

# The Future of Agriculture

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*by Tom Manley*

I had the pleasure of joining the 7,000 farmers at Queen's Park on Wednesday March 2nd 2005. The bus ride of 5 hours each way was worth the opportunity to understand the many facets of the crisis in contemporary agriculture in Ontario and Canada.

On one hand, there were loud demands for immediate actions to address the current crisis: direct financial support comparable to Quebec, the USA and Europe, delays or reduction in the regulatory load, withdrawal of trade embargoes. People could clearly grasp the short-term problems and solutions, as demonstrated by the reading material, the rhetoric of the speakers, the cheers of the crowd, and the discussions on the bus.

There were also great statements from the podium about long term solutions, a hand up instead of a hand out, the future of agriculture, long term sustainability, systemic changes, the priority of food in our survival and quality of life, feeding Canadians first, the need to connect the grower and the eater, etc... Unfortunately, the participants usually came up short on specific long-term solutions. Quite often, a question about long-term direction was often answered with the usual short-term band-aids.

I fear that farmers either do not grasp the long-term dilemma or refuse to imagine the significant changes required to make agriculture sustainable. That is quite understandable since systemic changes are very uncomfortable for the current paradigm in agriculture.

Let us first understand that the current income crisis is not a sudden event caused by a border closure or a crop surplus or a subsidy disparity. The trend has been clear for many decades as mechanization, high energy inputs, globalization and consolidation have eaten away at margins. Foreign trade policies have then amplified the problem.

Given the current electoral status of the Green Party, I will leave the short-term debate to current governments. Rather, let me focus on a vision for agriculture in 10 years, one that a Green Party government could implement.

Above all, the world has a limited supply of fossil fuels and we will run out of cheap energy. The rising cost of energy will make long distance transportation and fossil fertilizers unaffordable and uncompetitive with low input and organic agriculture.

Cheap foreign commodities will not longer afford the high cost of transportation to flood the Canadian market. The US farm subsidies will be a victim of the crushing US debt.

Farmers will walk away from the disenfranchisement of globalization and the export-import commodity business. We will feed Canadians first with a rich and varied offering to satisfy our culinary and cultural diversity. Local economies will flourish. Farmers will cut out the middleman and re-connect with consumers through farm stands, farmers markets, and home delivery. Miniaturization will make on-farm or community processing the norm.

The average age of farmers will drop considerably. The current generation of so-called "production farmers" will have retired, to be replaced with a generation of new and second-career farmers focused on food, health, and lifestyle. Marketing systems will evolve to reduce the capital cost barrier, open the bottom to entry-level farmers, allow for direct marketing, diversify and distribute production on mixed family-scale farms. Farm credit organizations will facilitate start-up farms, small acreages, local processing, and farmer coops.

I see farmers doubling their political clout by simply doubling their numbers from 2% to 4% of voters. I can read the headline in this paper in 2015: "Ontario registers its 100,000th farmer!" Farmers will also have become political and will ensure their own direct impact on their urban friends, thanks to direct contact thru direct marketing.

But that also means a 50% reduction in the average farm size. History will have swallowed the industrial scale commodity farm serving the export market. The next generation farm will be more labour intensive, as farmers re-connect with their consumers and respond with organic food, high value crops, fresh produce, wool and fibers, on-farm processing, and pastured livestock.

We may think that Ontario agriculture today is safe, nutritious and ecological. But health conscious consumers and budget sensitive governments have a much more demanding definition of sustainability for our farms, our ecology and our health. As provincial health care budgets overtake all other departments, we will undertake a great paradigm shift towards greater nutrition, raw food, less meat and more produce, and local production and consumption.

By the way, our farms will be profitable through the price of food, not through subsidies to farms, energy, or industry. The food portion of our disposable income will rise from 10% to 15% with a corresponding decrease in taxes as we reduce subsidies, transportation infrastructures and sick care costs. We will have rediscovered the culture of agriculture, the pride and appreciation of farming, and the ecological value of land stewardship.

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