2019 FARMLAND FORUM

A NATURAL SYSTEMS APPROACH TO FARMLAND PROTECTION
2019 Farmland Forum
A Natural Systems Approach to Farmland Protection

March 28, 2019, Balls Falls Centre for Conservation, Niagara Region

About the Forum

The 15th annual Farmland Forum explored the theme, “A Natural Systems Approach to Farmland Protection.” The Forum facilitated learning and discussion about various strategies and tools that consider farms within broader landscapes and natural systems. Speakers were welcomed from New York state, Alberta, and across Ontario and spoke about the benefits of considering the bigger picture when protecting farmland.

The Ontario Farmland Trust hosts the annual Farmland Forum as a place to bring together government, non-government, and community stakeholders to network, share and learn about emerging policy innovations and practical approaches that advance the permanent protection of farmland. In total, 73 planners, farmers, researchers, policy makers, elected officials, and land conservation enthusiasts from across Ontario attended the 2019 Forum.

Forum topics included: a unique partnership between New York City and the Watershed Agricultural Council to help farmers improve upstream water quality and stay in agriculture; provincial, regional, and farm-level approaches to integrating farmland and natural heritage features protection in the Greater Golden Horseshoe; a project that works with farmers to manage rural stormwater in the Garvey-Glenn Watershed; farmland success stories from the Niagara Region; and the development and implementation of Strathcona County’s Agriculture Master Plan.

These topics are relevant today as provincial and municipal policies and programming increasingly move toward systems approaches and looking beyond the farm in isolation. Dialogue at the Forum helped to highlight the role of farmland as an important part of natural systems and brought many voices together to learn about and build on new ideas to further inform the future of provincial and municipal farmland protection policies, programs, and projects.

These proceedings summarize the 2019 Farmland Forum presentations.
Thank you to our 2019 Forum Supporters

University of Guelph
Ontario Agricultural College
SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Brock University
Faculty of Social Sciences

Brock University
Department of Geography and Tourism Studies

Town of Lincoln

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NIAGARA NORTH FEDERATION OF AGRICULTURE

13th Street Winery

Ontario Professional Planners Institute
Forum Program and Presentations

PowerPoint presentations from the Forum can be viewed on the Ontario Farmland Trust website.

Welcome & Opening Remarks
- Kathryn Enders, Executive Director, Ontario Farmland Trust
- Sandra Easton, Mayor, Town of Lincoln
- Dean Allison, MP, Niagara West

Keynote: Watershed Agricultural Council – 25 Years of Improving Water Quality and Economic Viability in New York City’s Watershed
- Larry Hulle, Agricultural Program Manager, Watershed Agricultural Council

Panel: Integrated Systems Approaches to Farmland and Natural Heritage Features Protection
- John Turvey, MCIP, RPP, Policy Advisor, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs
- Janet Horner, Executive Director, Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance
- Mark Eastman, Senior Coordinator of Agricultural Outreach, Credit Valley Conservation
- Facilitator: Chris Fullerton, Associate Professor, Department of Geography & Tourism Studies, Brock University

Plenary: Garvey-Glenn Watershed Project: Lessons on Managing Rural Stormwater
- Sarah Fleischhauer, Stewardship Project Lead, Maitland Valley Conservation Authority

Panel: Farmland Success Stories from Niagara
- Erik Acs, MCIP, RPP, Manager of Community Planning, Regional Municipality of Niagara
- Kelly Provost, Economic Development Officer, Regional Municipality of Niagara
- Facilitator: Sara Epp, Sessional Lecturer & Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Guelph

Keynote: Agricultural Master Plan: Cultivating Change
- Diana Wahlstrom, Senior Advisor of Agricultural Initiatives, Strathcona County

Wrap Up & Concluding Remarks
- Bernard Pope, Chair, Ontario Farmland Trust

Master of Ceremonies
- Sara Epp, Sessional Lecturer & Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Guelph
Morning Keynote Summary

Watershed Agricultural Council – 25 Years of Improving Water Quality and Economic Viability in New York City’s Watershed

LARRY HULLE, Agricultural Program Manager, Watershed Agricultural Council

The morning keynote session provided insights from the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) about how they work with farmers to protect and improve water quality in New York City’s watershed. This work includes farm and watershed-level services like: whole-farm planning, conservation easements, and economic viability programs.

