

Advocates celebrate 30 years of standing up for ag



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It's been 30 years since Ontario farm leaders first began noticing a need to speak up for agriculture. In the 1980s, anti-animal agriculture campaigns were growing and regulatory pressure over the environmental impacts of pesticide use were increasing.

Independent of each other, both crop and livestock farmers realized they needed to take action, ultimately resulting in the formation of the Ontario Farm Animal Council (OFAC) and Agricultural Groups Concerned About Resources and the Environment (AGCare) three decades ago – the predecessor organizations of today's Farm & Food Care Ontario.

"We were hearing and reading about animal rights versus animal welfare, especially from Britain and some areas in the U.S., and realized there was a need to collaborate with counterparts at other commodities to form some kind of organization that could be proactive on that," recalled Bruce Christie, a past OFAC chair who first became involved with the organization around 1990.

According to Christie, egg farmer Jim Johnstone from Alliston and dairy farmer Gord Coukell from Stayner were two early drivers behind the creation of OFAC, along with Grober's Mike Cooper. Egg Farmers of Ontario (EFO) staff member Leslie Ballentine became the new organization's first paid employee.

"Leslie was articulate and very persistent and she had a good awareness of who the activists were. She really made it fly as far as getting started," Christie added.

Around the same time, Ontario crop producers were facing their own problems: increasing restrictions on use and potential withdrawal of various pesticide products due to environmental concerns.

Farm leaders from the Ontario Corn Producers' Association (OCPA), Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association and others felt a proactive approach based on stewardship and responsible use was the solution.

"As the organizations began thinking about this, there was a need to create an entity that represented all farm organizations – what became AGCare," said Bruce Archibald, who served as AGCare's first secretary as part of his then-position with the Ontario Corn Producers' Association.

In its early years, AGCare focused on bringing agriculture's voice to the environmental conversation when decisions were being made that would affect the sector.

"We crafted scenarios and stories we could sell that would have traction with urban media and audiences – I would cold call radio stations and newspapers and for some media, it was the first time they had a live farmer to talk to and put science into lay terms," said Jeff Wilson, an early AGCare chair.

He credits AGCare's first Executive Director Mary Wiley, along with Terry Daynard and Ken Hough of the OCPA and Gord Surgeoner as supporting him in those outreach efforts.

Both Wilson and Archibald point to the industry-requested introduction of the grower pesticide safety course as an early and long-standing AGCare accomplishment. Today, more than 22,000 Ontario farmers are certified in pesticide safety – and many believe that this helped shield agriculture from restrictions when Ontario's cosmetic pesticide ban was introduced a decade ago.

OFAC's early years were defined by raising awareness of the rising tide of animal welfare issues and making agriculture more understandable to the public. That included exhibits at the Canadian National Exhibition and other events with large urban crowds, and providing resources to help farmers tell their story and deal with activists and protestors.

ACCORDING TO Christie, the first steps in what he calls the natural evolution towards the ultimate amalgamation of AGCare and OFAC were taken when OFAC hired Crystal Mackay to become its executive director.

Mackay and AGCare executive director Jackie Fraser began partnering on projects of common interest, including relocating into joint Guelph office space in 2005 and sharing staff resources.

"It became increasingly evi-



Wallenstein Feed's Rick Martin (left) poses with Kelly Daynard and Brian Gilroy of Farm & Food Care.

dent that questions were being asked about pesticides and GMOs as well as about animal housing – and that's when we started to do more and more work together," said Farm & Food Care's current Executive Director Kelly Daynard, who first joined OFAC in 2005 as its program manager.

After an extensive consultative process, the new organization came into being on January 1, 2012 with a mandate to build and maintain public trust by providing credible information about Canadian food and farming.

Today, Farm & Food Care has six full-time equivalent employees, an annual budget of \$1.2 million, and sister groups in Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island. About 60 per cent of its activities focus on proactive consumer outreach.

"Providing information and advocating for agriculture is our focus," said current Farm & Food Care chair Brian Gilroy, adding that this does not include lobbying, an activity member organizations handle on their own.

Among Farm & Food Care's leading accomplishments is the Real Dirt on Farming, an informative publication about Canadian agriculture first released in 2006 with 15,000 printed copies. By this spring, over four million copies will have been distributed nationally, including as a Globe and Mail insert coming up on May 12.

A virtual farm tour website, also first launched in 2006, is now reaching over one million visitors a year and was expanded in 2017 to include its first processing tours. "Real" farm tours for media and food influencers, including bloggers, dietitians

and culinary students, have brought about 3,400 people to 170 Ontario farms and research facilities, and the popular Breakfast on the Farm events easily attract over 2,000 visitors each time.

"We're not afraid to answer tough questions about GMOs, antibiotics, hormones, and pesticides. They were the top questions when I first started with OFAC and they still are today," Daynard said.

And, according to Gilroy, it's through Farm & Food Care that the industry can present a unified response to specific issues, like the 2017 Pig Save trial, where farm groups worked together to present a unified message that was heard by urban media, even if the trial outcome was not what was hoped for.

Stable funding remains an issue, however. Farm & Food Care receives money through memberships and donations. Outside of small environment and animal care projects, there is no stable government funding, although OFAC and AGCare both received annual grants from OMAFRA until a few years ago.

"We continually seek funding from new venues and new members. Our members put the roof over our head and fund our operational costs, but we fundraise for outreach projects – for example, 76 companies, commodities and individuals donated to the Real Dirt on Farming," said Daynard, adding all projects are done in partnership with others.

WALLENSTEIN FEEDS was one of those supporters, donating \$103,500 to the project after pledging to match, up to \$50,000, all supplier donations made at a company open house

last summer.

"The goal of achieving public trust in food and farming is difficult to achieve. We think that our support for organizations such as Farm and Food Care helps consumers to better understand and appreciate farming practices and the science behind food production," Martin said. "My hope is that Farm & Food Care can bring sectors of agriculture together so that we can tell one comprehensive story that is science-based, believable, and compelling."

Burnbrae Farms is another long-time supporter, providing both membership and specific project funding, including for virtual farm tours and Breakfast on the Farm, as well as hosting media and culinary tours.

"With only two percent of the population farming, it's important to support organizations that are dedicated to educating non-farming consumers about agriculture and the good positive impact of agriculture," said Sue Hudson. "The job of instilling confidence in consumers is a forever job – it will always be important to communicate how food is being produced."

According to Daynard, both AGCare and OFAC were unique organizations when they were formed and Farm & Food Care Ontario was the first of its kind to unite crop and livestock farmers working on a common public outreach goal.

"It's a model we sometimes take for granted, but it's a model the world looks at – a visiting Churchill scholar from Australia who was here last year has gone back to Australia telling their industry that they need a Farm & Food Care," Daynard said.