

Farmers spotlight Food Freedom Day

BY ANDY COMBER

February 6 marked Food Freedom Day, the calendar date on which the average Canadian has earned enough income to pay their individual grocery bill for the entire year.

To highlight the significance of the day, the Essex County Federation of Agriculture (ECFA) partnered with the Essex Pork Producers, Essex-Kent Milk Producers, Essex County Cattlemen Association, Essex County Grain and Oil Seeds Producers, Essex County Associated Growers, Ontario Apple Growers, and Essex County 4-H Association to sponsor a hot noon meal at Windsor's Downtown Mission.

"This location was chosen to not only highlight the ongoing hardship in our area but to emphasize how fortunate most Canadians are to have access to an affordable food supply," said ECFA president Bernard Nelson, a Kingsville dairy farmer, noting the importance of the day.

"Canada's farmers are proud to be able to supply this abundance of safe, high quality food," said Nelson, who was accompanied by 4-H members and other local farmers in helping prepare

and serve the meal at the Mission.

Nelson also presented a cash donation of \$500 to the Downtown Mission on behalf of the area farm groups, which was accepted "with thanks" by Chandra Dass, assistant director of the Downtown Mission.

Local farmers said Food Freedom Day also helps demonstrate the continued hard work of farmers and optimism despite the hardships found in the agricultural industry in recent years.

"I've farmed all of my 60 years. I'm proud to be a farmer," said Tony Unholzer, a Woodslee cash crop producer, whose farm, started by his father in 1946, also included a dairy operation up to five years ago.

"We want to draw attention to the fact that farmers feed cities. There is no way to get food unless it goes through a farmer's hand," he said.

The Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) also spotlights Food Freedom Day to illustrate the relatively low share of the consumer dollar that is received by farmers.

In recent years, the returns for Canadian farmers have been decreasing, while input costs have increased dramatically.



HELPING HANDS – Local farmers, including Kingsville dairy producer Mark Balkwill, left, and Essex apple producer Keith Wright, serve up lunch at Windsor's Downtown Mission, during Food Freedom Day, Feb. 6.

CFA calculations show that the price Canadian consumers paid for food increased by almost 14 percent between 1997 and 2003, while the average price received by Canadian farmers for their produce during the same period increased by about only 2 percent.

"This means the prices paid by consumers for food increased over six times more than the prices received as a return to farmers," states the CFA.

Statistics Canada information supports this statement:

- In 2003, the average retail cost of a litre of milk was \$1.66, but the farmer received only 64 cents a litre.
- Chicken cost the consumer \$4.99/kg while the farmer got barely more than a dollar per kilo.
- The box of corn flakes that cost almost \$3.50 in the grocery store paid only 11 cents to the farmer who grew the corn.
- The beef rancher received \$1.83 for the prime sirloin steak that cost \$14.00

in the store.

In 2005, Canadians spent 10.2 percent of their disposable income on food. That number has dramatically decreased over the years, down from 12.5 percent in 1997, according to the CFA.

"A home grown food supply is essential for a self-sufficient country, and a sustainable farming sector is essential in maintaining that home-grown food supply," said CFA president Bob Friesen, noting that Canadians enjoy an abundant, safe and secure food supply here in Canada at a relatively low cost.

"Canadian consumers can do their part in supporting Canadian farmers by buying Canadian-made food. Remember: if you ate today, thank a farmer," he said.

Founded in 1935, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture is the country's largest farmers' organization, representing over 200,000 Canadian farmers and farm families.



Woodslee farmer Tony Unholzer serves up some locally produced milk at Windsor's Downtown Mission. The Essex County Federation of Agriculture marked Food Freedom Day by serving up a hot meal sponsored by local farm groups at Windsor's Downtown Mission.

Environmental improvements outlined at ERCA budget meeting

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"To get to 12 percent we have an ambitious tree planting program," said ERCA general manager Ken Schmidt. "We anticipate over 200,000 trees to be planted, making us one of the biggest planters in the province."

A target of 150 acres of projects has been set for this year.

Other major budget items

include the completion of waterfront works in Windsor, the finalization of dyke repairs at the mouth of Little River, and some shoreline protection works proposed for Hillman Marsh.

There is also a focus on ensuring greater protection for homes against flood and erosion and performing intake protection zone studies for all water treatment plants in the region.

When ERCA started in 1973, 10,000 homes were threatened by flood, Schmidt said. ERCA has spent more than \$35 million to date in protecting the areas.

This year, about \$2 million will go toward protecting areas in Leamington. But costs could reach about \$10 million or more in the future for these types of projects, Schmidt said.

Tim Byrne, ERCA's sen-

ior water management technician, said although ERCA has an active flood response and contingency plan, dealing with run-off and storm water management is a "challenging issue."

Some of the county's conservation areas will be receiving a boost, with a one-kilometre extension to the Chrysler Canada Greenway in Ruthven and improvements to Holiday Beach in Amherstburg.

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