Key themes and ideas from Larry’s presentation are summarized below:

A Brief History of the Watershed Agricultural Council

- In 1990, concerns regarding water quality for downstate consumers resulted in proposed regulations for upstate communities that would have made it difficult, if not impossible, to farm
- An ad hoc task force created in 1991 worked to allow farming to continue in the watershed by working with farmers to voluntarily help protect water quality using Whole Farm Plans
- WAC was incorporated in 1993 as the administrative body for the voluntary, incentive-based programming (including Whole Farm Plans) that would be fully funded by New York City’s Department of Environmental Protection
- At present, WAC primarily operates out of the Catskill/Delaware and Croton watersheds in the broader New York City Watershed, which serves 9 million consumers with fresh water
Program Foundations

- All of WACs programs are voluntary, which is important for keeping farmers engaged and actively working to improve water quality
- Their programs are fully funded and provide financial incentives to participants
- Programs are designed to maintain a working agricultural landscape within the watersheds
- Farmers are given a voice and a role in decision making through active involvement in council activities and meetings and their work/time is compensated through a stipend

Agricultural Program

- This program has 263 active farms in the Catskill/Delaware watershed with a 90% voluntary farm participation rate that covers over 160,000 acres
- Whole Farm Planning, similar to Ontario’s Environment Farm Plans, is used to identify and prioritize on-farm best management practices that will address potential risks to the water supply
- WAC and affiliated contractors works closely with farmers to develop their Whole Farm Plan, which simultaneously builds strong relationships and a plan that is best suited to each individual farm
- Examples of projects covered under the agriculture program include: riparian buffers, exclusion fencing, manure management infrastructure, and nutrient management for crop production

Conservation Easement Program

- WAC’s Conservation Easement Program has permanently protected over 30,000 acres of farmland and forests, and are designed to keep lands in production
- Potential easement properties are required to have a Whole Farm Plan or Forest Management Plan before they are eligible for the program, which encourages the permanent protection of active farms and working landscapes
- Landowners who place easement agreements on their property are financially compensated for 100% of the fair market value of that easement
- WAC has a robust stewardship endowment to ensure the ongoing maintenance and stewardship of easement properties, regardless of the future of the Council

Economic Viability

- Programs to improve the economic viability of watershed farms have become a key focus of WAC because it allows the land to stay in production
- Program components include annual events, micro grants for business planning, and the Pure Catskills buy-local campaign and branding initiative
Integrated Systems Approaches to Farmland and Natural Heritage Features Protection

The morning panel shared their expertise on integrated systems approaches to farmland and natural heritage features protection. Panelists provided insights from the provincial, regional, and farm levels that considered how policy, planning, and programming approaches can protect both farmland and the broader natural system. The session was facilitated by Chris Fullerton, an associate professor at Brock University, and included the following panelists:

- JOHN TURVEY, MCIP, RPP, Policy Advisor, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs
- JANET HORNER, Executive Director, Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance
- MARK EASTMAN, Senior Coordinator of Agricultural Outreach, Credit Valley Conservation

Each panelist discussed the theme with respect to their own experiences and provided examples about how their organization approaches integrated protection. Highlights are outlined below:

**Integrated Systems Approaches to Farmland and Natural Heritage Features Protection: A Provincial Perspective**

- Within the Greenbelt, there are a number of areas where the Agricultural System and the Natural Heritage System overlap and these areas are subject to both policies
- This overlap has caused confusion in the past, which led to a 2017 amendment to the Greenbelt Plan that provided greater clarity about agricultural uses within the Natural Heritage System
- Normal farm practices, including site improvements and changes to agricultural activities, are permitted and encouraged in areas where the two systems overlap, as per the Greenbelt Plan policies
Working Regionally to Protect Farmland and Natural Heritage

- The Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance (GHFFA) is a regional collaborative between the 5 regions, cities of Toronto and Hamilton, and numerous agricultural and research institutes/organizations within the Golden Horseshoe
- In 2012, the GHFFA developed a 10 year action plan to retain, enhance, and expand the Golden Horseshoe’s farming cluster
- 91% of the Plan’s actions have been completed to date
- GHFFA activities include: municipal staff working groups, policy reviews, Agricultural Advisory Committee support, bringing awareness to agriculture and economic development, research and development, and data sharing

Farm-Level Environmental Programming

- The Credit Valley Watershed is roughly divided in thirds between urban, natural, and agricultural spaces and much of the agricultural land is rented
- Credit Valley Conservation’s farm-level environmental programs are comprised of three main aspects: education, technical assistance, and incentives
- These programs are tailored to the needs of different farming/farmer groups
- Programs include: the rural water quality program, bird friendly certified hay program, and a forthcoming profitability mapping program

