

## Food Systems: A Golden Opportunity

The Golden Horseshoe of southern Ontario is embracing a food systems approach in order to create value and opportunity.

In March 2011, many area stakeholders held a summit aimed at creating a 10-year action plan for the region, which extends from Toronto to Niagara. The participants included farmers, food businesses, health practitioners, educators, suppliers, conservation authorities and local governments, among many others. The Golden Horseshoe Agri-Food Region includes the municipalities of Durham, Halton, Hamilton, the Holland Marsh, Niagara, Peel, Toronto and York.

“The opportunities for an integrated food system are almost unlimited,” declared Nick Ferri, Chair of the Greater Toronto Area Agriculture Action Committee (GTA AAC) and the Peel Federation of Agriculture. “Each player has its own needs and wants and our work is about setting clear goals so we can work together to achieve them.”

Food is an economic driver. Contrary to popular perception, more people in southern Ontario now work in the food sector than in the auto sector. The action plan is about creating new local markets, new supply chains and new relationships for farms and food businesses. It is also about linking the economic prospects of the agri-food sector to the needs of the health and education sectors so each can benefit from new approaches to producing, promoting and consuming good food.

The summit revealed creative ideas at work. For example, public health dietitians had observed that one city needed to fill a gap to meet the Ministry of Children and Youth Services



Local growers can help schools meet Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services nutrition guidelines.

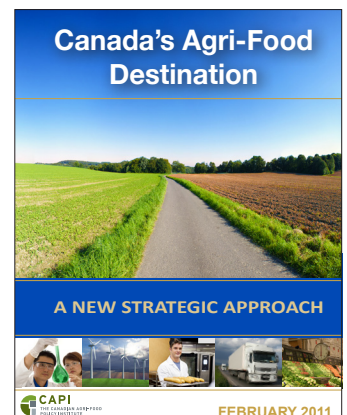
nutrition guidelines (to provide at least one milk and milk alternative serving for snack programs). They reached out to a cheese supplier and encouraged the company to literally re-shape its products for local schools. The company now supplies smaller portion-sized, low-sodium, low-fat mozzarella “cheese wiggles.”

“Having a food company, school board and dietitians come together created a win-win,” noted Vicki Edwards, a public health nutritionist for the City of Hamilton. “The company responded with a new product, the schools now serve a healthy snack and the kids love them.” Public health dietitians are now helping school boards to identify the pizza establishments that have made changes to their recipes

*continued on page 2*

### CANADA'S AGRI-FOOD DESTINATION

In March 2011 CAPI initiated a blog to foster a public conversation based on its new report on Canada's agri-food future. Download the report and join the discussion at [www.capi-icpa.ca/blog](http://www.capi-icpa.ca/blog) to provide your opinion on the question: **How can Canada realize the full potential of a major strategic asset – the country's agri-food sector?**



*continued from page 1*

to meet current nutrition guidelines, specifically with whole grain crusts and lower fat toppings.

How can such insightful systems thinking become pervasive?

In part, it's about truly focusing on the consumer. This requires a willingness to develop new relationships in order to share new ideas.

The Summit prompted other ideas. "This densely populated region has some 44 hospitals and serves millions of meals every year," said Mr. Ferri. "Yet we need to connect the health sector's procurement policies and practices to sourcing more Ontario-grown and processed food."

Other suggestions included:

- using food waste as an energy source to generate biogas;
  - creating more food distribution hubs;
  - promoting producers and processors together; and,
  - finding new ways to coordinate and enhance research and innovation to respond to the growing interest in functional foods and responding to the demand for ethnic foods.
- It is often said that farmers have always grown "good" food. The Golden Horseshoe initiative is showing that the real opportunity lies in finding creative ways to work across the food system to create new market channels. This approach will make good local food available in a way that drives consumers to demand it.

## Linking farmers and consumers

The Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation have created a business-to-business website, [Ontariofresh.ca](http://Ontariofresh.ca), that aims to expand the market for buyers and sellers of local food. The electronic marketplace will bring growers together with bulk buyers, chefs, caterers and distributors. This is one way to link farmers to the changing marketplace and consumer palettes.

## The right apples: Making better choices



A fruit producer in Beamsville, Torrie Warner, observed that better communication can create better procurement choices. He supplies a local school with apples. But budget constraints often result in the lowest-cost option being ordered, such as Spy apples. These apples are good for baking, but they are bitter and not very physically appealing for individual consumption (as opposed to the more expensive and sweeter Gala apple). "It's no wonder that the Spy apples don't get eaten, sit on the shelf and go bad," he said. "Schools need to understand how to select the right foods – and especially fresh fruit and vegetables – to encourage consumption and reduce wastage. I can then count on selling greater volumes because the kids will make the healthy choice, thus eating what tastes and looks good. This only happens if the right choice is offered to them."



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The Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute (CAPI) is a catalyst. The Institute is focused on stimulating a national dialogue on agriculture and agri-food issues, by addressing the policies that will enable Canada to thrive in the global agri-food marketplace. It is a non-partisan, not-for-profit

organization that offers an independent voice on the mid- to long-term challenges facing the agriculture and agri-food industry. Through the publishing of an occasional newsletter, CAPI will highlight innovation and successes in the agri-food sector.