



Uncovering rural poverty

by Geri Kamenz, President Ontario Federation of Agriculture

The people of rural Ontario have long known that they differ from urban residents in many ways. Poverty is something common to both, but until recently little has been done to define and understand the impacts experienced by the two groups.

Now the Federal Government's Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry has issued its interim report entitled Understanding Freefall: The Challenge of the Rural Poor.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture has reviewed the committee's attempt to define poverty and how it affects the lives of individuals, families and communities who make up the rural areas of Canada. Much of the OFA's work is focused on improving the economics of agriculture in Ontario, and in recent years the challenges associated with this focus have grown at an incredible rate. We have detailed the impact of rural poverty on the entire economy – that agriculture is also an urban issue.

We have been successful in getting some government response as we work to improve the incomes of farmers, but the forces that contribute to the increasing poverty levels in rural Ontario persist. World market conditions continue to drive down the prices farmers receive for their produce and governments resist our calls for long-term programs that would stabilize returns to farmers.

Without improved stability for farm returns, rural economies are destined to continue their downward spiral – it's a message we repeat on a regular basis.

Some witnesses reporting to the committee called on our provincial and federal governments to change their approach to developing and delivering farm policy. Revising how governments assess and recognize the impacts agriculture and the people involved in agriculture have on society in general was among the observations.

Adopting a multifunctionality approach, similar to what is now used in many European countries, was suggested. This would bring our governments to look at farms as places for sequestering carbon and protecting watersheds – something that would lead to farms and farmers being paid for contributions to society.

These contributions include the promotion of rural development, the preservation of rural heritage and rural amenities, and ensuring the security of the nation's food supply. The committee's interim report states: "the problem of rural poverty is the outcome of a larger issue, namely rural Canada's relative economic and demographic decline."

This points to a situation OFA has brought before governments many times – without a healthy farming economy, people in rural areas will see their jobs disappear, taking with them farm-related services and vital job opportunities. The report refers to this phenomenon as a vicious cycle in the decline of rural regions.

The report, in its executive summary, points out that "the rural poor are, in many ways, invisible. They don't beg for change. They don't congregate in downtown cores. They rarely line up at homeless shelters because, with few exceptions, there are none....Canada's rural poor have rarely been the subject of political attention."

The committee says its primary objective in writing the interim report "is simply to begin the process of giving rural Canadians and the rural poor in particular a voice, of making them a little more visible."

OFA will work to ensure the committee develops a full appreciation for the impacts of rural poverty, and the policy options available to correct the situation. The final committee report is expected by the end of this year.

Junior Farmers call for new members

Junior Farmer membership registration is approaching and your local Essex-Kent club (commonly known as Kessex) goal is to acquire at least ten new members, which would bring local membership up to 25 to 30. Although many members have a rural background, anyone between the ages 15 and 30 is welcome to join.

There will be a recruitment night at the Sherk Complex in Leamington from 7 to 9 p.m. on Jan. 19. The club has rented a gym so individuals attending will get an opportunity to break the ice through engagement in sports games, learn about what Junior Farmers do, and ask questions.

The local Essex-Kent Junior Farmers are hoping to be eligible for the title 'Club of the Year', which is declared at March Conference, an annual provincial event. Clubs are judged on community betterment, joint Junior Farmer youth activity, agricultural awareness, leadership opportunities, and membership participation.

To fulfill these guidelines, the local Junior Farmer club has undertaken a number of



The Essex-Kent Junior Farmers ride through town during the Harrow Fair Parade.

activities during the past year, including a clean-up at Erieau Beach, 'learn to two-step' nights hosted in Kent County, supervising the Essex County Federation of Agriculture booth for a day at the Harrow Fair, and entering a float in the Harrow Fair parade. The club also did car parking during the annual Farm Hiker Tour in Essex County,

car parking during the Canada Day festivities in Woodslee, prepared a meal for the KFA, a 50/50 draw, a TSC BBQ, an Essex Plowing match BBQ, battery collection, and a strawberry social at McLeod's Strawberry Farm.

The Essex-Kent Junior Farmers also hosted 'Sing Swing', a major provincial event held this past

November. They travel to different counties in Ontario for provincial events held by different county's clubs and hosted a group of international exchange delegates the last week of June/

For more information on membership, visit www.jfao.on.ca or e-mail Kessex at essexkentjf@jfao.on.ca.

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