

Agrifood Policy Renewal in the Golden Horseshoe: Closing Urban-Rural Gaps

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Specific policy shifts can incrementally move the agrifood system towards a tipping point in which a creative agrifood sector contributes to: (1) skilled jobs across the urban-rural divide; (2) closing the gap between economic development and environmental protection; (3) closing the gap between sustainable farm incomes and inclusive access to nutritious foods by all income groups.

Demographic and cultural gaps between aging farm populations and young, culturally diverse urban populations have led to a gap between what Ontario farms produce and what consumers demand. However, the gaps are opportunities to renew the agrifood system, including land use, crops, marketing and production networks, and cuisines, which have potential to promote healthy farms, healthy, accessible and culturally appropriate foods, and skilled jobs in an emerging social economy.

Support Creative Agrifood Economies

In an urbanized region like the Golden Horseshoe --- indeed in a world in which more people live in cities than rural areas --- food markets are no longer driven by agricultural production but by urban demand. This includes consumers, retailers, processors and food services. The way forward for government is to create incentives across the agrifood sector to pursue synergistic solutions to otherwise intractable problems.

1. Food is the fastest growing and most robust source of employment in the Greater Toronto Area (City of Toronto, Economic Development and Culture – Michael Wolfson), while specialized crops, livestock, as well as artisanal foods for ethnic, specialty, and health conscious food products form the most dynamic and robust part of the farm sector (Margaret Walton (Planscape), consultant draft report for Greater Toronto Area Agricultural Action Committee, Jan. 17, 2011).

- a. Closing the skills gap: education policies for apprenticeship programs and colleges to foster interest and skills in artisanal food preparation, butchering, canning, and other such processes, as well as institute programs for the training of young farmers
- b. Closing the employment gap: food incubators on a larger scale to foster small and medium enterprises
- c. Creating infrastructure for an environmentally and socially innovative agrifood sector, including
 - a. reform (?) of Ontario Food Terminal, including new technologies for medium and large scale composting, together with combined heat and power generation, and educational/public facilities with lessons from in Paris, London, New York, and other cities;
 - b. the upgrade of rail connections linking OFT, food business incubator and other initiatives with farmers, processors, distributors and retailers;
 - c. tax incentives for food hubs and clusters;
 - d. public procurement of local, sustainable foods.

2. Closing the farmland gap

Increasing numbers of educated young and New Canadian farmers are eager to develop new crops to meet urban demand but have difficulty accessing good farmland, while Class One farmland continues to be lost in White Belts and regions designated for urban expansion.

- a. Foodbelts (Markham proposal --- for municipalities and provinces (OMB))
- b. Transferable development rights or other fiscally neutral methods for compensating retiring farmers in Greenbelt
- c. Greenbelt expansion to presently speculative areas on boundaries
- d. Compensation to farmers and nonprofits (e.g., payment for training new farmers, educational partnerships with schools and boards) to train a new generation of farmers

- e. Encourage scaling up of experiments for sharing and transition of existing farms (lease arrangements, etc.)
- f. Change land use policies to protect farming without requiring farms to be large (commodity crops require large areas; specialized crops and livestock and value added often do not)

Put Agriculture and Food at the Centre of Regional Plans

The policy legacy of a half decade or more is built on anachronistic assumptions about boundaries between rural and urban, agriculture and health, health and environment. Policies appropriate to present realities can be designed by putting food --- from farm to fork --- at the centre. Indeed, food can be seen as the hole in policy donut, invisible but giving shape to the whole. Making the agrifood sector central to an emerging policy system will allow the circle to form. It can efficiently combine effective approaches to presently intractable problems --- from loss of farmland, agrichemical runoff in waterways and carbon emissions of the farm sector, to the fiscal health care crisis, to a mismatch between labour market skills, educational curricula, and the emerging creative economy. Examples of synergistic policies based on the emerging agrifood sector include:

3. Create a Food Section in the Ontario Provincial Policy Statement (presently in revision), and include farmland
 - a. Change land use policies to protect farmland without restricting farm size (i.e. acreage or income)
 - b. Encourage pluriactivity; it can be a benefit rather than an obstacle for farm families and communities to have access to multiple occupations and associated amenities
 - c. Foster emergence and integration of a creative food economy throughout urbanized as well as less populated regions
 - d. Improve incentives to participate in farmland trusts
4. Renew Greenbelt legislation to find revenue neutral avenues to compensate farmers for loss of land values
 - a. Negotiate fair land prices (not speculative prices) for protected farmland

- b. Design tools, such as transferable development rights, which compensate farmers without burdening public budgets
- c. Transferable development rights:
 - a. Should be created only once for each farm at the time of protection
 - b. Their only market can be selected development; i.e., require development rights on selected sites for specific purposes, e.g., to build a shopping mall
 - c. The consequent market in development rights will be limited by the number created as farmland is protected
 - d. Incentives for intensification are created at the same time as farmland is protected

5. Multiply income streams for farmers. These could include

- a. payments to mentor farm apprentices, as expansion of existing high school programs, and working across jurisdictions to bridge the rural-urban divide;
- b. payments for environmental management and services, such as rebuilding soils, restoring clean water and aquatic ecosystems, sequestering carbon, reforestation, wildlife habitat, and pollinating insects; all these are free gifts of nature which we need farmers to protect;
- c. supporting integration into all aspects of the creative food economy to reconcile the dilemma of equitable consumer access to healthy foods and resilient farm incomes; creating educational curricula at all levels to prepare young people for skilled and remunerative (self)employment in the creative agrifood sector; supporting food hubs in communities to further all these goals; renewing the Ontario Food Terminal as a combined food, environmental, and educational facility in partnership with institutions engaged in all of these areas and with municipal, regional, provincial and federal agencies.

Synergistic Solutions to Food Security and Farm Security

6. Close the demand-supply gap
 - a. Create incentives for farmers to develop culturally appropriate crops for New Canadians and specialty markets
 - b. Encourage New Canadians to enter farming

7. Close the price- access gap
 - a. Multiply income streams to farmers (payment for environmental services, educational services, landscape enhancement, etc.) to detach incomes from agricultural prices
 - b. Foster food hubs in low income areas to encourage cooperative sourcing of regional, sustainable, culturally appropriate foods.
 - c. Include food literacy in school curricula.
 - a. Food preparation skills and food knowledge are foundations for wise food purchases as well as crucial knowledge for citizens and householders.
 - b. Gardening, botanical, and ecosystem knowledge are foundations for a sustainable future.
 - c. Food literacy should link theoretical knowledge (science, math, literature, social science) with practical experience of gardening and cooking.

8. Encourage exchange between youth in urban and rural areas
 - a. Build on experiences such as the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair to expose urban youth to farming. Include opportunities (see above) for farm apprenticeships.
 - b. Help farm youth to see exciting futures as part of emerging creative food economies
 - c. Support growth of IT infrastructures, community theatre, music, cafes and other cultural amenities in rural communities