

Holland Marsh Growers' Association

AGM 2009 Executive Director's Report

It has been a year and a bit since I was asked to become the Executive Director of the Holland Marsh Growers' Association – and it has been my privilege to serve at the best interests of the farming community that I enjoy so much. Many of you may be aware that I shun titles. I like to think that I am a farmer advocate, someone who will go to bat for farmers so that they can get on with the business of farming without worrying about what is coming down the pike at them.

I have stated both to the board and publically that my role for the past year has been to put the Holland Marsh back on the map – maybe not literally, but figuratively. It is a disappointment to know how far off the map this area had gotten – politically, in agriculture, and, more importantly, in the consumer's mindset. Today, that is no longer the case. We have caught the attention of many – and that means it's a good start but the job is not done.

The focus this past year – from our last AGM – has been relationship building: from Queen's Park and their federal brethren to our local municipal councils and a fair number of agencies that are involved in the Holland Marsh and area. I am proud of the small part I played to reacquaint the Holland Marsh back into the mainstream mindset of all stakeholders. This little region of Ontario, the most heavily regulated in the province, has come a long way since its inception.

I was asked recently by my board whether the job is what I expected. I answered no. The truth is, the role I play is so much more than I could have ever anticipated. And despite what may be out there, rumours of my demise, my leaving the association, are greatly exaggerated. I am having too much fun to leave right now. And the strength of the association lies not within the board but its members, the farmers who actively want to see change take place – change that is for the better.

The association, as the list of items we have done over the past year would indicate, has been involved in a great number of issues – with a wide range of results. I indicated that this past year has been about relationship building. We have done that because there is consensus amongst our stakeholders that a collective of farmers has the voice being strived for. We are not split in our opinions, statements, or facts. We talk about challenges but we highlight and stress opportunities. We focused on the areas where we could have an impact upon – and dealt with that as a board.

Speaking of which, I would like to thank all board members since its inception. As someone who has worked with a number of boards throughout the years, this board is – by far – the genuinely nicest board that I have ever worked with. Our farmers, our membership are the best folks in agriculture to deal with. I cannot count the number of times that your fellow farmers have stepped up to the plate on your behalf – not just board members, but many of you. You should all give yourself a hand for your efforts over this past year, whether it be participating at the Royal or Soup-a-licious, whether it is donating products for a political fundraiser or helping prepare product for the Royal and other events, whether it is doing interviews or television shows, or whether it is allowing visitors to come onto your property, on your tractors, or into your sheds – our membership has demonstrated time and again the remarkable generosity that I have personally come to recognize as an inherent part of the Holland Marsh farming community.

Not a day goes by when I am not grateful for the opportunity to work with some of the best individuals in agriculture in this province – and that speaks volumes towards those who have stepped into it. I am particularly pleased because it has not been just one or two – but many. The association has become known as media savvy – and we have focused our efforts on correcting preconceived ideas within the mainstream media side, from labour to the marketplace. We did not work on the agricultural media side because our message has never been geared towards that. We have a remarkable website, one of the best in agriculture. You should visit it weekly because there are many others outside of our sector that are – more than a million hits in the year we've been up.

The association has not been shy to challenge the status quo for farmers. We have argued, as I indicated last year, that farming and profit should go hand-in-hand. Now, as we await our second retailer meeting, we, as a board, have a better idea of what we are looking towards. On that note, it should be brought to your attention that this board has no personal agendas. No one is benefitting from the association or because they are on the board. I have no agenda except to make the Holland Marsh and area the very best location in agriculture in Ontario. That has been an on-going issue, something that is heard from time to time. I will say it again – there is no agenda by anyone on the board. We have plans, that is true enough, and many of them are now getting out there through a newsletter we will be sending out every two or three weeks.

When the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation provided a grant for the start-up of the HMGA, there were conditions that had to be met. We have met virtually all of them in the first year and a bit – but not to my satisfaction. When we work with Local Food Plus to certify farmers, it is not so that we can be annoying or cause yet another level of paperwork to be thrust upon farmers – it is because the provincial government has a new program dealing with institutions to help fund a transition towards purchasing local food products. The program, \$24-million over three years, is about to be implemented and LFP certified products are a part of it. This area's farmers should benefit – be at the forefront of the movement – and that is why we worked on that aspect. When preliminary discussions at the board level focused on the development of a regional distribution centre, it was because there is a huge demand from restaurants and food service for a range of products, local food, which they can't access. These preliminary discussions are accelerating even as we deal with other issues. This is no longer a pipe dream – but a realistic opportunity to open more doors in an area that has not been the focus of much attention in the past couple of decades. And it is being driven by consumer demand and through the association's visionary focus to provide more marketing opportunities for your products.

There is much to be proud of for this association, its membership, and the farmers in the Holland Marsh and area. Your competition is not your neighbour – but from thousands of miles away. Remember that. Together, much can be accomplished. We cannot fight Mother Nature – but everything else is fair game. The HMGA, with your consent, will continue to be your voice on the myriad issues impacting the Holland Marsh and area.

Jamie Reaume
HMGA Executive Director