



Farmland Acquisition & Management by Ontario Conservation Organizations

survey results from conservation
authorities & land trusts

December 30, 2015



This document is a background study that feeds into the companion publication titled:

Supporting Farmland Protection, Local Food & Farming on Public Lands: opportunities for greater collaboration among Ontario

To access this document, visit www.ontariofarmlandtrust.ca
or contact the Ontario Farmland Trust directly by phone or email.



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Cover image: Dufferin County farmland, including
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Introduction

The Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT) works to protect and preserve Ontario farmlands and associated agricultural, natural and cultural features of the countryside through direct land securement, stewardship, policy research and education for the benefit of Ontarians today and future generations. OFT is the only charitable organization in Ontario with a province-wide mission dedicated to the preservation of farmland.

OFT’s direct land protection (land securement) activities are largely focused on farmland conservation easements. The organization has permanently protected 1,100 acres and twelve farms with these easement agreements since establishing its Farmland Protection Program in 2009. OFT works with many land conservation partners including conservation authorities, other land trusts and various government agencies to protect land for agricultural uses as well as natural heritage preservation. OFT strongly supports the cross-pollination of land conservation efforts among these organizations in Ontario, and continually seeks opportunities for improved knowledge exchange and collaboration.

Orland Conservation was commissioned by OFT to conduct a survey of Ontario’s conservation organizations. The purpose of the survey was to create a baseline understanding of the extent to which conservation organizations in Ontario are engaged in the acquisition and management of farm properties, and the challenges and opportunities that are associated with such activity. The survey results may inform future work of OFT and Ontario’s land conservation sector at large, and could lead to more collaboration among conservation organizations as opportunities arise to protect additional lands or support sustainable agricultural initiatives on protected lands.

The survey was distributed to participants in December 2015 using an on-line survey platform (SurveyMonkey.com) to one or more people employed in land management and conservation at each of the 36 Ontario conservation authorities (“CAs”) and land trust members of the Ontario Land Trust Alliance (OLTA). The survey received 46 individual responses, representing 31 conservation authorities and 15 land trusts; these responses are collectively referred to as the “conservation organizations” in this document. See Appendix 1 to view the complete survey.

Farmland Ownership & Conservation Easements

Over 60% of the participating CAs and land trusts own farmland. Collectively, the 46 organizations represented in the survey responses own close to 16,000 acres of farmland, of which, approximately 10,000 acres are held by CAs, and 5,000 acres are owned by land trusts. The majority of these organizations are located in Southern Ontario where the bulk of the Province’s agricultural land is concentrated.

Does your organization currently own any farmland?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	63.0%	29
No	37.0%	17
Unsure	0.0%	0
<i>answered question</i>		46
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Does your organization currently own any conservation easements that protect farmland?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	17.4%	8
No	76.1%	35
Unsure	6.5%	3
<i>answered question</i>		46
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Land trusts have protected 4,000 acres of farmland using conservation easements, with the conservation authorities holding only 500 acres. These numbers suggest that CAs are not typically using conservation easements as a land securement tool for farmland acquisition. Many land trusts favour the conservation easement method as a lower cost option for land securement.

Organization	Acres of Farmland Owned	Acres of farmland under conservation easement	Number of parcels that include farmland	Acres currently farmed directly by your organization	Acres currently leased by your organization to others for farming	Additional acres planned for future farming
Conservation authorities (31)	10,811	500	189	50	8,262	Approx 107
Land trusts (15)	5,081	4,293	68	0	347	0
TOTAL	15,892	4,793	257	50	8,609	Approx 107

Close to 20% of the CAs and 20% of the land trusts own 450 acres of farmland or more. 42% of the CAs lease out 100% of their farmland to others for farming, whereas only 27% of the land trusts lease out 100% of their farmland to others for farming. There is indication from several organizations that some farmlands are being left idle and are not in active farm production due to various management, leasing and site specific challenges.

Only two of the 31 participating CAs and none of the land trusts are planning to secure more farmland in the future. CAs and land trusts that do not have long standing farm stewardship programs and/or agricultural land ownership experience may benefit from assistance with examples of what other conservation organizations have done, including management plans, best practices and case studies.

