

Holland Marsh Growers' Association

## **AGM 2009 – What we've done**

This is what has taken place over the past year – and listed below is a recap of what has been taking place since our inception. The one thing that should be noted is that all of the activities have been a culmination of efforts to bridge the gap between rural and urban societies and build new partnership that benefit all stakeholders.

### **Vision Statement:**

We are champions of economical, environmental, and entrepreneurial sustainability in agriculture.

What that means is that we want our members to make money, in an environmentally friendly fashion as possible (for consumer interest), while recognizing that our farmers are the original entrepreneurs. Being a member doesn't mean giving up your independent farm identity – it means, as a member, we, as a farmer-based organization, want to add value to your farming practice.

### **Mission Statement:**

The Holland Marsh Growers' Association (HMGA) is dedicated to improving economic conditions for its farmer members; fostering a new era of co-operation amongst farmers, packers, and retailers while promoting our high-value food and unique region to local consumers.

Businesses spend years trying to find themselves – especially during tough economic times like now. Coke spent millions of dollars to identify their vision and mission statement – that they will be the best soft drink company in the world. The HMGA will live by its Mission Statement – we, as an organization, want to improve the financial conditions for its members from farmer to grower/packer/shipper to our packing brethren. We want our area to be recognized as the first-class region we all know it to be – and that is slowly happening. There are no short-term solutions to decade-old problems, but there is nothing that the organization will not tackle for its membership.

## **WHAT WE'VE DONE**

Major items completed:

- Completed our second consecutive successful Royal Agricultural Winter Fair project; this time, with the blessing of the folks at the Royal, there were a number of signs indicating that we were “Growing for the Royal” – a major first for the Royal. This kind of relationship had never been ventured into and the HMGA was the first to do so. Our booth was so successful that we ran out of carrots that were bagged under the HMGA Gold logo. We did television spots, interviews, were on the stage for a cooking

demonstration (thank you Avia), and three speaking engagements. Media coverage of the event greatly favoured the Holland Marsh – and, as a bonus, it was well known that Prince Charles took a bag of carrots from the University of Guelph research booth for the limo ride to the airport for himself and the Duchess.

- The Holland Marsh Soup-a-licious was hugely successful this year, in fact, it was commented that it was too successful. That being said, we thank our partners for the past two years, but we will be moving onto a future event. This is not an easy decision but it was one that the board made with the best intentions of our association and its farmers. We will be holding the Holland Marsh Soupfest next year in partnership with the municipalities of King and Bradford-West Gwillimbury because of the convenience of local support. We will continue to keep you up to date on this.
- The HMGA board has been a supporter of the Bradford Farmers' Market – and has been approached by others, including an event for the Schomberg Spirit Day and the Windfall Ecology Festival. We have participated wherever it was of benefit to the association – and will continue to do so. There is currently a proposal to look at the Bradford market in the same vein as the one that was conducted at this year's soup-a-licious – a community of farmers with all different products, no fighting over pricing, and co-operation amongst the various farmers. It was astounding to see – and we will be working towards bringing that same kind of farmer co-operation into the future market.
- The HMGA continues its stand against the construction of a peaker plant facility within the Holland Marsh. In order to show our opposition, we have brought several provincial politicians into this area, including Julia Munro (the local MPP) and Tim Hudak, the leader of the Progressive Conservatives party. But having the two in the marsh, a direct result of holding our Queen's Park event in October (listed below), also provided the HMGA to discuss a number of other opportunities and has led to continued discussions on agricultural issues; not just about a poor choice of location for an energy facility.
- The HMGA was approached by two major parties to honour Ontario Agriculture Week with a Queen's Park event. In fact, we were the only agriculture organization to hold an event during that week – although the Friends of the Greenbelt held a function that week as well at the behest of the Speaker (Steve Peters). The HMGA event was held as a breakfast, and originally had more than 70 confirmed MPPs attending. Then David Caplan, the former Minister of Health, resigned nine hours prior to the event – and chaos reigned at Queen's Park. We ended up with more than 35 MPPs still coming down – and had the distinction of being the only event in recent memory to have representation from all four major political parties. A resignation by the top cabinet position should not take away from the fact that the HMGA – and its farmers in attendance, were professional, poised, and conducted themselves in such a fashion that many of the MPPs see the association as being a role model for the new leadership required in agriculture. That speaks volumes to the unheralded presence farmers have – and an opportunity for future discussions.

- The HMGA was provided with Ontario Market Investment Funding to promote and market the Holland Marsh to both consumers and other stakeholders – the original mandate. The results, according to those within the OMIF section of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, have been remarkable. The HMGA has appeared to genuinely have caught these folks off-guard because many of the projects, to date, were accomplished at far less cost than anticipated – and were completed. An example of that is the road signs that have gone up on Highway 400 (north and south) and Highway 9 (east and west). The reason why – the attention of media (see below) on the Holland Marsh. We said we would do it – and we did it. There is one thing that needs to come and that is shortly with meetings with retailers on-going
- Have become THE agricultural organization for mainstream media contact. The Holland Marsh and area have been involved in interviews with every major news outlet in the GTA and province, including Reader’s Digest, the National Post, the Star, CBC, the Globe and Mail, CTV, and many of the other local mainstream media outlets. We have been on radio programs, have been featured in the movie theatres this past month, through our initial efforts with the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, and will be the focus and highlight of a new television program called The Fresh Life in January or early February with foodie chef/critic Marty Galin. The HMGA has been unafraid to back away from controversial subjects normally taboo, including energy, labour, and education. Farmers, when approached, have been outstanding in terms of information provided, articulate, and fun to deal with. This media savvy approach has been remarkable because this is all coming at no cost to the farm organization or membership (with the exception of the television program, which the HMGA owns exclusive rights to its portion for).
- We, as an association, have been involved in a number of community organizations including the Bradford Board of Trade, Nottawasaga Futures – and its Agricultural Committee, the Greater Toronto and Area Agricultural Action Committee (GTA AAC), and on a roundtable discussion on a number of agriculture issues in and around the Golden Horseshoe. We have met with a number of organizations and presented our opinion on agricultural and food related issues – for on-going and future reports. We have discussed the development of a national food strategy with political groups, including federal politicians.
- We, as an association and in partnership with the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, had an economic impact study done on the Holland Marsh and area. This is the first such study to look at an area/region that doesn’t just at a specific crop but rather, takes into account all growing areas. The association would like to thank all those farmers that participated in this study which allowed for a better idea of what the Holland Marsh means in terms of taxation and municipal/provincial impact. This was a third party evaluation – and was not written by farmers or the organization – which lends credibility to the final document.

