



**farm fresh
ontario**

EXPERIENCE IT

2023

Message from the Chair

Dear Farm Fresh Ontario Members,

I sit here at the computer drafting to you my final report as your chair. It is hard for me to believe, but yes, it is true. When I joined the board three years ago our association had just completed a strategic review and identified a critical action plan to take our association into the future with a new look and a new vision. Then a global pandemic threw the biggest monkey-wrench into this great plan of ours. Our amazing board of directors took it all in stride as they accepted this new challenge. Critical to our path forward was to find a new Executive Director to replace the retiring Cathy Bartolic and Gary Johnson. Our search led us to hiring Kevin Vallier and the fit could not have been better. His experience and management skills have allowed our association to take important steps forward in the execution of our strategic plan. Critical tasks included:

- Develop a new logo, branding and website
- Move our ever-popular newsletter to an online format
- Develop a new Government Relations strategy to bring our members' concerns to the appropriate government agencies
- Build a network of relationships with other farm and marketing organizations
- Develop new member programming and benefits to stay current in this ever-changing marketplace
- Work with sponsors to secure top level speakers for the annual Ontario Fruit & Vegetable Conference
- Establish new budgets and funding to ensure Farm Fresh Ontario has a stable and financially successful future

I am very pleased to announce that your board of directors was able to complete all these critical tasks. The path was not easy but our goals were reached. And we are only getting started.

As 2021 came to a close and we entered 2022 things were finally returning to some sort of normal, post-Covid. At least as far as Covid lockdowns and restrictions went. Many of the restrictions that prohibited us from doing business in a normal fashion started to fall away. Month-by-month things slowly returned to a more normal state. For many of our members, business was strong or at least remained steady.

With COVID in the rear-view mirror, we were able to turn our attention to a number of items that the board have been addressing in order to make it easier and more profitable for our members to do business. Our government relations work, aimed at tackling such issues as planning regulations, liability and rising insurance costs, was ongoing throughout the year. Meetings were held monthly with various stakeholders from different provincial ministries including elected officials and top bureaucrats as well as other key stakeholders and industry partners. While these changes won't happen overnight, we believe Farm Fresh Ontario has made great strides in raising these issues and presenting a strong case for change.

Turning our attention inwards, we were thrilled to be able to meet in-person again. Starting with the annual Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Convention, to a Spring workshop at 13th Street Winery, to our Summer Sizzle networking event at Thunder Ridge Bison Farm, and finally our annual bus tour in November, it was exciting to see members back together, learning together and laughing together. Thank you to all those who attended these events.

Through our increased and more consistent social media presence, we made a strong effort to raise awareness and educate the public as to the importance of visiting your local farm, buying local and supporting local business.

Just recently at this year's OFVC, we had the pleasure of handing out the 2022 awards. A big congratulations to all three winners who were very deserving. They are as follows:

Farm Marketer of the Year

Laura Wegrzyn – Peach Country Farm Market

Leadership Award

Brian Arnold - Thunder Ridge Bison Farm

Ambassador Award

Culinary Tourism Alliance

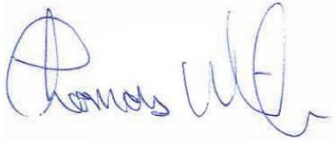
As my term as your board chair comes to an end, I want to thank my fellow board members for their support and dedication. Thank you to my vice-chair, Jordan McKay for his friendship and steady hand. It was a challenging couple of years, but we not only survived, we thrived. We upped our game for the betterment of our members and agritourism in Ontario as a whole. I also want to thank all of you, our members. Your professionalism, creativity and incredible work ethic makes us, I believe, not only the leading organization for diversified agriculture but a champion for agriculture. Your participation is paramount to the success of this organization.

As the saying goes, you get out of something what you put into it, and so, I would encourage all of you to attend FFO events this year.

To those who will now follow in my footsteps, I wish you all the best. I can proudly say my family has been an active member of FFO since 1988 and we look forward to many years to come. The progress made this year and in the years to follow by the dedicated volunteers who serve on our board and committees is positioning FFO as a leader in the Ontario agricultural sector.

Wishing you all a healthy, happy, and successful 2023.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Thomas Wilson". The signature is stylized and cursive, with the first name "Thomas" written in a larger, more prominent font than the last name "Wilson".

Thomas Wilson
Chair
Board of Directors, FFO