Reducing Pesticide Use by 50% in the Province of Ontario: Challenges and Progress

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Introduction: This Farm Ontario

The Province of Ontario, in central Canada, has the largest agriculture industry of any province in the nation. Approximately, one-half of the class 1 agricultural land for Canada lies within its boundaries. In 1986, Ontario farmers sold food and other agricultural products worth 5.5 billion dollars. About 2 billion dollars of this production was exported, principally to the United States (O.M.A.F. 1988). A wide diversity of agricultural commodities are produced, from tobacco and peanuts in the south, to fruit and grapes in the Niagara Peninsula, to vegetables and pasture lands throughout the province.

Approximately 60% of the gross farm income is derived from livestock or livestock products. Consequently, the major crops are grain corn (704,000 ha), silage corn (154,000), soybeans (518,000), winter wheat (279,000), and hay (1,040,000). There were approximately 3.2 million hectares of field crops grown in 1988 (O.M.A.F., 1988). Our field-crop commodities are similar to many of the Midwestern U.S. states, e.g., Illinois and Ohio. We do have, however, 76,000 ha of vegetable production and 34,000 ha of fruits and vineyards.

Ontario is the most populated province in Canada, accounting for 9.5 million of a national population of approximately 26 million (O.M.A.F., 1988). The 1986 Canadian census reported 72,713 farms, an 11.8% decline from 1981. These farms totaled 13.9 million ha in 1986, a decline of 6.5% from 1981 (O.M.A.F., 1988). Farmers make up less than 4% of the provincial population.

Most of the population is confined to large urban centers like Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, and London. In counties surrounding large urban centers like Toronto the majority of land under cultivation is not owned by
farmers but rather by speculators and urbanites who hope to eventually retire to the country. Indeed, just over 15% of those living in rural Ontario are farmers (Davies and Penfold, 1990). Many in the rural landscape are commuters who work in the cities and live on small parcels of land. In 1986, the farm population of Canada represented only 14.6% of the actual rural population (Davies and Penfold, 1990). We estimate that there are approximately 40,000 full-time farmers in the province. Public-opinion polls indicate that our farm population is well respected. A recent multiple-choice, public-opinion poll of Ontario citizens asked, “What positive things come to mind about Ontario farmers?” They had the following responses: (1) 36%, hardworking/dedicated/heritage, (2) 18%, provide food, (3) 13%, vital to economy, and (4) 16%, don’t know. Nevertheless, the political voice of farmers does not match that of the urban or most rural populations. The farmers are, however, well organized with a variety of commodity marketing boards and joint associations to deal with common problems such as international trade, animal welfare, and public misperceptions about farming. A consortium of 15 marketing boards has formed an association known as AGCARE to address environmental issues facing agriculture such as pesticides.

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History

It would be a triumph of virtue if one could say that the program to reduce pesticides by 50% in the Province of Ontario was based on a consultative process between farmers, agriculture researchers, politicians, and the general public. As in many endeavors the truth is more revealing. In the summer of 1987, there was a provincial election to choose the ruling party for our provincial parliament and our premier, who is the equivalent of a U.S. state governor. Various political parties were seeking issues on which the public could make decisions. Public-opinion polls in Ontario, as in most jurisdictions throughout North America, had indicated that the public in general was concerned about pesticides from both a human health and environmental perspective. The electorate made their choice in the late summer of 1987. Quite simply, the party which won the election and became the ruling party had as one of their platforms a promise to reduce pesticides by 50%.

Prior to the election in 1985, there had been an ad hoc committee of pest-management specialists including provincial, federal, and university personnel who had attempted to determine where the province should be going relative to pest management. Six commodity areas where pest man-