



> THE GREENBELT FUND, PART 3

Rethinking the path to your plate

Local food champions help farmers expand their markets

DICK SNYDER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

In the third of a four-part series on the Greenbelt Fund, we see the impact when local producers are connected with food buyers.

It's all well and good that there are more than 52,000 farms in Ontario producing everything from vegetables and dairy to meat and grains. The real challenge is getting this food to the folks in Ontario who want to eat it.

To be sure, distribution isn't the sexiest element in the local food equation, but it may well be the most important. Even 100-kilometre food needs to catch a ride to where the action is.

But, like most big business, it's all about volume as the path to efficiency. In Ontario, a few food distribution channels control the majority of the food supply. In retail, four companies carry most of the volume, and there are just eight distribution companies delivering that food supply.

This system does not favour small and medium-sized farmers, though these represent more than 80 per cent of Ontario farms. Sound like a problem?

Enter the Greenbelt Fund, which is all about connecting local food leaders and Ontario and Greenbelt farmers to public institutions, retail outlets and food markets. It sounds easy enough, but modifying the old ways of doing business and creating a leaner, smoother, more transparent system takes time and money — and some considerable will.

Greenbelt Fund grants are helping to make it happen. Ten years ago, legislation was put in place to establish Ontario's protected Greenbelt lands, now covering almost two million acres, as a catalyst for initiatives to strengthen the viability of local agriculture. In 2010, the Greenbelt Fund was created to further support agriculture in the Greenbelt and throughout Ontario. Its mission is to provide grants to projects designed to boost consumption of Ontario-grown food in the province, especially in the broader public sector.

With support from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, the Greenbelt Fund has granted more than \$8 million, resulting in about \$63 million in increased sales of Ontario-grown food. For every \$1 invested, an economic benefit of more than \$7 is realized.

Today, we seem to be on the right path. But jump back in time, maybe 10 or 15 years ago, before the locavore movement hit its stride. Do you recall seeing the word "heirloom" on the menu in front of "tomato salad"? Or the name of the farm where the



SHAYNE GRAY

A Greenbelt Fund grant is helping 100km Foods get food from small farms to an expanding range of institutions such as hospitals and universities.

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PETER BOZZER
GORDON FOOD SERVICES

cow that provided that rib-eye was raised?

You didn't, partly because nobody knew for sure where the food came from — the box might say "Ontario," but that was about it. Fast-forward to 2015, and putting the stamp of provenance on food is not only expected, it's an important part of food safety and traceability.

"Local" is no mere token, it's the wave of the future.

"I see (local) becoming a part of the landscape," says Peter Bozzer of Gordon Food Services, one of North America's largest food distribution companies, with sales in Ontario of about \$800 million.

"We're going past using the verbiage of 'trend.' I refer to it as a movement and I believe that it has permanently changed the landscape of how our customers do business and how consumers do business."

A family-run company, Gordon Food Services has been operating for more than 115 years. It's embracing local, with the help of the Greenbelt Fund, by revamping its ordering, tracking and labelling systems. As it had never been protocol for distribu-

tion companies such as Gordon to identify the origin of food, it was impossible to pass this information on to customers.

Bozzer was hired about a year ago to be the company's local food specialist, developing new relationships with farmers and other local food champions and also getting word out that it's no longer business as usual.

Through the partnership with the Greenbelt Fund, he says, "we now have the ability to provide clarity to our customer with respect to local foods. So when they order through a sales rep or our online ordering system... and they punch in 'carrot,' 40 different items come up and they can distinguish the local from the imported."

"Since 2010 we have doubled the amount of products of Ontario that we offer our customers," says Bozzer. "Our local sales are growing at more than 20 per cent over the previous year, with no signs of slowing down. That is a direct reflection of the increased interest in local food as well as our expanded product offering."

He adds emphatically: "This is not a 'project' — this is now ingrained and it's the way we do business."

Bozzer notes that one of the most important contributions of the Greenbelt Fund to the Ontario food industry has been its role as catalyst and connector, bringing farmers, food-service companies and consumers in the broader public sector

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together to exchange ideas and find new ways to work together.

Paul Sawtell at 100km Foods, a small but growing distributor focused on smaller farms, feels the same.

Sawtell throws an annual "mixer" in which he invites his farmer vendors and restaurant and institutional customers together. Something good always happens.

