growers.

"It's a business but it's also a lifestyle," he said. "There's a lot of pride involved in growing and operating a farm, and a great sense of satisfaction in getting a crop up. If you grow a tomato in your backyard, that's the best tasting tomato you've ever had, and you're so proud of that tomato. Well, we get that every day."

Farmers are also essential to the economy. From smaller family farms to co-operatives, co-packing plants and large farming operations, the ag-food business is helping to build communities and create jobs. Ontario's food system generates more than \$63 billion in sales and employs more than 767,000 people, according to Econometric Research Ltd. And that translates to 12 per cent of the paid labour force.

Though his father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all farmers, Tregunno wasn't planning to continue the family business — he fell into it when his father passed away. After stepping in to run the farm, he realized that was where he wanted to be.

Tregunno sees a lot of growth in the ag-food business. Growing up, there wasn't a big "buy local" movement in Ontario. But that's changed. "We've always pushed buying local, but when it became an environmental issue that's when it really took off," he said. "It really has revitalized the industry, there's great support from retailers."

There's also growth in smaller, niche markets, such as organics. "We're always looking for new varieties," he said.

But farming these days comes with its challenges. "The availability of land is really critical now," Tregunno said. "If we didn't have a Greenbelt and it wasn't protected, it would be all gone." The population is growing,



STAR METRO MEDIA TREGUNNO FARMS

Phil Tregunno, centre, a fourth-generation farmer who grows tender fruits such as peaches, nectarines and grapes, with his family in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

**"The farm community in Ontario is one of most productive sectors of the province, and it will be called upon to be even more productive in the future."**

**JEFF LEAL**  
ONTARIO MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

but there's less farmland, and fewer people farming it. "At one point in time we had about 1,200 tender fruit growers (in Ontario); now we're looking at 250 to 300."

Farmers are also under pressure from foreign buyers to sell their land, so "you get farmland at prices that are not reflective of what you can grow on it." Absentee ownership isn't good for the land, either. "Farmland needs the owner's fingerprints on it to really thrive," he said.

While preserving farmland is an issue in rural areas, it's also an issue for urban farmers looking for accessible, affordable land. Jacqueline Dwyer, co-founder of Black Farmers and Food Growers Collective of Toronto, is a farmer and community organizer, with a mission to grow clean food. She wants to help provide all generations within the African diaspora with access to affordable, clean foods, as well as food sustainability and a stronger sense of community.

"I am a food insecure person for many reasons on the strata," she said.

The collective — a member of the cross-cultural food access hub FoodShare Toronto — is a group of farmers, growers, small business owners and food insecure families. "We came together to change the narrative," said Dwyer, who has been farming at Downsview Park as part of Fresh City Farms since 2013.

"We bring more diverse foods here, whether it's tropical or equatorial, and we are asking other farmers and growers to join us. It's vital with this new national food policy coming in place that we start ... to dismantle clean food poverty."

Noel Livingstone, also a co-founder, is an urban farmer and musician, avid about community development, food policy and food justice. He spends a lot of time working in the collective's greenhouse, growing foods that aren't easily accessible in grocery stores, such as tropical fruits.

"Moon-and-pop stores can't afford ... to pay the farmers in Jamaica or Trinidad or Africa to grow food in bulk, so (these foods) are gradually being deleted from the market," he said. "We believe if we have access to space in a greenhouse, we have the knowledge to do what we need to do." They're growing, for example, five varieties of sweet potatoes.

Access to land is an issue for both rural and urban farmers. The province, for its part, is creating a new soil map. "It will identify those areas of Ontario that we must retain for the production of agricultural products," Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Jeff Leal said.

"It will assist our administrative partners to stay away from valuable farmland ... and allow us to sustain agriculture in the province of Ontario."

After all, agriculture is the largest economic driver in Ontario, making up \$6 billion of the GDP, Leal said. This is predicated on 50,000 family farms producing 200 commodities; 65 per cent of what is grown in Ontario is processed in Ontario. "What that tells you is the farm community in Ontario is one of most productive sectors of the province," he said, "and it will be called upon to be even more productive in the future."

## Economic growth — down on the farm

Resilient ag-food sector has potential for expansion with investment in rural Ontario

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The agri-food sector is the backbone of Ontario — both historically and economically. Beyond the variety of food products that are grown, raised and produced in the province, the ag-food sector is creating quality jobs and driving the economy.

Ontario's food and beverage processing sector, for example, generates \$41 billion in revenue, providing more than 130,000 direct jobs, according to Food and Beverage Ontario. And it generates another \$24.1 billion in indirect economic impacts.

"People don't really understand the size or the impact of the agricultural industry," said Keith Currie, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, and a Collingwood-area hay and sweet corn farmer.

"There's a lot of people in the GTA connected to the ag-food industry that don't realize they're in the ag-food industry."

To put it in perspective, Ontario provides close to one-third of the nation's agriculture, he said. "Agriculture is recession-proof," he said. "Commodities have ups and downs, but it's a pretty good economic base for any jurisdiction."

Yet, farmers are often undervalued, said Burkhard Mausberg, CEO of the Greenbelt Fund. "I would put farmers on the same pedestal as doctors," he said. "Doctors are here to cure us when we're sick; farmers are giving us sustenance to live. In producing the food that we need to survive, their status in society is vastly underappreciated."

Yet, it's a resilient industry that has the potential for huge growth. The University of Guelph, for example, is ranked as one of the top five agricultural universities in the world. And for every student graduating from its agricultural program, there are four jobs waiting. These jobs aren't strictly related to farming food products — they include everything from energy to biotech and pharmaceuticals.

The university is conducting groundbreaking research in areas such as robotic applications that could be applied to agriculture. And



MATHEW MCCARTHY

Sunset at a farm on Northfield Drive, near Waterloo, Ontario provides close to one-third of the nation's agriculture.

Ontario farmers are developing products to meet consumer tastes, including those of new Canadians and those with food intolerances.

Preservation of land is top of mind, but so is smarter planning. "Our farms are getting bigger, the equipment is getting bigger, the road infrastructure isn't. (Some farmers) have to drive hours to get to the nearest

grain elevator," Currie said.

He says there's a need to invest in rural infrastructure that will help farming communities thrive, from roads to schools to hospitals. "We feel there's real economic development opportunities in rural Ontario ... there's opportunities for high-skilled, high-paying jobs. But we're still advocating for responsible

growth."

"This is where technological advancements, food innovations and a spirit of entrepreneurship could help the ag-food business. "Big data is important so we're collecting data all the time and using it smarter, (such as) growing more with less," Currie said. "It's kind of made farming sexy again."



“ My family has been farming for over 100 years, and we are proud to be supplying fresh eggs to the community. Choosing local means supporting farming families like mine in rural communities across Ontario. ”

**Bonnie Clark**  
4th Generation Farmer



Possibility grows here.

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