Afternoon Plenary Summary

Garvey-Glenn Watershed Project: Lessons on Managing Rural Stormwater

SARAH FLEISCHHAUER, Stewardship Project Lead, Maitland Valley Conservation Authority

This session discussed some of the lessons that the Maitland Valley Conservation Authority (MVCA) has learned when developing a rural stormwater management program over the past several years. Sarah first provided context on the growing need for stormwater management in the Garvey-Glenn Watershed, and then walked participants through the stages of the program’s development and implementation.
Key themes and topics from Sarah’s presentation are summarized below:

**Maitland Valley Conservation Authority & Climate Trends in the Great Lakes**
- MVCA is one of 26 Conservation Authorities throughout Ontario and works within a predominantly agricultural watershed area that drains into Lake Huron
- Climate trends indicate that air and lake temperatures are increasing around the Great Lakes area
- These increasing temperatures have resulted in greater rainfall, shorter and wetter winters, and more extreme precipitation events within the watershed

**Developing the Garvey-Glenn Watershed Project**
- The Garvey-Glenn Watershed Project was formed as part of the Healthy Lake Huron Initiative to help farmers protect their assets by preventing erosion and nutrient loss caused by extreme precipitation events
- Engaging farmers in the development and implementation of the program has been critical to the program’s success but building trust between the farm community and the Conservation Authority has taken time
- Ultimately, farmers are the greatest proponents of the project, with increases in uptake and program success as farmers share their experiences with the program and feedback about different program components

**Program Step One – Avoid/Prevent**
- Avoidance and prevention is considered the most important step in controlling erosion and nutrient loss at the field-level
- They worked with farmers to introduce best management practices to improve soil health including using a 4R approach to nutrient application, reduced tillage, and introducing cover crops
- Provincial and federal grants helped to offset the financial costs of adopting new techniques or purchasing specialized equipment

**Program Step Two – Control/Trap/Treat Water**
- This has been the most successful program step with farmers in the area
- This step controls flooding and the rate of water/sediment transport using structures that are either constructed in or on the side of fields
- Structures include: broad and narrow based berms, French drains, grassed waterways, and 2-stage ditches
- These structures are most effective when farmers use them in series along a waterway, which speaks to the importance of farmer engagement and relationship building

**Program Step Three – Riparian Management**
- Riparian buffers are the last line of defense for stormwater management but planting has had low uptake from farmers, who are focusing on steps one and two
Farmland Success Stories from Niagara

This session invited panelists to talk about the status of farmland and agriculture within the Niagara Region and the strategies that led to agricultural successes. The panelists provided three different perspectives: farmland loss and preservation, agricultural economic development and change, and policy development to support agricultural viability. These perspectives helped to tell a story about the changes to Niagara’s agricultural landscape over the past 50 years and how the Region continues to adapt to those changes. The session included the following panelists:

SARA EPP, Sessional Lecturer & Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Guelph

KELLY PROVOST, Economic Development Officer, Regional Municipality of Niagara

ERIK ACS, MCIP, RPP, Manager of Community Planning, Regional Municipality of Niagara

Highlights and key themes of each presentation are summarized below:

Measuring Farmland Loss: A Case Study of the Niagara Region

- Within the Niagara Region, over 21,000 ha of agricultural land has been lost through Official Plan Amendments between 2000-2014
- While this land may currently be used for agriculture, the amendments allow for it to be used for non-agricultural purposes in the future
- The Greenbelt has been highly effective at preventing further farmland loss within its boundaries since its implementation in 2005
- Agricultural advisory committees help to restore political representation to farmers and provide a collective voice when advocating for agriculture and farmers’ interests
Grow It Niagara

- Agriculture is a huge contributor to Niagara Region’s GDP and employment and the sector has seen increases in gross farm receipts, the value of exports, and the number of jobs over the past 10 years
- High value crops and technological advances have contributed to an 18% increase in gross farm receipts per acre and a 47% increase in average net farm revenues between 2011 and 2016
- Education and innovation by research institutes, including Brock University, Niagara College, and the Vineland Research Station, have supported industry growth

Farmland Success Stories: Niagara Region

- Mass fruit production in Niagara emerged in the 1860’s, peaked in the 1970’s, and faced rapid decline in 2007 due to market changes and resultant processing facilities loss
- The Region developed an Agricultural Action Plan in 2005 in response to early warning signs that the canning/juice market was struggling and to create a plan to support the viability of the agricultural sector into the future
- As a result of the Action Plan and broad consultation processes, the Region’s Official Plan was amended in 2009 with the purpose to support a more sustainable and profitable agricultural sector without impacting the right to farm
- The amendments included new policies that expanded and clarified the breadth of value added and “value retention” uses allowed on farms with provisions for agri-tourism and supports for agri-food services (e.g. warehousing, bottling)
**Afternoon Keynote Summary**

**Agricultural Master Plan: Cultivating Change**

DIANA WAHLSTROM, *Senior Advisor of Agriculture Initiatives, Strathcona County*

Diana provided insights from Strathcona County, Alberta about the visioning, development, and implementation of their award-winning Agriculture Master Plan. She covered key concepts about the phases of development that led to an actionable plan along with how they have approached implementing the plan’s five main strategies.

