

PLANTING A SEED WITH THE MINISTER

AGRICULTURE MINISTER ERNIE HARDEMAN LISTENS AS YORK REGION FARMERS SHARE THEIR CONCERNS ABOUT THE FUTURE

"The silence is over."

— signed York Region's farmers

This message landed on Ontario Premier Mike Harris' desk yesterday morning, delivered by Ontario Agriculture Minister Ernie Hardeman.

Farmers across the Greater Toronto Area, including York Region, are demanding the provincial government put legislation and land-use policies in place to protect dwindling prime farm land.

And the farmers want the province to help them secure a fair return for their hard work.

"The agricultural food industry has a broad reach," said Hardeman. "I recognize this and I hear the value of it."



Joan Ransberry

On Thursday, Hardeman was given the grand tour of northern York Region.

Accompanied by his colleague Julia Munro, the York North Tory MPP, the agriculture minister lunched with a small group of farmers, including officials from the local Federation of Agriculture.

The tour included a visit to a Sutton-based dairy operation, owned by farmer Debbie Johnson. Standing in the milking bay, Hardeman and Munro welcomed 15 farmers, mostly dairy.

The farmers reminded Hardeman the dairy industry is Ontario's largest agriculture sector. In 1976, the 363 dairy farmers in the GTA produced 107 million litres of milk. Gross farm receipts totalled \$67.7 million in the same year.

In one year, the 7,800 dairy farms in Ontario sent 2.3 billion litres of milk worth \$1.4 billion to market.

Hardeman is no stranger to farming. A resident of Oxford County, he operated an agricultural feed business before seeking political office. And he knows GTA dairy farmers contribute significantly to Canada's world-class reputation for producing top Holstein and Jersey cows for export. In fact, the GTA is home to some of the top Holstein herds in the world.

Hardeman and his party left the dairy farm, visited Effem Foods in Newmarket and then stopped at a Queensville vegetable farm owned by Don Chapman.

The farmers did much to ensure Hardeman understood their plight.

"We want a fair return on our investment," stressed Mount Albert potato farmer John Thompson. "If we can't compete, we're in serious trouble."

Farming in the GTA is, indeed, serious business. Taking in dairy, beef, horse, pork, sheep, poultry, grain, fruit and vegetables and mixed products, stats show there were \$585 million in gross farm receipts in the GTA in 1996.



STAFF PHOTOS/ROB ALARY

Agriculture Minister Ernie Hardeman (left) listens to speakers with York North MPP Julia Munro. Land use planner Margaret Walton (above) warned land must be protected. Holland Marsh farmer Carl Wierenga (below) told the minister all farmers want is a fair return on investment.

The farmers are not making pie-in-the-sky demands, stressed Holland Marsh vegetable and flower grower Carl Wierenga.

"All we want is a valid return for our investment," said Wierenga. "As long as we get a fair return for our input, we'll be able to carry on doing what we do."

The farmers asked the agriculture minister to do the math, stressing that the GTA has lost a significant number of farms and farmland since 1976.

In the past 20 years, more than 2,000 farms and more than 150,000 farmland acres went out of production (roughly 30 per cent of existing agricultural ventures).

Our farmers want to be able to compete in today's market. They want a level playing field.

In York Region, there are 1,211 farms, totalling 131,647 acres. York farmers produced close to 15 per cent more revenue on about 13 per cent fewer acres of land than did farmers in Huron County.

Critical food-producing land is disappearing and, if the trend does not stop, it will eventually threaten the availability and quality of our food, the farmers, including local federation president Virginia McLaughlin, told Hardeman.

Armed with the recently published GTA Agricultural Economic Impact Study, the farmers gave Hardeman a real from-the-field-to-the-fork lesson about York Region.

While King Township boasts the largest number of farms in York Region today (314), in 1976, it had 515. That decline is reflected

throughout the region.

East Gwillimbury has 288 farms, down 80 farms in the past 20 years. Whitchurch-Stouffville is in third place with 201, down from 254 in 1976. Vaughan's farm inventory has gone from 247 to 139 in two decades. Richmond Hill had 80 farms in 1976, while today there are only 34. Markham has 107 farms, down from 209 in 1976. Aurora had 38 farms in 1976. Today, there are 24. Georgina had 212 farms, now there are 183.

In a majority of the cases, the prime farm land was lost to residential development. Instead of food, bungalows are now rooted in the land.

Land-use restrictions are needed to make farming the most profitable use for it. "This is the challenge," Hardeman said.

And there are more challenges. Produce coming in from Quebec, the United States and other countries is having an impact on Ontario farmers' ability to make a profit.

Government farm subsidies in many countries make it almost impossible for the Canadian farmer to compete.

The financial plight, especially in western Canada, compares to that of the Dirty '30s. Meanwhile, massive farm bankruptcies are expected. Western grain growers are, indeed, in serious trouble, said Hardeman.

One of the saving graces in Ontario is diversity. Ontario's agricultural community doesn't stick to one product, which offers some built-in protection, Hardeman suggested.

"Our farmers want to be able and willing to compete in today's market," said Hardeman. "They want a level playing field. Their main concern is they get a fair trade."

The farming community is now being



noticed province-wide, stressed Hardeman. People do notice the buy-Ontario promotion," said Hardeman.

What we all have to remember is that only 5 per cent of land in Canada can produce food.

"Much of that is in the GTA," said community and land use planner Margaret Walton.

Once the land is gone, it's gone, Walton said.

"How much more can be lost before there is a big crumble? The land base must be protected in order to feed the population," she said.

Canada is recognized around the world as a leader in agriculture. Walton pointed out. Still, the farmers ask: When are Canadians going to recognize it?

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