

POLICY BRIEF

Ontario's Agricultural Policies and Sustainable Agricultural Systems for Large-scale and Small-scale Farmers

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Executive Summary

There is a growing argument that smaller-scale farms can produce healthy and affordable food to the surrounding local communities more effectively than large-scale farmers can. It is further argued these small-scale farmers have an equally as important role in the creation of a sustainable agricultural system, as large-scale farmers, by participating in local food initiatives. The research expects these increased local food initiatives would contribute to a food secure province through the diversity of the farming operations and local food options made available to communities.

The following research brings three of Ontario's key Provincial Planning Policies to the spotlight to raise attention on the impacts they have on small-scale farmers across Ontario. Anabaptist farmers in Algoma District in northern Ontario and in Huron County in southern Ontario were interviewed to gather input on how Minimum Farm Size policies, Lot Creation policies, and On-Farm Diversification policies have impacted their farming operations.

The research found that the Provincial Government's newly updated policies on permitting On-Farm Diversification policies have aided small-scale farmers in their ability to survive. However, increasingly strict Lot Creation policies and large Minimum Farm Size policies have proven to be challenging to small-scale farmers.

This research argues small-scale farmers are equally as important in supporting a sustainable agricultural system across Ontario and therefore small-scale farmers need to be consulted during the creation of new policies and update process of existing policies to ensure their needs are properly addressed.

What's the Issue?

Ontario's agricultural industry is constantly evolving. What was once an industry made of small-scale family farmers, is now becoming more industrialized to meet the demands of factors such as globalization and international trade agreements. While the vast majority of these farms are still family owned, they are simply becoming bigger in size than they used to be. This raises the point that for Ontario to have a sustainable agricultural industry and better food security, attention must not focus solely on large-scale farming. Rather, attention must also be given to small-scale farmers. While large-scale farmers can provide large amounts of food to large populations of people, small-scale farmers have the ability to provide quality, local food to their surrounding communities. With this, it is important to ensure a balanced approach to policy planning is enacted to better promote the cooperation of local food initiatives and large-scale cropping in addressing food security issues across Ontario.

The current state of agriculture in Ontario is geared towards larger-scale farms with high yields that export the food out of the local communities. It is important to indicate that economies of scale and trade agreements play a major role in the creation of these larger farms as they can have a greater ability in efficiently handling such

agreements. These large-scale farms do have a significant impact on the agricultural industry and Ontario's economy and therefore, it is important to ensure their survival. This research, however, is intended to bring attention to small farms and highlight their capability of producing high quality yields for the local communities surrounding them. To do so, the research is expected to highlight how Ontario's policy driven planning system has an impact on small-scale farmers' abilities to produce locally grown food for surrounding communities. A detailed breakdown of the following specific policies follows: farm size policies, lot creation and severance policies, and on-farm diversification policies.

The research explored the impacts existing Provincial planning policies have on addressing food security and the promotion of local food initiatives across Ontario. More specifically it addresses issues small-scale farmers face with Ontario's current planning policies. The analysis was completed with two case studies; one in the District of Algoma and one County of Huron. Data required for the research included academic and professional knowledge on local food policies, farmland preservation methods, food security strategies, and sustainable agricultural systems. Four methods were utilized to acquire the required data:

1. A literature review on the current research surrounding local food strategies and sustainable agricultural systems.
2. A document review on existing Provincial planning policies and documents.
3. Key informant semi-structured interviews with small-scale farmers; focusing on Anabaptist farmers.
4. A review of the local Municipal Official Plans pertaining to the locations of the interviewees.

