

# South Simcoe Agriculture Action Plan

March 2009



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# Agriculture Action Plan Program Background

## What was the Process?

- To support the continued sustainability and growth of the agriculture sector, a business retention and expansion survey of farm operators was commissioned in January 2008. Additionally, to identify the level of support for agricultural operations by non-agriculture residents, a second comprehensive survey of local residents unaffiliated with the agricultural sector, was conducted in May 2008. A Task Force comprised of farm operators, community leaders, representatives from farm organizations, and all levels of government was created in January 2008.
- Upon completion of the surveys, the program consultants reviewed the data. In the business retention and expansion survey, the consultants responded to immediate concerns expressed by business. The survey data was entered into specifically designed software, ensuring the business information remained confidential. A statistical analysis was conducted and a report was prepared for the Task Force.
- The survey results were shared with the Task Force and priority actions were identified that would significantly enhance or sustain the agricultural sector in South Simcoe. The goals, action plans and partnerships identified by the Task Force are included in this report.

## What were the Objectives?

The objectives of the project were to:

- Assist existing agricultural businesses in solving problems;
- Assist businesses in using existing programs and resources aimed at helping them become more competitive;
- Create a forum in which sensitive information on the needs and issues of agricultural businesses could be addressed effectively, yet confidentially;
- Collect data on our community's strengths and weaknesses as a place to do business and determine appropriate actions to ensure a healthy business climate exists; and
- Determine the public perception of the agricultural industry within their community and its impacts and determine appropriate actions to maintain or create a positive climate.

Please be advised, the data was collected from February 2008 to February 2009. Due to the significant economic downturn and decline in commodity prices, data analysis required adjustment to determine appropriate actions.

# General Information on the Farm Operation Survey

## Who Was Involved?

The South Simcoe Economic Alliance, in partnership with Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, Simcoe County Federation of Agriculture, New Tecumseth Farmers Association, NT Temps Inc., and Nottawasaga Futures funded this initiative.

## Who Replied to the Survey?

Seventy-three agricultural businesses were selected as a representative sample of the local agricultural sector. The consulting firm, Communitas Associates interviewed business owners throughout 2008 and early 2009 using the standardized Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs Business Retention and Expansion questionnaire.

## Business Profile of the Survey Participants

- Type of agriculture businesses: 65% livestock and/or crop production only, 22% on-farm production, processing and retailing; and 9% on-farm production and processing only.
- Local businesses market their products through a blended variety of strategies such as 48% farm-gate, 42% direct to processors, and 25% to local retailers
- Staffing: 332 permanent full time, 130 permanent part-time and 227 seasonal temporary staff;
- 80% of all businesses surveyed have been in business over 26 years with 97% family owned. 32% are planning to sell/transfer their land in the next decade. Approximately 50% to family and 50% to unrelated third party.





# General Information on the Farm Operation Survey

## What were the “Red Flags”

One of the key aspects that significantly contributed to the success of this program was the quick response to businesses with respect to “red flag issues”. The criterion used for determining “red flags” was:

1. Business closing or downsizing
2. Business relocating
3. Business expanding
4. Request for information

## Response to Red Flags

### Closing and Downsizing

- One business was in the process of closing due to lack of profits. The decision could not be reversed.
- Two businesses were downsizing. Neither business required assistance. Of the two, one was related to retirement.

### Relocation

- Two businesses were relocating. One was relocating within the community while the other was relocating elsewhere in Ontario. The businesses would not consider reversing their decision.



## Expanding

- Twenty-five participants were considering expansion at their current site within the next three years. Over 90% of the businesses that were expanding, planned to invest in new equipment and undertake major renovations. They were predicting those expansions may result in an increase in product line, floor space, work force, and related skills training, including health and safety training.

## Request for Information

- All of the participating businesses surveyed were provided with additional information and support. Sixty percent of the businesses requested specific information on topics such as: energy engineering/technical assistance; business planning; succession planning; marketing plans; business development plan; food processing information; and assistance with expansion.

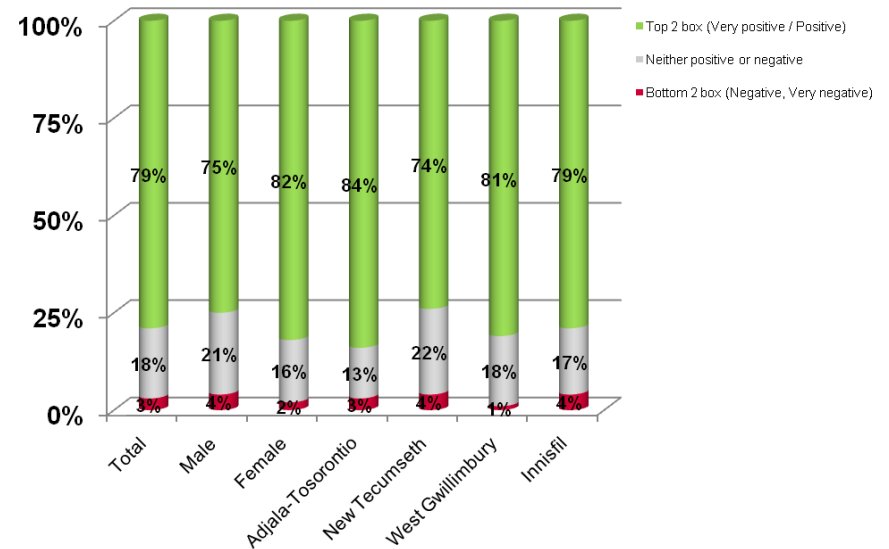
# General Information on the Non-Agricultural Residential Survey

## Who was Involved?

The consulting firm, Foundation Research Group, interviewed 758 non-agricultural residents by telephone in May 2008. The number of surveys was proportionate to the percentage of the municipal population. 435 respondents were female and 323 were male.

