

Queen's Park should push local produce, farmers say

TORONTO (Jul 3, 2007)

Farmers' markets are booming across Ontario thanks to environmentally conscious shoppers, but the province needs to help put local produce on grocery store shelves if the farm sector is to survive, advocates say.

Aided by the push to cut transportation-related carbon emissions, the number of farmers' markets has ballooned, said Bob Chorney, executive director of Farmers' Markets Ontario.

"People are becoming increasingly concerned about what it takes to get their food to them," said Chorney, who added the average meal travels some 4,000 kilometres.

"It takes 535 calories to move a seven-calorie strawberry from California to Ontario. It takes 400 times more energy to ship lamb from New Zealand than it does to buy local lamb."

The number of farmers' markets in the province has risen from 60 to 135 in the past 15 years, with annual sales of almost \$700 million, Chorney noted. The net sales for all Ontario farms were almost \$9 billion, according to the 2005 census.

Food harvested in Ontario is of higher quality than imports, but the lack of consumer education means farmers are struggling to make ends meet, said Bette Jean Crews, vice-president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

People take the safety and low price of their groceries for granted, said Crews, who is also a farmer.

"We won't really realize the impact of that until food is coming into this country that doesn't have the standards we have," she said.

The climbing attendance at farmers' markets is heartening, said Lorenz Eppinger, an organic farmer from Greenfields Farms in Campbellville, Ont. Still, Eppinger said he's a little worried it might be a fad.

"It's almost so hyped right now I'm a bit worried," he said. "Whenever something like this appears so quickly, sometimes it ebbs off very quickly too."

Although the provincial government recently launched a new branding campaign to encourage sales of local produce, Eppinger said much more should be done.

He said because of the central location of his farm, about 45 minutes from Toronto, he can't find people to work for \$8 per hour, which is the amount a London-Windsor corridor farm would pay. Tangible financial programs, like tax breaks on payroll deductions, are needed to defray costs and encourage the market, he said.

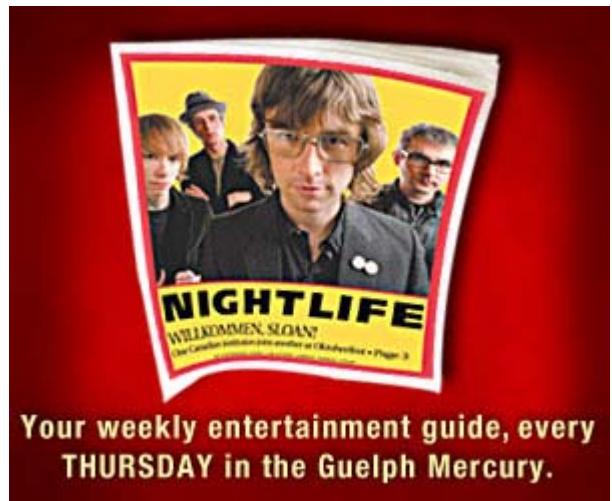
Fruit and vegetable farmer William Blyleven said the province is putting the food supply at risk because the wholesale price of food is so low.

"It's got to go up, because right now you can buy it cheaper than you can grow it. How stupid are we?"

Ministry of Agriculture spokesperson Brent Ross said the province is currently negotiating with the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors to get more local food on store shelves.

Ross said there's an increased demand from consumers for local foods in big-box stores. That would allow farmers to increase sales as well as the cost of their produce, he said.

Anne Freeman, manager of Toronto's Dufferin Grove market, said the devaluing of the farming profession is at the root of why the number of farmers is declining.



"The story I'm hearing from farmers is that it's really hard to make a go of it," she said. "I'm hearing about mountains of paperwork and all kind of obstacles that make it really tough."

Freeman said visits to her market's web page are up by 30 per cent, which she counts as a hopeful sign people want to support farmers over the long-term.

"What we really hope for is that people will participate for long enough, get to know the farmers enough, that they really start to learn about what the reality is for farmers," she said.

"I don't want it to be just a trend. I want it to be a really long-term shift in how we think about our food: where it comes from and the kind of respect we have for the producers of it."

Although Crews says her son will be taking over her Trenton-area farm, she said the average age of an Ontario farmer, which is over 50, is dangerous for the province's food supply.

"I know that sometimes you need to buy the cheapest food, but the consumer needs to make that educated choice as to exactly what they're buying and who they're supporting," she said.



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