Farmland Conservation Goals & Intent

The mission of CAs and most land trusts is focused on the conservation of natural heritage; securing and protecting farmland is often not a core priority. However many conservation organizations have acquired parcels of land that include a portion of agricultural land, and therefore, the management of that land becomes part of their land management program. 47% of the conservation organizations stated that farmland use consists of a mix of short and long term intentions for agricultural use of the land, meaning that there are plans to remove some of the lands from agricultural use in favour of forest or natural feature regeneration; 13% have a clear intention to convert farmlands to another use.

If your organization currently owns and maintains farmland, is agricultural activity an interim use or part of long-term management of the lands?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Interim farming - we are planning to convert the land to another use in the future (e.g. tree planting, natural heritage restoration)	13.3%	4
Long-term management intent - we plan to keep farmlands in active farm use	43.3%	13
A mix of short-term and long-term planning for farmland - there are plans to remove some lands from agricultural production in the future	46.7%	14
Other (please specify)		5
<i>answered question</i>		30
<i>skipped question</i>		16

If your organization currently owns conservation easements that apply to farmland, how strongly do you protect and encourage ongoing farming activities?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Not applicable	71.4%	20
Our easements offer explicit protection of farmland and support for ongoing farming activities	21.4%	6
Our easements acknowledge and permit existing agricultural activities but we prefer that such activity cease and for the properties to naturalize	7.1%	2
Our easements contain no explicit support for ongoing farm activities	0.0%	0
We provide specific farmland stewardship recommendations or other support to farm owners outside of the easement agreement itself	3.6%	1
Other (please specify)	3.6%	1
<i>answered question</i>		28
<i>skipped question</i>		18

The survey results indicate that most CAs and land trusts do not require specific environmental farming practices or implementation of an Environmental Farm Plan on their lands.

Does your organization apply or require an Environmental Farm Plan or certain conservation farming practices on farmlands you own?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	33.3%	11
No	57.6%	19
Sometimes	3.0%	1
Other (please specify)	6.1%	2
<i>answered question</i>		33
<i>skipped question</i>		13

Managing Farmland

CAs and land trusts have come to own farmland for a variety of reasons, including:

- Receiving a bequest of agricultural land,
- Agricultural land being part of a larger property acquisition, and
- Strategic parcel acquisition of marginal farmlands or agricultural lands adjacent to, or in close proximity to sensitive natural features, trails, species at risk habitat or other conservation land holdings.

Many land conservation organizations have active farm stewardship and educational programs; there is increasing interest in acquiring or maintaining land for farm education and demonstration sites, for farmers, consumers and nearby schools.

What has motivated your organization to acquire farmland or farmland easements, and/or maintain farmland in agricultural production? Check all that apply.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Protecting farmland in the long-term for ongoing farming uses, preventing conversion to other non-farm uses	35.7%	10
Supporting sustainable agricultural enterprises and/or local food initiatives	17.9%	5
Creating farm stewardship education or demonstration sites	32.1%	9
Maintaining Species at Risk habitat associated with active agricultural land uses (e.g. grassland birds)	39.3%	11
Creating buffers surrounding core protected natural areas	35.7%	10
Strategic acquisitions within a broader land securement strategy (e.g. trail linkages or linkages between protected areas)	46.4%	13
Bequest or donation of land or easement that included farm areas	60.7%	17
Other (please specify)		12
<i>answered question</i>		28
<i>skipped question</i>		18

The majority of CAs and land trusts that do not own farmland or farmland easements say that this is the case because farmland acquisition is not congruent with their organization’s current mandate or land securement strategy. Many of these organizations, however, simply haven’t had any farmland property opportunities arise, and some investment in outreach to the farming community could open the doors for more collaborative work in the future.

