

Office of the Minister

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April 30, 2020

Dear Friends,

I am writing to you today to give another update on some of the actions that I and our government have taken in response to COVID and the challenges that our sector is facing.

Before I get into some of those details, I'd like to start by thanking you, your members and staff for everything you continue to do, every day, to keep our agri-food system strong. These times have been incredibly difficult for everyone in Ontario, but the people of this province depend on the critical work you do, sometimes under very difficult circumstances, and you have not let them down. Thank you for that.

While our government continues to battle this ruthless virus and has taken decisive action to stop the spread of COVID-19, we also continue to work with our agri-food sector during these unprecedented times. I want to encourage every farm, agri-business, food processor and other agri-food business in Ontario to ensure that they have their own contingency and continuity plans in case of a breakout. I also want to encourage you to please contact me with any concerns or ideas that you want to share to make sure our response to this outbreak reflects the concerns you may see day to day. We are all in this together.

Extensions for Deadlines

In addition to the extensions I shared with you by letter last week, I want to let you know that a number of new adjustments of government programs and requirements have been recently made, including:

- Amending an Agricorp regulation that will extend the deadline for grain dealer and grain elevator licenses to 90 days after the Emergency Order has been lifted to safeguard grain purchasing and storage during this time;
- Extending the existing certificates (4) and licences (2) under the Nutrient Management Act that expire in the coming months, to ensure farmers have access to qualified personnel to assist them in preparing and implementing nutrient management strategies and plans to support crop growth and protect the environment;

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- For beekeepers, streamlining inspection requirements and extending the terms of permits to sell bees.

Also, a reminder that we have extended the deadline to enroll in AgriStability until July 3, 2020.

New E-commerce Support

Last week, we announced an investment of up to \$2.5 million to help the agri-food sector expand online. I hope that this will help some businesses create opportunities for online sales. The new program has two funding streams: one for grants of up to \$5,000 to establish an online e-business and marketing presence and the other for cost-share funding of up to \$75,000 to develop and implement high-impact online business opportunity projects, such as organizations that are coming together to develop websites for a number of producers. It is funded through the Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

My ministry will immediately accept applications and expedite the approval process to help businesses and organizations develop, expand and enhance their current online presence as quickly as possible. Please visit www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/cap/ebusiness.htm for more information.

Increasing Access to Labour

I know labour continues to be a critical issue for many in our sector. While temporary foreign workers continue to arrive, I know there are operations that don't have the full amount of labour they need.

We recently announced a new investment of up to \$1 million to connect workers with jobs in the agri-food sector. The goal of this program is to help primary agriculture, food processing and grocery retail businesses to recruit and train workers. This targeted intake through the Canadian Agriculture Partnership is open and eligible applications will be received and assessed on a continuous basis while funding is available. I'm pleased that we have started to receive applications. For more information and to apply online, visit http://omafra.gov.on.ca/english/cap/labour_supply_training.htm.

As you know, we also launched a website earlier this month that provides resources and job listings across the agriculture and food supply chain including grocery retail, food processing, distribution and other agribusinesses. The word is certainly out – since its launch in early April, there have been about 200,000 page views, and I hope that this initiative is proving helpful to highlight the available jobs in our sectors. The website is available at Ontario.ca/AqFoodJobs

Advocating for Ontario

I continue to engage with my federal counterpart, Minister Bibeau, about the issues impacting the agriculture sector. Ontario's agri-food sector plays a critical role in Canada's food supply and agriculture industry. We need a national approach to many of the problems we are facing.

I continue to advocate to the federal government for support for both our processing challenges and our producers. I am also engaging with my provincial counterparts on these issues.

Preparing to Re-open the Province

Ontario is planning for the next phase of responding to the COVID-19 outbreak – reopening our province.

As a first step, we have developed a framework to guide our approach. This framework outlines the method and principles we will use to reopen businesses, services and public spaces to responsibly lead Ontario's economy back to prosperity. *A Framework for Reopening our Province* includes three stages. Through all stages, public health and safety will be the number one concern, while balancing the needs of people and businesses.

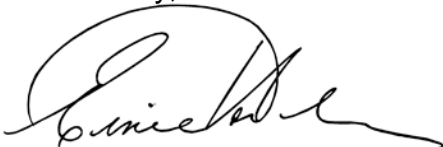
I know that the last weeks have been hard for everyone both on a personal level and for the impacts on businesses. There have been some difficult decisions. We are looking forward to taking the steps that will begin opening but we need to go slow to ensure that we don't put people's health at risk.

As a member of the Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee, I will be consulting with people and businesses to assess the economic impacts of COVID-19 and help guide Ontario back from this virus. More details on our government's plan can be found at www.ontario.ca/page/reopening-ontario-after-covid-19

In closing, I and your team at OMAFRA are dedicated to our sector and are committed to ensure that we are addressing your needs and concerns. I thank you again as we all work together to protect our food system, from farm to fork.

Please stay safe and healthy.

Sincerely,



Ernie Hardeman
Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs