

8 Conclusions

This study has explored farmers' barriers to participation in any agri-environmental program in Ontario, using several research methods and incorporating relevant survey, census and participation data from other sources. It draws from a wide range of opinion from published sources, from farmers and from those involved in the design and delivery of existing programs.

Conclusions from each element have been made in the respective Sections throughout the report. We conclude that there are major areas of congruence between the existing evidence and new information presented here. There are also well-entrenched points of divergence or contradiction which have no apparent resolution in the short term.

We conclude that the major barrier to participation in programs, from structural design and delivery standpoints, is the limited funding budgeted for them by most of the various levels of government involved. This limitation puts severe constraints on farmers' access to programs.

A major divergence in philosophy concerning access is also apparent within Ontario. Federal funding, such as for the EFP, is delivered within a firm concern for equal access for all farmers. The province, on the other hand, is dedicated to community-based programming which relies heavily on local initiative, establishment of partnerships with other funders and volunteer service. Cost-sharing is deeply entrenched in Ontario and perceived as a self-evident virtue. This is despite the fact that almost all who contributed to this report agreed that incentive levels are not adequate to attract voluntary uptake. In areas of full uptake in programs, further access to provincial program funding is constrained by limited budgets.

Ontario's approach allows local flexibility in targeting areas for remediation and other prioritizing. This local flexibility is considered a desirable form of governance. But it also produces a regionally unequal playing field which results in considerable misunderstanding and resentment among farmers.

The requirement for an EFP to be in place is required by some programs and some delivery agencies to establish eligibility for provincial funding from the Healthy Futures for Ontario Agriculture. This is a particularly contentious feature of the interplay between the two levels of government. As well, the status of the type and level of environmental commitment through the federal APF has yet to be established. Anticipation of the

regulations associated with the provincial NMA appears to be slowing enrollment in existing voluntary programs.

The divergent styles in governance of programs may be creating uncertainty as local actors compete for funds. New graduates and former extension agents released onto the labour force through government down-sizing now compete within other institutional arrangements. These agencies likely have vested interests in the outcome of government decision-making for environmental spending.

In neither federal nor provincial domains is there a firm commitment to long-term agri-environmental programs. These, of necessity, are tied to the timelines of political mandates. In neither jurisdiction is there an unambiguous policy, backed by long-term financial commitment and clear action, for integrated social, economic and environmental rural sustainability, which would entertain the concept of multifunctionality in agriculture (or multi-benefit agriculture, to use the CFFO's term). This would be necessary before programs making direct environmental payments could be effectively established.

There are diverse and sometimes contradictory barriers to participation from the personal perspective of farmers. Chief among them appears to be mistrust and/or misunderstanding of government and delivery agencies. Unresolved anxiety and even fear exists about the possibility that information about their operations will be collected, broadcast and possibly used against them. In reality, it is almost impossible for independent, systematic research to be conducted on farmers and their practices in Ontario, since access to discrete information is firmly closed.

Many farmers believe that they or their organizations have "ownership" of programs disbursing public funding. While these organizations do deliver programs with the active involvement of farmers, they remain accountable to the public through government. When organizations have not been held up to transparency and accountability, we may take this as a deliberate policy position by government itself, perhaps to maintain the appearance of self-regulation.

Another powerful barrier is the complexity of programs and the paperwork or time required to enroll in them. Hopefully an agreeable trade-off between equity, accountability and simplicity can be constructed to surmount this barrier. To achieve this, all actors will have to sit together to formulate a workable solution. There are currently severe barriers to this, as we saw in our inability to attract many farmers to the multi-stakeholder meeting of

this project. Many farmers firmly believe only those from a farm background may competently join in decision-making about farm practices surrounding the agri-environment. As well, a strong aversion to the environmental movement and, to a lesser extent, conservation of the natural environment, exists among many farmers.

There is no obvious solution to the artificial rift between the environment and the agri-environment, any more than between urban and rural. While it is not easy to reconcile the productive use of farmland with conservation, both sides will be expected to sit together within the community-based and participatory forms of governance now in place. This must, of necessity, include many groups, agencies and governmental ministries.

The rise of other forms of regulation, notably under the NMA, stands to place a serious brake on voluntary activity. It was evident that farmers themselves do not readily distinguish between voluntary enrolment in incentive programs and the regulatory regimes under which they must operate. Their decision-making is firmly enmeshed with uncertainties over economic viability and other structural problems in agriculture today.

This study concludes that there are some important regional differences in farmers' participation within the province. This is clearly apparent in the publicly-available EFP information and suggested by the farm show and workshop data. As well, it appears that Primary farmers are more likely to participate in programs than Secondary farmers. There seems, however, to be no significant difference in their opinions about direct environmental payments, as revealed at the 2002 CFFO workshop survey. Further direct study of these two questions is recommended.

Joining the dual functions of environmental payments programs, as a form of financial support to farmers and a means of environmental stewardship, would require a formidable act of political will and financial commitment to make programs widely available, provide equity of access and ensure effective monitoring, evaluation and public accountability. As well, financial risks, public liability concerns, and exclusion from program design and implementation must be resolved before wider voluntary uptake in such programs could be expected. The farmers consulted directly for this project found favour in the concept of direct environmental payments, if expressing considerable doubt about their practicality in today's policy environment. There remains considerable merit in the concept of direct environmental payments and hope for its successful application in Ontario.