If your organization does not own farmland or easements on farmland, why not? Check all that apply and then skip to question 12.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Not congruent with our organization's mandate or land securement strategy	58.8%	10
Our land securement focus is on natural heritage preservation only; we will not accept a parcel with farmland.	5.9%	1
No projects or opportunities have arisen that include properties with agricultural land	41.2%	7
We have not done any targeted outreach to farm owners for land securement	35.3%	6
Farm owners have not been interested in working with our organization's land securement program	0.0%	0
We do not have the internal agricultural expertise or experience on our staff or Board that is required to deal with farm properties	11.8%	2
This is a low priority for our organization and/or does not have Board support	29.4%	5
Other (please specify)		6
	<i>answered question</i>	17
	<i>skipped question</i>	29

For those organizations that own and manage farmland, the greatest challenge mentioned is balancing desired conservation farm practices with the production of viable, income-generating crops. Finding farmers to lease farmlands, and negotiating and managing leases with farm tenants are other key challenges to navigate. Organizations also face variability in balancing leasing and farming revenues with farm-related expenses, with nearly 20% saying expenses always exceed revenues and 42% breaking even.

If your organization manages farmland directly and/or leases farmland to others to manage, what are your biggest challenges? Check all that apply.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Not applicable	27.3%	9
Finding farmers who want to lease land from our organization	24.2%	8
Managing/negotiating leases with farm tenants	24.2%	8
Administrative costs	18.2%	6
Cost of maintaining land and/or farm buildings	21.2%	7
Balancing desired conservation farm practices with the production of viable, income-generating crops	48.5%	16
Encroachment of agriculture into protected natural areas or disregard for conservation farm practices required by our organization	18.2%	6
Limited agricultural expertise or experience on our staff or Board	15.2%	5
Other (please specify)		6
	<i>answered question</i>	33
	<i>skipped question</i>	13

Is farming or leasing farmland to others a revenue-positive venture?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, we can generate revenues to cover our costs each year and set aside funds for longer-term stewardship of the lands	38.5%	10
Sometimes - we generally break even, but there is some variability from year to year with revenues and expenses	42.3%	11
No - costs always exceed revenues	19.2%	5
Other (please specify)		6
	<i>answered question</i>	26
	<i>skipped question</i>	20

Survey participants provided the following responses to describe factors or major costs that make revenue generation from farmland challenging for conservation organizations:

- No active campaign to raise funds and acquire farmland for the purposes of farmland protection and ongoing agricultural use.
- Most acquisitions are of marginal farm lands; small acreage with limited farming potential. Most farms in the region are based on a larger-scale farming model; our lands do not fit with those objectives.
- Currently some lands are idle and have been so for many, many years and therefore do not generate revenue.
- Cost of maintaining farm buildings is a major challenge and currently exceeds revenues by a great margin.
- Grants have been required to pay for land management and maintenance costs, including upgrading and installing new fencing and renovating pastures, removing trees - very costly. We could not cover these expenses with lease payments only.
- Costs are low as there are no buildings, fences etc. to maintain on our properties. Revenues are also low, however, because of conservation restrictions on farming practices (e.g. can only grow hay and late cut required to avoid bird nesting period).
- Leasing land for conventional farming practices may be at odds with our mandate to protect adjacent conservation lands (e.g. herbicide and insecticide use)
- We can't make revenue from leasing land, as farmers in the area are used to accessing land for free; developers and speculators own much of the land in our region and provide land to farmers for free. There is little desire for farmers to pay for access to our land.
- The areas we have are small and unsustainable for farming without the neighbouring farmer taking them on.
- Farmland is very costly, we would like more land that could generate revenue but can't afford to purchase any land at current prices
- Limited servicing
- There are no challenges. We simply lease the land and the farmer pays their lease when required.

Farmland Conservation Collaboration

Nearly 60% of the respondents indicated an interest in receiving support from OFT for agricultural related activities. More in-depth interviews were held with 3 individual CAs. These CAs are at the beginning phase of developing land acquisition and stewardship strategies or programs that include farmlands within their watersheds; they could benefit from learning from other conservation organizations that have already achieved some success with owning and managing farmland. This may be representative of what other conservation organizations are also facing as part of the evolution of their strategic planning and program development.

