

Holland Marsh Growers' Association

AGM 2009 Chair's Report

As I reflect back upon this past year, what strikes me is what a difference a year truly makes. At this point last year, we were just beginning to get some traction on issues we, as a board, thought were relevant for our membership.

We had not begun to form the partnerships that would make a difference; we had not begun to develop long-term plans; we had some ideas that were still left to implement. We wanted accountability for our members; we wanted to make sure that we were doing the right things for our farmers and this area; and we wanted to build for the future. We had started work on a few issues, like participation at the Royal – but had not yet found our place within the agricultural system. A year ago, many questioned our association and the reason for it.

Today, one year later, I can't help but marvel at the professionalism of our farmers and the results our association and its members have achieved. We have met with government, stakeholders, and others outside of the realm of our agricultural industry to reposition the Holland Marsh as the crown jewel of farming in the Province of Ontario. We are returning to the Salad Bowl of Ontario days – when we didn't have to re-educate residents and fellow citizens of the importance of this growing area. We are working with mainstream media to help our fellow citizens realize that the black soil they drive through on the way to the cottage or ski hills is vital to their future existence. These foodies, these food aware consumers are now taking our message into an area that we could have only dreamed about a year ago – the internet. They blog about the Holland Marsh and area; they take their pictures; they are doing a good job of helping us get the message out to all stakeholders how important this growing area truly is. Because of this, we don't want to have fellow farmers questioning whether there is merit in marsh farming – or even questioning whether there will be a so-called Holland Marsh in a few years.

What began as an idea to promote the Holland Marsh to consumers, through a growers' association, has become a full, one-stop organization dedicated to improving the lot of farmers within the Holland Marsh and area. And make no mistake; we have caught the attention of virtually everyone who comes in contact with our association. They have found us to be cordial, informative, and considerate. But they have also found us to be combative when needed, validating our position with intelligent, common sense, farming approaches – the way that we see life on the marsh.

The list of accomplishments, in such a short time, is a reflection of the excellent board that we have. And we have accomplishments – and you should be grateful for the efforts of a board that can agree to disagree and still move ahead with the vision that led to the creation of this association: a vision that is farmer-driven and farmer-implemented. We have made an impact in the GTA; with consumers; with the media who have found us to be articulate and patient as we re-educate that important segment of our society; and we have met with a major retailer already and have more meetings scheduled within the next six weeks. The mandate, when we talked with farmers, was to improve pricing and return the marsh farmers to prosperity. We were told that regulations were too much for our area – and to see what we could do about relieving the rules

governing this specific part of Ontario. We were told to market and promote – and make the marsh prominent. We've done that – and we're not even close to finishing what we've started.

We do not have all of you on board with this association – that's fine. We will never get 100 per cent buy-in with what is happening. Many questioned marketing the marsh last year. We now know that is what is of interest to consumers and those within the retail value chain. More and more, we are driving interest to a Holland Marsh Gold brand and logo. More and more, we are getting the attention of consumers, the media, and the various levels of government to understand that the Holland Marsh is not just farming – it's much more than that. It is a necessity for Ontarians – and beyond. A year ago, if we had said that, you would have laughed this board out of this community. You can't today, because we have made the Holland Marsh and area important to all of our stakeholders – and the timing for what we are doing is perfect. Not only is there a buy local movement being driven by consumers – but we, as an association, are contributing towards that movement by reminding everyone that fresh, tasty, and healthy is right in their backyard.

I would like to personally thank all of the board members this year: Paul Smith, Joe Srebot, Herman Gasko, Dan Sopuch, Doug Weening, Doug Van Luyk, Bill Scotch, Avia Eek, and Domenic Riga. They have done a remarkable job and should be congratulated by our membership and the farming community for their on-going efforts. I would also like to thank Jamie Reaume, who has been helping with the association and its day-to-day activities. Through the efforts of all of us, we are making a difference.

Alex Makarenko, Chair
HMGA Board of Directors