## Key Findings

Ninety-seven percent of respondents felt that farming has a positive or no impact on daily life. Seventy-nine percent felt there was a positive impact while 18% didn't have a positive or negative response.



Only 3% percent of the individuals surveyed identified negative effects on their daily life (e.g., environmental, isolation of the farming community, smells, transportation).

# 1. Strategic Alliance Development

## Objective:

To provide support in developing business networks to increase profitability.

## Identified Actions:

- Create a means of efficient and timely distribution of products through a distribution network for farm to market sales opportunities (e.g., trucking to end users).
- Create an online database of existing goods and services used by the South Simcoe farming community. In addition, establish an online bulletin board where farmers can post goods and services needed. This web site would also be an opportunity to develop a labour pool, where farmers could find potential employees and potential employees could find available work.
- Build on the success of the AgKnowledge Forum, held annually in winter to continue to share best practices.
- Encourage local training service providers (e.g., local high schools, OMAFRA) to conduct specific training for the agriculture community (e.g., agriculture equipment, Health and Safety).
- The farming community has developed successful, varied and broad marketing strategies. Existing farm organizations have formed joint marketing opportunities for their membership (e.g., Simcoe County Farm Fresh, Holland Marsh Growers Association). Ensure the web site identified above provides a section for organizations and individuals to list opportunities for joint marketing purposes. Also end users (e.g., wheat mills) could post when and what they are receiving during harvest.
- Ensuring immediate pest and pathogen threats or anticipated threats are communicated (e.g. web site, newsletters) to the agriculture community along with preventive strategies would assist in containing the damage.



## 2. Green Shift

### Objective:

The South Simcoe agriculture community has indicated a strong interest in: reducing energy costs; developing alternative energy sources; developing efficient processes; and local markets.

### Identified Actions

- Create a partnership for bulk purchase of shade trees from local suppliers.
- Conduct a local symposium to investigate developing energy efficient agriculture processes (e.g., recycling water, smart meters, wind or solar power, wind breaks, bio-fuels, and geothermal).
- Provide ongoing updates to the farming community through various strategies (e.g., press releases, web site, forums and newsletters).



- Create a database of sources for engineering and technical assistance for renewable and alternative energy sources and energy audits on the farm.
- Monitor national policy on carbon trading opportunities. Ensure communication strategies include the promotion of buy local programs, products, and services to reduce the carbon footprint.



### 3. Communications

#### i. Government to Business Communication Objective

The agriculture sector requires an improved information exchange process from the community, as well as local, county, provincial and federal governments. The future success of their operations depends on the level of support and easy access to information. Information must be provided using various media such as internet, mail, one-to-one support, forums, information sessions, and workshops.

#### Identified Actions

- Aggressively lobby for Right to Farm legislation acknowledging and addressing a farmers right to farm and produce domestic products ensures food safety, food security and food sovereignty. This would further support the ability to acquire funding for infrastructure needs.
- Dialogue to ensure clear government agriculture definitions, guidelines, continuity and interpretation of policy & programs will have a direct influence on the future success of this sector.
- Include local farmers on advisory committees, municipal committees, economic development and environmental committees.
- Involve the farm community on all aspects of municipal consultation
- Ensure farm organizations are circulated for comment with respect to municipal policy and bylaw development to foster a broader base for input and communication.
- Encourage farmer participation in farm organizations.
- Communicate the importance to all levels of government of the appropriate timing of meetings and consultations on issues impacting this particular sector (e.g., not during peak planting season).
- Heighten the agricultural profile and strengthen the relationship with county appointed officials (e.g., Economic Development offices).



### 3. Communications (continued)

#### ii. Farm Business to Community Communication

##### Objective

Provide up-to-date and timely information to their community on their concerns, achievements and successes is a priority to maintaining the high level of community support from non-agriculture residents.

##### Identified Actions

- Celebrate the “Bounty of the County” to strengthen and maintain the agricultural profile through special events.
- Ensure local media is regularly kept up to date on agricultural successes, issues, and activities.
- Invoke an aggressive “Buy Local Campaign”, ensuring local food is available in government cafeterias, arenas, stores, restaurants, hospitals, etc.