Farm Size Policies

It is the job of policy makers and planners, to create and implement supportive planning policies that do not conflict with or hinder small-scale farmers' abilities to support local food initiatives and contribute to food security within their regions. The correct implementation of realistic planning policies across Ontario is vital to promoting local food initiatives as it is these policies that establish the foundation for what is and is not permitted. Researchers Darryl Benjamin and Lyndon Virkler are critical of standardized farm sizes as they suggest "Being small [or large] does not necessarily make a farm sustainable. Sustainability is about harmony among all dimensions of a farming system" (Benjamin & Virkler, 2016, p. 88). Furthermore a 2010 study analyzed minimum farm size policies of five municipalities across the GGH and the results showed a variation in minimum farm size policies across the region. Tender fruit regions in St. Catharines, for instance, permit farms as small as 16.2 hectares (40 acres) while the majority of other regions require a minimum of 40 hectares (100 acres) (Dickinson, et al., 2010, pp. 23 - 24). Generally, minimum farm sizes across

regions in North America were set at 40 hectares.

It is difficult for policy makers, both at the provincial and municipal levels, to justify creating more relaxed minimum farm size policies when historical analysis has shown a rapid decline in the number of active farms in Ontario, while at the same time showing an increase in the average farm size, and the number of larger farms (National Farmers Union, 2011, pp. 2 - 4). On the other hand, the number of smaller farms of 130 acres or less populate the clear majority of Ontario's agricultural landscape. In 2006, it was estimated there was over 26,000 farms across Ontario less than 130 acres in size compared to less than 300 farms greater than 2,240 acres (National Farmers Union, 2011, p. 4). This large gap indicates the need for smaller farm size policies would be relevant and highly applicable to Ontario.

Severance Policies

Much like the issue of creating realistic farm size policies, striking a balance between protecting farmland and allowing sustainable non-agricultural development is critical when creating severance and lot creation policies for agricultural areas as it gives small-scale farmers greater flexibility in

diversifying to support the agricultural system as a whole.

Policy makers in Ontario have significantly increased the stringency of severance policies in recent years. Before the 2005 Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) came into effect, farmers could sever a retirement lot from their farm, but when this was disallowed, it served as a roadblock to many farmers' retirement plans. The 2014 PPS further restricted severance policies to the point that the only severances permitted for non-farm related activities in agricultural designations are for a residential surplus to a farming operation as a result of farm consolidation.

While it is important to ensure the protection of agricultural soils and decrease inappropriate development within the agricultural areas in Ontario, it is equally important to support farmers in the success of their operations whether they be large-scale or small-scale.

On-Farm Diversification Policies

The PPS permits *agricultural uses*, *agriculture-related uses*, and *on-farm diversified uses* in agricultural zones across Ontario. OMAFRA's Publication 851, *Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario's Prime Agricultural Areas*, defines these permitted uses and assists municipalities in interpreting the PPS on land use planning by providing examples of the application of such uses in prime agricultural areas. They strike a balance between supporting a

thriving agriculture industry and maintaining prime farmland for long term use in agriculture.

Potential reasons why small farms are being consolidated into larger farms include: 1) the farms are too small and inadequate at sustaining modern farming practices, and 2) poor financial management and large amounts of debt associated with traditional farming methods (Meert et al., 2005, p. 81). To help promote the survival of small farms in Ontario, flexible policies need to be created to allow for diversified uses on these small farms, as the traditional farming methods of animal and crop production can be costly to operate, do not always have high returns on investment, and can waste large amounts of valuable space, all of which significantly impact the viability of small scale farming.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The researcher conducted a case study investigation of the current perspectives of small-scale Anabaptist farmers in two regions of Ontario. Each interview began by understanding the current situation of each interviewee (i.e. size of farm, size of family, type of farm operation). The interviews then further investigated how the interviewees participate in local food initiatives in their respective regions and if they had an On-Farm Diversification strategy. Figure 1 is a table summarizing the results from the interviews with the farmers in Algoma District in northern Ontario.

Figure 1: Summary Table of interviews in northern Ontario

Number of Interviewees	11
Average Farm Size	177 acres
Average Tillable Acreage	78 acres
Average Number of Children	9
Number of Farmers with an On-Farm Diversification Operation	11 out of 11
Types of On-Farm Diversification Strategies	Registered egg grading station, roadside produce stand, produce sales, maple syrup production, lumber mills, lumber kiln, knitting of alpaca fibers, furniture/wood working, truss construction,
Opportunities noted	Less competition, land is ideal for pasture and beef cow operations, greenhouses to start growing produce earlier in the season, ideal for farmers interested in small-scale operations/market gardening
Challenges noted	Distance and logistics to markets, transportation costs, shorter growing season, lack of a year-round auction barn, costlier to purchase supplies

Figure 2 is a table summarizing the results from the interviews with the farmers in Huron County in southern Ontario.

