

# Reaping financial benefits of fresh, homegrown food

Agriculture contributes \$35.4 billion to Ontario's yearly gross domestic product

DICK SNYDER  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

To say that Ontario's agri-food industry is an economic powerhouse may sound like hyperbole, but in fact it's something of an understatement. Or, at least, it may very well be in a few decades.

One out of every nine people employed in Ontario work in the agri-food system directly or indirectly, contributing more than \$63 billion in economic activity to the province, according to Dollars and Sense: Opportunities to strengthen Ontario's Food System (2015).

The report found that for every direct job generated by farm operating expenditures, "another 0.86 full-time equivalent jobs were generated by the indirect and induced effects."

According to Jeff Leal, Ontario's minister of agriculture, food and rural affairs, agriculture contributes \$35.4 billion to Ontario's annual gross domestic product.

"Depending on how you rank it, this puts agriculture either first or second in competition with the auto sector in the province," he said in an interview. "Seven hundred and ninety thousand people wake up every day to work in primary food production, food processing, distribution, food service and retail."

The importance of the agri-food industry is not lost on politicians or the public, both of whom have expressed continued support for The Greenbelt Act passed in 2005, which today has a 90-per-cent approval rating among Ontarians.

The act protects almost two million acres of valuable farmland, forests, wetlands and watersheds in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), while guiding smart planning for sustainable growth and jobs in Ontario. "Certainly in southern Ontario, once the Greenbelt came into force there was a real catalyst for more local food," said Burkhard Mausberg, CEO of the Greenbelt Foundation and the Greenbelt Fund.

"And there should be. If we're asking the farmers to maintain their land and production, then we should be buying their product. The benefit of the Greenbelt is only going to be as good as the success of the farmers in

the Greenbelt."

Mausberg says local food sales increase by \$13 for every \$1 invested by the non-profit Greenbelt Fund. The Fund's mandate is to shepherd more local food into the province's food system and public institutions.

Since its inception, almost \$10 million has been directed by the Greenbelt Fund to a variety of projects, including food literacy, food hub development, farmers' markets, equipment, research, logistics and distribution.

"There are three reasons why local food is important," said Mausberg. "One, food miles. If you buy local, you reduce air pollution, and carbon emissions from transportation.

"Secondly, there's a clear economic benefit to our neighbours, our farmers, our friends, who ought to earn a decent living — and if we buy from them we are helping them and the broader economy.

"And third, flavour. Think of a Niagara peach or strawberry and it tastes much better. It's not picked too soon and doesn't need to be transported so far."

There were 10 farmers' markets in Toronto when the Greenbelt was established, says Anne Freeman, director of the Greenbelt Farmers Market Network. "Now there are more than 30."

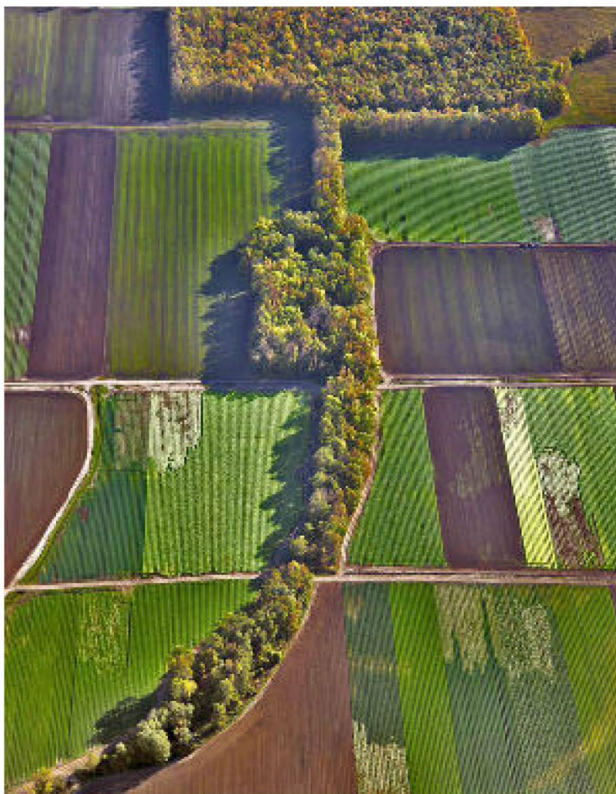
Farmers' markets play a key role in connecting urban food consumers with farmers and food producers, she says.

"Looking at our whole network, between 2005 and 2015, the number of farmers' markets doubled," she said. "We now have about 100 farmers' markets in and around the Greenbelt."