The most significant areas of support required by the respondents were in the acquisition of farmland, outreach to the farming community, and farm stewardship planning. Building stronger connections with the agricultural community is essential for advancing both farmland securement and farmland stewardship initiatives in Ontario's land conservation sector. Using OFT as a vehicle for fostering partnerships, facilitating knowledge exchange, and supporting the comprehensive farm management planning would improve Ontario conservation organizations' approach to farmland acquisition and success at sustaining farm activity of protected properties.

Prior to this survey, did you know about the work of the Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT)?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, I am very familiar with OFT's work	26.1%	12
Yes, I have some knowledge of OFT	50.0%	23
No, I was not aware of OFT	23.9%	11
<i>answered question</i>		46
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Would your organization be interested in receiving support from OFT to help acquire and/or manage farm property?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	58.7%	27
No	41.3%	19
<i>answered question</i>		46
<i>skipped question</i>		0

If yes, what kind of support would be most valuable?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Acquisition of certain farmlands or farmland easements	56.0%	14
Integration of farmland into program planning, land securement strategies and landowner agreements	32.0%	8
Outreach to farmers and farm owners	40.0%	10
Landowner relations and monitoring support for farmland easements	24.0%	6
Farm property stewardship planning	48.0%	12
Identifying appropriate farm tenants	24.0%	6
Negotiating and managing leases with farm tenants	20.0%	5
Other (please specify)		10
<i>answered question</i>		25
<i>skipped question</i>		21

Do you have specific project ideas or farm sites in mind?	
Answer Options	Response Count
	22
<i>answered question</i>	22
<i>skipped question</i>	24

Respondents provided the following responses to describe current project ideas, sites and private land stewardship projects:

- Currently working on one project in partnership with OFT; we look forward to other collaborative opportunities as they arise.
- Sites with idle farmlands and farm buildings would benefit from a partner like OFT that can help to revive farming uses on the site and help connect local farmers to the land.
- Interested in developing a relationship with OFT that would see OFT managing farmlands and farmers on our properties. Could use help getting idle farm properties back into farm production.
- One land securement project partnership possibility; currently in early stages of negotiation with the property owner.
- Potential land acquisition includes one that has been farmed in past.
- Through our subwatershed planning and river/stream monitoring programs we identify priority farm properties that could benefit from stewardship projects.
- Projects would vary from tree planting, creation of important habitats (i.e., wetland, meadows) and watercourse buffer plantings.
- Stewardship in areas where there are species at risk, water quality issues, need for trees/buffers, relief for farms in flood prone areas or meander belts, erosion control, climate change adaptation.

Summary & Recommendations

This survey is the first of its kind in Ontario, establishing a baseline understanding of how much farmland is protected and managed by conservation authorities and land trusts. Collectively, these organizations have a significant impact, with more than 20,000 acres either owned outright or protected by conservation easement agreements with private landowners. These farmland holdings represent a great opportunity to support local farmers, local food production and environmentally-sustainable farming practices.

The survey results show, however, that conservation organizations are mixed in their commitment to supporting agriculture on protected lands in the long-term. In many cases, farmland acquisition has been incidental to the organization's core mission of natural heritage preservation, watershed management or recreation. These organizations can lack expertise or capacity to deal with farmlands, as well as the farm community connections needed to find appropriate farmers to help keep lands in agriculture. As a result only 43% of organizations intend to keep their farmlands in farming for the long-term. The potential loss of protected

farmland to agricultural use and food production is concerning to the farm community at a time when conversion of farmland to other uses in Ontario is at an all time high.

Land conservation organizations in Ontario can do more to engage with the farm community and support farming on their landholdings. It is positive to see 56% of survey participants indicating that they would benefit from more support for the acquisition and management of farm properties. This includes:

- Technical assistance, funding and partnerships to acquire farmland and farmland easements
- Technical assistance, funding and partnerships to develop farm property stewardship and management plans
- Outreach to farmers and farmland owners to educate about farmland protection and stewardship options, and seek opportunities for closer collaboration
- Knowledge exchange - sharing experiences among conservation organizations in farmland management, farmland securement and farm stewardship programming, as well as examples of property management plans, best practices and case studies.