- The HMGA worked with the George Morris Centre Value Chain department and Faye Clack Communications which led to the development of a value chain document that specifically traces a carrot throughout the entire food system. This is vitally important because it was both a third party and shows how much farmers contribute to the entire process before it reaches the mid-marketers and retail end. This is yet another tool, like the economic study, that can be used to for future government policy discussions and retailer meetings.
- The HMGA is exploring the possibility to open new markets through a regional distribution centre – and one that would involve both private and public funding. This is an exciting opportunity and would position this area – either North York region or South Simcoe region or both – as a way of moving smaller shipments, in greater quantities, to other markets previously not available. We will keep our members informed on this project.
- The HMGA has been working with the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority on improving conditions and regulatory issues for muck/marsh farmers. This is very important work and both the farming side (the association board) and the LSRCA officials are to be commended for their efforts. This is leading to future projects together, opportunities for farmers to work more closely with LSRCA officials, and a future list of what can be done within the legislation that exists and what can't. Please remember that the CA is governed by provincial legislation and they must do what is within their own mandate. That being said, we are trying to work with the Ontario government to make them aware of the uniqueness of the Holland Marsh and area – and this is on-going. In terms of the bureaucracy that exists, this area is not an agricultural area but rather, an environmentally sensitive wetland. In addition, we have begun preliminary contact with the Nottawasga Conservation Authority as well, since it governs other marsh lands not covered under the LSRCA. We are attempting to bring all the CA folks to the table to discuss the uniqueness of the marsh and muck soils – so stay tuned.
- We have sent letters to dozens of politicians on issues ranging from labour (over an industrial infraction) to environmental concerns to simple agriculture best management practices being allowed to happen within the Holland Marsh and area.
- We, as an association, have been approached to incorporate others into our membership – merely because of our success. We have made no decision on that to date and that will be something for the board to deal with.
- The HMGA was in attendance for the drainage tribunal to assist one of our members in an appeal (subsequently withdrawn). It is important that we have that presence – even if it is not required. We have attended council meetings – and will be at two council meetings in December, both Bradford-West Gwillimbury and King Township in regards to the economic impact study. Future meetings are planned for both Simcoe County Council and York Region Council in January.

- We had an initial, preliminary meeting with the President of Sobeys Ontario about the role that the HMGA can play within their operation and will be meeting with a delegation from Loblaws in the next six weeks. There have also been preliminary meetings with other food service reps (including Sysco) as to where the association fits into both the local food system and as an organization that can assist in bridging the gap to consumers. Again, no decisions will be made until the membership is consulted.
- The HMGA is awaiting word from the PMRA on a letter sent out regarding this past summer's venture into the marsh. We are awaiting a series of upcoming meetings with a number of federal MPs to discuss the disadvantages that impede the competitiveness of Canadian (and Ontario – specifically Holland Marsh) farmers. These meetings are scheduled – it's just a matter of getting them completed. There will be discussion about telone and the role that the association can play. We are looking for an extension – to work with other agricultural groups (which we are already starting to do), with the company, and with the government to ensure that there is either telone available or an equal product registered. We will also be addressing both the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association (OFVGA) and the Canadian Horticultural Council (CHC) – our provincial and federal lobbying bodies respectively – on this issue.
- We are working towards a single permit to take water from the Holland Marsh and canal system – and that is something involving a number of stakeholders, including the LSRCA, the Joint Drainage board, the OFVGA, the MOE, and the HMGA. This is a major project – and like everything else, will not happen overnight.
- The HMGA would also like to acknowledge the on-going support of the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation. It can be said that we have lived up to and exceeded the expectation and standards of the Foundation. This will be the last year of their obligation towards the association – but we are trying to work with them on two major projects: a Holland Marsh Ho-Down, to be held in the first week of February as a celebration of the fifth year of the Greenbelt Act and a special clean-up of the canal, turning the area into a designation for agri-education and agri-tourism. What must be noted is that the HMGA hosted 57 tours of the marsh this year – and are anticipating the eventual arrival of dignitaries such as Premier Dalton McGuinty in the spring or early summer 2010. We, as an association, will continue to play host to these tours as a means of highlighting activities in the marsh and dispelling mythology about farming in general. The potential and opportunity to have more Ontarians (and beyond) visit is one that needs to be taken seriously as the Holland Marsh Gold name gets broader public presentation.

This is an update over the past few months. The association has been busy since its inception – and if there is anything that has been missed, please don't hesitate to contact any of the board members or Jamie Reaume (905-251-6786) for anything that you'd like to know.

The future – and the direction of the association – is in the hands of its membership and the farmers of the Holland Marsh and area. This is a farmer-based, farmer-driven organization and, has been shown, we've been following the wishes of the membership.