



Minister's Agricultural Roundtable
Improving Farmer Mental Health
January 7, 2019 – Guelph, Ontario

BACKGROUND

The well-being of Ontario's beef farmers is a critically important issue for Beef Farmers of Ontario (BFO).

While many factors can contribute to the large number of farmers experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety and depression, there are several commonalities across sectors, operation types and jurisdictions that are fueling this problem.

For beef farmers, increasing revenue uncertainty driven by higher costs, slimmer margins and more volatile markets is putting increased pressure on farmers to make ends meet. An aging producer population, with an average age over 55, is also creating challenges for many farmers to manage workloads. For many farmers facing these challenges, retirement, liquidation or downsizing are not perceived as viable options.

The effects of mental health extend beyond individual farmers and their families. High levels of stress, anxiety and depression also have major impacts on the welfare of animals under farmers' care. BFO Animal Care Advisors, who are charged with responding to animal care complaint calls on beef farms in Ontario, have reported an increase in the number of cases involving older farmers unable or struggling to properly manage farm workloads, which can often result in lapses in animal care standards. Revenue uncertainty and market volatility can also incentivize corner-cutting and reduced farm investment, all of which can deteriorate one's mental health and put farmers at increased risk of self-harm, notwithstanding the obvious economic consequences.

There is a clear link between mental health and financial security: those who are more financially secure have better mental health outcomes. In the beef industry, profitability varies considerably by sector and operation type, and safety net programs designed to protect beef farmers against severe fluctuations in market prices have been steadily reduced over the last several years. This leaves farmers much more exposed to financial downturns. It is no surprise that the increase in mental health issues among the farm community has mirrored the decrease in farm supports and the increase in market volatility over the last decade.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One action the Ontario government can take immediately is to follow through on their commitment to increase funding for the Ontario Risk Management Program (RMP), which is designed to provide



income stabilization to farmers through partial financial protection against global downturns in commodity market prices.

Secondly, the Ontario government should consider conducting a comprehensive study to analyze structural and systemic factors contributing to financial insecurity and instability on Ontario farms. This study would provide meaningful information that could be used to help design new farm safety net, insurance, and other government support programs aimed at improving farm financial security, which would support improved farmer mental health and well-being.

Beyond government-supported farm safety net and insurance programs, there are a number of recommendations that have been made to the federal government by Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton from the University of Guelph, the Do More Agriculture Foundation and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, among others. The Ontario government could choose to support the improvement of mental health and well-being in the Ontario farming community through actions that include:

- 1) Support for the creation of a Canadian (Ontario) network for farmer mental health
- 2) Funding for more research on farmer mental health
- 3) Support for the development of evidence-based training and support programs for the primary agriculture sector

SUMMARY

Farmer mental health is an important issue that has the potential to seriously affect rural families and communities, animal welfare, farm economics, and the broader health of the province if left unchecked.

In BFO's view, the Ontario government must help drive the creation and expansion of mental health resources, services and supports that are tailored to farmers and the agricultural community and made available across rural Ontario. Of equal importance is the need to take immediate action to help address the financial instability and insecurity many farmers face across the province as a result of regulatory burdens and insufficient business risk management programming.

For more information please contact:

Richard Horne
Manager of Policy and Issues
richard@ontariobeef.com
519-824-0334 ext.234

Craig McLaughlin
Director
cmblackhorse@gmail.com
613-504-1863

Beef Farmers of Ontario represents 19,000 beef producers in Ontario by advocating in the areas of sustainability, animal health and care, environment, food safety, and domestic and export market development. BFO's vision is to help foster a sustainable and profitable beef industry, and have Ontario beef recognized as an outstanding product by our consumers.