Key ideas and topics from Diana’s presentation are summarized below:

**Strathcona County & Agriculture**

- Strathcona County has both rural and urban populations and although it is the smallest rural municipality in Alberta, it also has the highest population
- 69% of the County’s land base is agricultural land, which is comprised of ‘large’ and ‘small’ agricultural landholdings
- Agriculture is the backbone of the County’s economy, due to the abundance of fertile agricultural soils with a rich biomass and favourable climatic conditions

**Agriculture Master Plan Development**

- The Agriculture Master Plan was borne out of growing momentum to preserve the County’s agricultural land and a need for long-term direction and certainty for the agricultural sector
The Plan was developed over a year and a half and had three phases, which were broken into: “Analysis of Current Situation”, “Development of Vision and Operating Principles”, and “Consultation and Finalization”.

The “Analysis of Current Situation” provided a baseline of where the agricultural sector was at the beginning of the process and a foundation to develop their vision for the future.

Public engagement was paramount to the development of the plan and their engagement processes included: open houses, one-on-one interviews, sectoral focus groups, online web surveys, and attending committee and association meetings.

After finalization, the Plan has several elements including: a vision and definition of agriculture, a snapshot of agriculture in County, agricultural strategies that feed into an implementation plan, and a list of potential actions.

**Agriculture Master Plan Implementation**

- Having a strong implementation plan is important for the success of the agricultural strategies identified in the Agriculture Master Plan.
- To help with implementation, they drastically expanded their agricultural planning branch.
- One of the key components of successful implementation is planning for flexibility and proactive approaches when responding to, or anticipating changes in, the agricultural sector.

**The Strategies**

- The Plan proposes five strategies to be implemented over a five year time span.
- The “urban agriculture strategy” was developed through significant community engagement with over 5,000 residents and has implemented multiple projects (e.g. community gardens, school agriculture) designed to contribute to healthy, liveable, and inclusive communities.
- The “land use and development strategy” and the “governance strategy” are currently in progress, with ongoing stakeholder engagement to ask key questions about the goals and purposes of the strategies and how they can best serve the agricultural community.
- Future strategies are the “food and agriculture sector development strategy” and the “agri-tourism strategy,” which will focus on providing a stronger voice to the agricultural community and developing a more robust economic environment for the agri-food sector.
Closing Remarks

The 15th annual Farmland Forum was a huge success. The event focused on tools and strategies to protect farmland and the broader natural systems that all farms are part of. Presenters provided their expertise on a wide range of topics: from provincial policies and regional strategies to watershed-wide projects and field-level mapping. These sessions provided an opportunity to learn about new tools, strategies, and approaches to protecting and promoting the health of farmland and environmental features from across the Province and beyond.

The morning keynote, Larry Hulle, shared his experience with the Watershed Agricultural Council in New York City’s watershed. He spoke about the necessity of working with and alongside farmers to simultaneously protect water quality and agricultural viability. Larry shared the Council’s many great achievements that have resulted from their farmer-first approach and unique funding structure. His experiences inspired many in the room with the Council’s success and use of tools that are familiar to Ontarians, like Whole Farm Plans and Conservation Easements.

The afternoon keynote, Diana Wahlstrom, spoke about her experience developing and implementing Strathcona County, Alberta’s award-winning Agriculture Master Plan. Like Larry, Diana talked about how consultation and engagement with the farming community is absolutely critical when developing strategies and programs that affect farmers. She also shared her commitment to creating a Plan that would be implemented in the County. This commitment has resulted in increased agricultural planning support, continued consultation, and on-the-ground actions.

The Farmland Forum was an excellent opportunity for participants to share experiences and new tools about how to protect Ontario’s farmland and broader natural systems for present and future generations. Protecting farmland and ensuring its primary use continues to be agriculture is critical for the Province’s environmental and economic sustainability and the dialogue generated at the Forum continues to work towards and support this goal.
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