Given its mission, interests and connections, OFT is in a unique position to bridge dialogue and foster collaboration between the agriculture and conservation communities in Ontario, bringing groups together to achieve goals of farmland and environmental preservation, and sustainable agricultural practice on protected lands. However, 24% of survey respondents did not have knowledge of OFT and 50% indicated that they only had some knowledge. OFT should pursue targeted outreach to conservation organizations across Southern Ontario to share and discuss OFT goals and services, and develop more collaborative farmland conservation initiatives.

Broader recognition of OFT across the Province could be achieved by organizing regional networking sessions. More educational resources could also be developed for CAs and land trusts regarding farmland securement, outreach to farmers/farm owners, and farm property stewardship planning. OFT should define more clearly what services and support it can offer to conservation organizations that have secured, or may secure, farmland in the future.

Given the variability in farmland management contexts, approaches and successes presented by survey respondents, additional analysis could be completed on the business case for conservation organizations acquiring and managing farmlands to ensure fiscal sustainability of such initiatives.

The survey should also be expanded to include an inventory of farmland held by various levels of government and government agencies. This may include farmlands held by the federal government, Ontario Infrastructure and Lands Corporation, MNR and Ontario Parks, as well as lands that are part of national parks, wildlife management areas and university research farms. OFT is aware, anecdotally, of more than 50,000 acres of farmland held by various government agencies; there is no doubt much more land that is unaccounted for. Government also needs to be part of the dialogue about enhanced planning, collaboration and support for the long-term protection of farmland and sustainability of farming on public and conservation lands.

This survey points to the need for more dialogue and collaboration within the land conservation sector in support of local food, farming and farm stewardship on protected lands in the long term. OFT should build on the dialogue started by this survey to communicate more clearly to other conservation organizations why they should take an interest in farmland conservation, and how greater collaboration can take place among conservation organizations and farming communities to support agriculture on protected lands throughout Ontario.

Appendix 1: Survey



Farming & Farmland Survey for CAs & Land Trusts

Welcome to Our Survey

The Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT) is conducting a survey to create a baseline understanding of the extent to which conservation authorities and land trusts in Ontario are engaged in the acquisition and management of farm properties. OFT is interested in learning from the experience of other Ontario organizations and is considering opportunities to offer more support to like-minded organizations for sustainable agricultural initiatives on their protected lands.

The Mission of OFT is to protect and preserve Ontario farmlands and associated agricultural, natural and cultural features of the countryside through direct land securement, stewardship, policy research and education for the benefit of Ontarians today and future generations.

Participation in this survey is voluntary. Your responses will remain confidential and no names or identifying information will be included in any publications or presentation of the survey results.

This survey should take 10-15 minutes to complete.



Farming & Farmland Survey for CAs & Land Trusts

Farmland Ownership & Conservation Easements

*** 1. Does your organization currently own any farmland?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

*** 2. Does your organization currently own any conservation easements that protect farmland?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

3. If your organization does not own farmland or easements on farmland, why not? Check all that apply and then skip to question 12.

- Not congruent with our organization's mandate or land securement strategy
- Our land securement focus is on natural heritage preservation only; we will not accept a parcel with farmland.
- No projects or opportunities have arisen that include properties with agricultural land
- We have not done any targeted outreach to farm owners for land securement
- Farm owners have not been interested in working with our organization's land securement program
- We do not have the internal agricultural expertise or experience on our staff or Board that is required to deal with farm properties
- This is a low priority for our organization and/or does not have Board support

Other (please specify)

4. If your organization does own farmland or hold easements on farmland, please fill in the blanks where applicable.

Acres of farmland owned

Acres of farmland under conservation easement

Number of parcels that include farmland

Acres currently farmed directly by your organization

Acres currently leased by your organization to others for farming

Additional acres planned for future farming



Farming & Farmland Survey for CAs & Land Trusts

Farmland Conservation Goals & Intent

5. What has motivated your organization to acquire farmland or farmland easements, and/or maintain farmland in agricultural production? Check all that apply.