In May, former Toronto mayor David Crombie completed a review of the Greenbelt's first 10 years based on consultations with thousands of stakeholders across the province. Out of that report, the province has proposed to add a "bluebelt" to protect 28 urban rivers valleys and wetlands.

The Greenbelt's two million acres may seem like a huge tract of land, but a 2015 report sponsored by the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and Environmental Defence points out that growing population pressure may imperil some of the province's prime farmland.

Entitled Farmland at Risk, the report says about 75 per cent of the



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highest quality farmland in the Toronto Metropolitan Region along with about 70 per cent of the region's natural heritage systems lie beyond the protection of the Greenbelt.

"These less protected lands are the ones at risk of being paved over to accommodate an additional 2.5 million people by 2031," the report concludes.

Agri-food experts suggest this land should be protected and food production intensified. Certainly the demand exists. Ontario maintains a food deficit measured at \$9 billion in 2012.

Research suggests that more than half of the \$20 billion worth of food imported each year could actually be produced in Ontario. To do this would require more acreage devoted to agriculture, along with more infrastructure for processing and storing perishable fruits and vegetables.

According to the Dollars and Sense study: "If local production were expanded to replace even 10 per cent of the top 10 fruit and vegetable imports, the Ontario economy would gain close to a quarter of a billion in GDP and 3,400 full-time jobs."

Minister Leal acknowledges the province's world-class research facilities such as the University of Guelph's Ontario Agricultural College, Vineland Research and Innovation Centre, and Livestock Research Innovation Centre in Elora as key to Ontario's agricultural future.

"We know that when it comes to soil and land and the environment in general, farmers are our very best stewards. With nine billion people to feed (in the world) by 2050, and it's going to take the best talent available to address this as a citizen of the world, and a worldwide basis."

"The two big public policy questions will be food security and fresh water, and Ontario is in an advantageous position to be a leader in both of these."

## Overcoming challenges of bringing food from the farm to the table

Organizations seize appetite for going local by connecting farmers, chefs

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Getting more local food to more Ontarians is not just a matter of growing the right stuff — the bigger challenge is getting consumers to eat it. And that means serving it up how and where they want it.

It's a challenge Peter Sawtell and Grace Mandarano of 100km Foods Inc. have been working on since starting their local food distribution company nine years ago.

They saw a growing appetite for local produce — consumers who wanted to eat it and chefs and restaurants wanting to serve it.

They seized an opportunity to connect farmers and chefs, starting with a single truck to make both farm pickups and deliveries to customers. Chefs would place an order on Thursday for delivery on Tuesday. Not an ideal turnaround scenario, said Sawtell.

"It was a big leap of faith for chefs to work with us, but these visionaries like Jamie Kennedy, Anthony Walsh of Oliver and Bonacini, and Owen Steinberg saw the value. And it was our job to tighten things up."

Today, thanks to support from the Greenbelt Fund along with a growing network of farms and customers, 100km Foods has 10 trucks on the road and employs 25 people.

He's giving the chefs what they want: deliveries four days a week with product that's harvested to order.

"When a chef places an order, the food is still in the ground. We send a truck to pick it up, it comes to our facility for packaging, and the drivers come in in the morning to deliver what was growing the day before."

"We've been grinding out the distribution model and ironing it out for nine years now," Sawtell says. Annual revenues have gone from \$243,000 in 2008 to close to \$5 million today. In the food distribution game, a little creativity goes a long way. But it can take a while.

This past summer, Subway restaur-



A little creativity goes a long way in the food distribution game.

ants in Ontario amped up their commitment to serving local tomatoes, onions, green peppers and cucumbers when in season.

"For the most part green peppers

and cucumbers have always been local (for Subway) when in season," said David Capobianco, director of food service for Burnac Produce, which supplies Subway.

"But with tomatoes, we had to work with local growers to produce a tomato that was similar to what Subway needed to use in their supply chains. They needed to perform well, so we tested them in a small portion of Subway restaurants and the feedback was good."

This year Subway tripled the amount of local tomatoes and used only Ontario-grown onions during their four-month harvest season.

Signage in Subway restaurants touted "Ontario-grown produce" along with the logos of the Greenbelt, which supported the research, and Foodland Ontario.

"Subway is always interested in testing and trying different things, and doing research projects," said Capobianco. "It feels good supporting the local economy and doing something that's better for the environment — and at the same time giving consumers what they want."

He's confident the program will expand in 2017. "I hope this will be a learning experience for others in the food-service industry."

## More Ontario food more often...possible

To learn how the Greenbelt Fund is changing the way we eat and drink local in Ontario visit [Greenbeltfund.ca/news](http://Greenbeltfund.ca/news)



Possibility grows here.