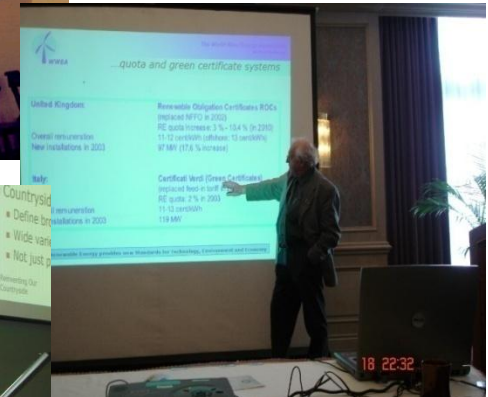
## 4. Business Development

### Objective

Businesses requested information and assistance with financial sourcing and management, business and marketing plans, sector specific training (e.g., health and safety) and customer service program development.

### Actions

- Conduct winter workshops and forums ensuring topic is tailored to local farm audience.
- Build on the past success of the AgKnowledge Forum, held annually in winter, to continue to share best practices.
- Continue to support Ag Info Days.
- Ensure farm incubator development opportunities are communicated through the agriculture and education communities to maximize support and education.
- Support value added opportunities by reviewing and removing existing local and provincial government policy barriers. Specifically reviewing with Municipal Public Assessment Corporation regarding taxation classification of agriculture lands.



- Create a newsletter and a comprehensive, up to date distribution list.
- Liaise with government departments and ministries to create projections on current and future varieties of crops to meet the ever-changing needs of Canada's diverse population.

## 5. Infrastructure Support

### Objective:

South Simcoe's agriculture businesses are ready to expand and grow. To ensure their continued success they require a commitment and support for infrastructure.



### Actions

- Ensure agriculture-friendly, coordinated, multi-jurisdictional government approach to streamlining zoning and approval processes, and by-laws such as minimum distance separation between an operating farm and residences; signage, water taking permits, etc.;
- Provide effective services to rural property owners (e.g., natural gas, garbage collection, broadband);
- Irrigation and Drainage
  - i. Continued support for the Holland Marsh Canal Reconstruction Program.
  - ii. Create a committee of stakeholders to resolve both agriculture and municipal needs for flows in the river systems
- Road Improvements:
  - i. Fair and equitable load restrictions comparable to other sectors.
  - ii. Widen and improve rural roads and establish intermediate rural/urban roadways to ensure safer transportation systems for the movement of farm implements on public road ways.
  - iii. Maintaining clear roadway ditches to efficiently move floodwaters away from agricultural lands and roadways.

# Potential Partners for the Agricultural Actions

- Agriculture Canada
- Banting Homestead Incubator Program
- Canadian Wind Energy Association
- Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario
- Commodity organizations
- Community groups
- County of Simcoe (Councils, Committees and Staff)
- David Suzuki Foundation
- Department of Oceans & Fisheries
- Domestic commercial suppliers
- Environmental groups
- Georgina Trades Training Inc.
- Greenbelt Association
- Growers' Associations
- Hidden Treasures of Essa
- Holland Marsh Growers' Association
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
- Lake Simcoe Regional Conservation Authority
- Land Stewardship Council
- Local media
- Ministry of Environment
- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry of Labour
- Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
- Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs
- Ministry of Natural Resources
- Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal
- Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
- Ministry of Transportation
- Municipal Public Assessment Corporation
- New Tecumseth Farmers' Association
- Nottawasaga Futures
- Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority
- Ontario Farm Safety Associations
- Ontario Federation of Agriculture
- Ontario Sustainable Energy Association
- Service Canada
- Simcoe County District School Board
- Simcoe County Farm Fresh
- Simcoe County Federation of Agriculture
- Simcoe Muskoka Workforce Development Board
- Soil & Crop Associations
- South Simcoe Municipalities (Councils, Committees and Staff)
- Windfall Ecology Centre



# South Simcoe Business Retention & Expansion Team

This successful program is the result of the hard work of the following individuals and their dedication to the agriculture sector.

## A Very Special Thanks to:

- The 73 Farm Operators that responded to the agricultural survey
- The 758 South Simcoe Residents that responded to the non-agricultural survey
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- Julie Bouchard, Northern Lights
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- Michael Disano, Bradford West Gwillimbury Economic Development
- Natalie Dykie, Bradford West Gwillimbury
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- Clayton Ferguson, Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board
- Jason Furlong, Markdale Tractor Sales
- Brian Hughes, Hughesdale Farm
- Jill Hyland, Northern Lights
- Brian Jackson, Mayor, Town of Innisfil
- Liz Kisilak, CONTACT, South Simcoe Community Information Centre
- Valerie Knight, Representing the Hon. Helena Guergis
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- James Leduc, Councillor, Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury
- Doug Little, Deputy Mayor, Township of Adjala-Tosorontio
- Mike MacEachern, Mayor, Town of New Tecumseth
- David MacKenzie, New Tecumseth Farmers' Association
- John Morrison, Ontario Wheat Producers' Marketing Board
- Mary Munnoch, Adjala-Tosorontio Residents' Association
- Mikki Nanowski, Nottawasaga Futures Board of Director
- Judy Noel, Simcoe County Training Board
- Bob Reynolds, Produce Farm Representative
- Jamie Rheume, Holland Marsh Growers Association
- David Riddell, Simcoe County Federation of Agriculture
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