"We bring the chefs up to visit the farms," he says. "We don't want to be nameless, faceless intermediary. Everyone benefits when everyone works together and knows where their food is grown."

Sawtell and his wife, Grace Mandarano, started 100km Foods in 2008 after leaving their jobs in the pharmaceutical industry to work on something closer to their hearts. 100km Foods is an aggregator, picking up food from small Greenbelt and Greater Golden Horseshoe farms and delivering it directly to restaurants and small retail stores. With the help of the Greenbelt Fund, their reach is expanding.

Being relatively small, 100km's

strength is that they can offer rapid delivery, specialty items and guaranteed freshness. But scaling up has been a problem. Having launched their business with just two trucks to do pickups and deliveries, says Sawtell, "we'd go from zero to 100-per cent inventory, then to zero again."

With a Greenbelt Fund grant, he was able to buy two more trucks, which allowed him to keep a steady supply coming in and going out. In turn, this allowed him to add more farms and service a larger area beyond the GTA. Twenty-three producers have been added to their roster, along with 58 new customers.

"It took five to six years to become financially sustainable," he says. From first-year revenues of \$242,000, 100km Foods' annual sales are now \$2.3 million.

While 100km Foods is still a tiny fish in a really big pond, that's not such a bad thing. In a pilot project, the Greenbelt Fund helped bring 100km together with large-scale food distributor Sysco, essentially combining the best of both worlds. 100km Foods sources product from its small-farm partners and Sysco uses its logistical might to get it to institutions.

In effect, two competing companies are working together for the greater good. Co-operative and efficient, it's a partnership that would have been unfathomable just a few years ago.

St. Joseph's food purchasing group creating change from within

MEALsource helps farmers expand into health markets

DICK SNYDER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Wendy Smith has the power to make people eat more local food.

But what really makes her happy is helping Ontario and Greenbelt farmers get their food into more health-care institutions. This is no mean feat, as procurement policies and practices can make it difficult for smaller-scale farmers and producers to break in.

Smith helps to ease the process. She is one half of a dynamic duo that runs MEALsource, a non-profit group and purchasing program that operates under St. Joseph's Health System. From a small office on the fifth floor of St. Joe's facility in Brantford, Ont., she and manager Candice Bes-

ter facilitate \$16 million worth of purchases annually for 33 health-care food service operations throughout Ontario.

What's the upside for farmers, suppliers and distributors getting access to broader public sector institutions? Well, this market in Ontario covers about 150 hospitals, 250 municipal and college-operated child-care centres, 100 municipal long-term care homes, 22 universities, 28 colleges, 100 school boards and more.

The economic potential for local food is huge, and it is organizations like MEALsource that are making it happen.

"The biggest piece of our job is vendor education. They say you don't buy our stuff and we say you don't play our game," she says with a laugh. Smith takes the time to work with vendors and walk them through the RFP process, explaining how they

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WENDY SMITH
MEALSOURCE

need to meet criteria for such things as quality, safety and traceability.

In 2012, MEALsource and My Sustainable Canada, working in partnership, were recognized as Greenbelt Fund Local Food Champions. Their project started with an audit to document the origins of hundreds of food products purchased by health-care facilities.

This led to a transformation in the bidding process to require information on food origin. Right away, more local producers began to respond, and purchasing of Ontario food has

jumped by 15 per cent.

The contracts are designed with long-term stability in mind, meaning farmers can count on a commitment that will allow them to invest in their own growth.

"When we contract with a vendor, we provide anticipated annual volume and promise to meet that by a minimum of 85 per cent. Should that commitment need to change, we provide 30 days' notice so that the vendor can appropriately react to the decrease or increase in demand."

MEALsource helped VG Meats in Simcoe, Ont., win its first contract, after their first bid was unsuccessful.

"We went through the process, and I said, here's the kind of product we wanted, and here's the type you offered.' And two years later they came back, met the criteria and were awarded three (products) in the program."



SHAYNE GRAY

Wendy Smith of MEALsource, a non-profit that purchases food for health-care food service operations.

With a two-year commitment, VG Meats was able to invest in strategic growth plans that will go even further to solidify their business.

"When we bring someone along to first win, it's very rewarding," Smith says. "Hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, patients will expect quality local products on their trays and their expectations will be met."



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You and your family deserve more local food. Is it being served in your community's restaurants, stores, and public institutions?



Possibility grows here.

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