

at urban dwellers

They are trying to foster 'agricultural literacy' among non-farmers.

By Howard Burns
The London Free Press

You can hear it in his voice, see it in his eyes.

Bob Bedggood remains passionate about farming.

Still, with the worries that occupy everyone in the province's No. 1 agricultural belt, it's a stretch for farmers to be blindly optimistic this spring.

Successive years of depressed prices for their crops, rising costs, the whims of nature and government farm policy have taught them to temper their outlook.

"Farmers have a tremendous economic battle — that's here and now," said Bedggood, who worked in the telecommunications industry before buying a Thorndale area farm with his wife, Sandy, in 1976.

ANOTHER FIGHT: But Bedggood and a growing number of producers are involved in a fight that takes them off the farm, too.

Their weapon is knowledge, and urbanites are their target.

They're out to explode myths and build bridges to show how agriculture touches everyone.

Bedggood is part of a loosely

organized, new attempt by mainstream farmers to inform urbanites and challenge inaccuracies in media coverage. For instance:

□ On Friday, four London area farm families who think it's important that their politicians know something about agriculture will dig out their financial balance sheets for MPP Irene Mathysen (NDP — Middlesex) on an "open-book" tour.

Participants Diane and Mike O'Shea, who have a farm near Granton, see it as another chance for them to increase "agricultural literacy" among non-farmers.

"Let's face it," said Diane O'Shea. "There aren't many involved in farming because there's a lot of risk. We have to make our voices heard."

□ After condemning a March CBC-TV Nature Of Things show on organic agriculture as "misleading" and "mischievous," a Chatham-based farm coalition has complained to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.

□ The Ontario Federation of Agriculture told Premier Bob Rae last week that the dwindling number of farmers who produce food is sorely taken for granted

SPRING SEEDING

□ **What's ahead:** Within a month, many farmers in Southwestern Ontario should be ready to start planting two of Ontario's most important crops, corn and soybeans — commodities worth about \$800 million provincially, even at depressed prices in 1989.

□ **Government aid:** Ontario announced last week a \$50-million program to help farmers cope with interest rates. Under the program individual farmers may qualify for grants of up to \$8,000. Farms with more than one owner could get a maximum of \$12,000.

and something must be done to increase awareness.

Bedggood said the goal is to tear down the "walls of convenience" that have sprung up between growers and city residents.

NOT EASY: There's no easy solution, said Bedggood, who does his part by accepting speaking invitations, some of them to groups with mainly urban audiences.

"The person I have to get to is the guy who is 30 and lives in Westmount," he said with a grin.

"If nothing else, we (farmers) create jobs," said Bedggood of agriculture's little-understood contribution to the health of London and other cities.

"As well, we all have this habit of eating."

He's also an unofficial media watchdog who clips articles he said illustrate inconsistencies in government spending plans and foster myths about farming.

The lack of understanding is frightening because without public support, agriculture will wither and Ontario consumers will become more reliant on imported products that will have trouble measuring up to home-grown standards, said Bedggood.

LONDON FARM BELT

□ **What:** City is centre of an area that produces more than \$2 billion worth of products annually. About 65,000 people live on almost 20,000 farms in Middlesex, Kent, Lambton, Oxford, Elgin, Huron and Perth counties. Many thousands more live in rural areas, but don't farm.

□ **Investment:** Farmers in this region have about \$7.5 billion invested in their land, machinery, buildings and livestock.

□ **Spending:** Collectively, they fork out an estimated \$1 billion on goods and services just to keep their farms running every year. More money is spent on consumer items purchased in cities and towns.

□ **Job spinoffs:** Food and beverage firms that process agricultural products employ many in Southwestern Ontario, including about 3,500 in London-St. Thomas alone. Thousands more are employed in the wider agri-food industry, which includes wholesalers, retailers and restaurants.