<i>Figure 2: Summary Table of interviews in southern Ontario</i>	
Number of Interviewees	5
Average Farm Size	78 acres
Average Tillable Acreage	67 acres
Average Number of Children	7
Number of Farmers with an On-Farm Diversification Operation	5 out of 5
Types of On-Farm Diversification Strategies	Roadside produce stand, produce/flower sales, wood working shop, log mill, buggy repair shop, wooden bee hive manufacturing, metal working
Opportunities noted	Easy access to markets, plenty of niche markets, greenhouse farming
Challenges noted	Greater competition, high land prices, livestock diseases, predators, planning policies prevent further severances/smaller lot sizes

Minimum farm size policies and severance policies were the two continuously indicated policies that prevented the interviewees from acting on some of their ideas for their farm. Such ideas include severing the farm in half to provide their children with a farm of their own. On-Farm Diversification policies were generally well received by the interviewees as all of the farmers interviewed were already implementing various diversification strategies. These policies were seen as the most beneficial to small-scale farmers out of the three policies researched. These results illustrate the importance of ensuring adequate and appropriate policies are established to ensure the Province of Ontario is positioned to continue to be a food secure province for the long term.

In the Official Plan Review section, the research examined if each Official Plan addresses the three policies in question for this research. In general, newer Official Plans are more likely to address each of the three policies. This is due to new provincial planning requirements to not only protect prime agricultural soils, but to also permit and promote diversified uses on such agricultural land. This review, combined with results from the semi-structured interviews indicates planning policies surrounding on-farm diversified uses and agriculturally related uses benefit small-scale farmers as these policies provide flexibility in permitting farmers to diversify.

In regard to lot creation and severance policies, current policies do not permit new

lots in agriculturally designated areas unless the severance is clearly indicated to be for agricultural purposes or for a residential surplus unit to a farm consolidation. This is understandable as provincial decision makers want to ensure the protection of agriculture by preventing fragmentation of land. Land ownership is not regulated in Ontario, so while small parcels can be created for agricultural operations, over the long term it is not guaranteed they will stay as agricultural operations.

Finally, minimum farm size policies vary across the municipalities analyzed. While the provincial government is promoting farm consolidations, they do permit the creation of smaller farms. However, as stated previously, the provincial standard for minimum new farm sizes is 40 hectares.

What's Next?

Overall, it is positive to see from the interviews that small-scale farmers view the On-Farm Diversification policies as a strength to assisting them in thriving. However, the interviews also established that more work could be done at the policy level to ensure small-scale farmers are not restricted by minimum farm size and lot creation policies. These two policies are currently weak points in promoting sustainable small-scale farming operations. Furthermore, it is concluded that newer Official Plans provide more direction for On-Farm Diversification, Minimum Farm Size, and Lot Creation policies over older Official Plans. Ensuring municipalities have the

necessary resources to review and update their Official Plans on a regular basis is critical to assisting small-scale farmers abilities to diversify, survive, and provide food to their local communities.

Ontario's planning policies need to accommodate local food initiatives and promote food security across the province.

In addition, specific policies surrounding Minimum Farm Size requirements, Lot Creation and Severances, and On-Farm Diversification strategies directly affect small-scale farmers. It is imperative these policies do not restrict small-scale farmers' abilities in providing healthy and affordable local food to Ontarians.

Sources

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This policy brief was prepared by James Newlands, a recent graduate of the Master of Science in Rural Planning and Development Program of the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph. The research in this policy brief is based on the research James collected for his Major Research Paper titled *Ontario's Food Security and Sustainable Agricultural System: A Case Study of the Impacts Planning Policies Have on Anabaptist and other Small-Scale Farmers*.