- Protecting farmland in the long-term for ongoing farming uses, preventing conversion to other non-farm uses
- Supporting sustainable agricultural enterprises and/or local food initiatives
- Creating farm stewardship education or demonstration sites
- Maintaining Species at Risk habitat associated with active agricultural land uses (e.g. grassland birds)
- Creating buffers surrounding core protected natural areas
- Strategic acquisitions within a broader land securement strategy (e.g. trail linkages or linkages between protected areas)
- Bequest or donation of land or easement that included farm areas

Other (please specify)

6. If your organization currently owns and maintains farmland, is agricultural activity an interim use or part of long-term management of the lands?

- Interim farming - we are planning to convert the land to another use in the future (e.g. tree planting, natural heritage restoration)
- Long-term management intent - we plan to keep farmlands in active farm use
- A mix of short-term and long-term planning for farmland - there are plans to remove some lands from agricultural production in the future

Other (please specify)

7. If your organization currently owns conservation easements that apply to farmland, how strongly do you protect and encourage ongoing farming activities?

- Not applicable
- Our easements offer explicit protection of farmland and support for ongoing farming activities
- Our easements acknowledge and permit existing agricultural activities but we prefer that such activity cease and for the properties to naturalize over time
- Our easements contain no explicit support for ongoing farm activities
- We provide specific farmland stewardship recommendations or other support to farm owners outside of the easement agreement itself (e.g. as part of annual easement monitoring site visits)
- Other (please specify)



Farming & Farmland Survey for CAs & Land Trusts

Managing Farmland

8. If your organization manages farmland directly and/or leases farmland to others to manage, what are your biggest challenges? Check all that apply.

- Not applicable
- Finding farmers who want to lease land from our organization
- Managing/negotiating leases with farm tenants
- Administrative costs
- Cost of maintaining land and/or farm buildings
- Balancing desired conservation farm practices with the production of viable, income-generating crops
- Encroachment of agriculture into protected natural areas or disregard for conservation farm practices required by our organization
- Limited agricultural expertise or experience on our staff or Board

Other (please specify)

9. Is farming or leasing farmland to others a revenue-positive venture?

- Yes, we can generate revenues to cover our costs each year and set aside funds for longer-term stewardship of the lands
- Sometimes - we generally break even, but there is some variability from year to year with revenues and expenses
- No - costs always exceed revenues

Other (please specify)

10. Please describe any factors or major costs that make revenue generation from farmland challenging for your organization.

11. Does your organization apply or require an Environmental Farm Plan or certain conservation farming practices on farmlands you own?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- Other (please specify)



Farming & Farmland Survey for CAs & Land Trusts

Farmland Conservation Support & Collaboration

*** 12. Would your organization be interested in receiving support from OFT to help acquire and/or manage farm property?**

- Yes
 No

13. If yes, what kind of support would be most valuable?

- Acquisition of certain farmlands or farmland easements
 Integration of farmland into program planning, land securement strategies and landowner agreements
 Outreach to farmers and farm owners
 Landowner relations and monitoring support for farmland easements
 Farm property stewardship planning
 Identifying appropriate farm tenants
 Negotiating and managing leases with farm tenants

Other (please specify)

14. Do you have specific project ideas or farm sites in mind?

*** 15. Prior to this survey, did you know about the work of the Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT)?**

- Yes, I am very familiar with OFT's work
- Yes, I have some knowledge of OFT
- No, I was not aware of OFT



Farming & Farmland Survey for CAs & Land Trusts

Participant Information

Please provide your contact information so we can be in touch in the future about potential and emerging opportunities to work together and support farmland conservation.

*** 16. Contact Information - This information will be used for survey purposes only.**

Name

Company

Email Address

Phone Number



Farming & Farmland Survey for CAs & Land Trusts

Survey Complete!

Thank you!

We really appreciate your time completing this survey. Your input is important, as we learn from each other, seek opportunities for closer collaboration around common goals, and work together to protect and steward working farmlands and associated natural heritage throughout Ontario.

For more information, please visit www.ontariofarmlandtrust.ca