

Agriculture changing as Durham Region continues to grow

Farm operations working to keep up with changing face of region

This is part one of a two-part series looking at agriculture in Durham Region. Part one looks at the effects of growth on agricultural operations and part two focuses on options for preserving farmland.

BOWMANVILLE -- The wheels of commerce are turning as trucks laden with goods trundle by on Hwy. 401, and power is being produced for area homes at OPG's nearby Darlington power plant, but the dairy cows of Almet Farms remain unfazed as they munch on hay just down the road.

Currently run by Ron and Brenda Metcalf, Almet was started by Ron's grandfather in 1921. Today, the Metcalfs raise 19,700 white and brown hens, milk 50 Holsteins and grow more than 1,000 acres of crops, including white beans, corn, wheat, hay and soybeans on their Bowmanville farm.

Having grown up there, Mr. Metcalf has seen the surrounding community change drastically.

"Traffic on Baseline Road now is busier than the 401 was when I was a kid," he said. "It's really difficult in the area we're in to continue to farm," Ms. Metcalf explained, noting they can see the lights of the nearby Walmart from their barn.

"It's hard but what can you do, with what we have here it's difficult to move. It's not like a storefront you can just pack up and put somewhere else."

Driving by Almet Farms you wouldn't guess that the family is busily packing nearly 20,000 eggs every other day, and shipping them out to Mississauga's Burnbrae Farms for distribution to grocery stores, and collecting about 3,000 litres of milk every two days, distributed by Kawartha Dairy and Natrel.

For the crew of four, including the Metcalf's son-in-law and a hired hand, it's more than a full-time job.

"We live, work and play on the farm, it's not a job, it's our life. We eat our eggs and drink milk right from the tank," Ms. Metcalf said. "This is our livelihood, we make sure everything going off the farm is the absolute best quality we can produce."

But the hours can be trying.

"If someone could invent a cow who only gives milk five days a week so we get weekends off that would be great," Ms. Metcalf said. "This is a 24/7, 365 days a year job. But it's a great way to raise a family."

Ms. Metcalf credits their farming lifestyle for instilling a strong work ethic in her children. All four of her children, and six grandchildren, frequently pitch in on the farm, and the plan is that the farm will pass to one of them someday.

"You can keep your kids with you on a farm, that's not the case for many jobs," Ms. Metcalf explained, pointing to a tricycle tucked away in the corner of the chicken barn, awaiting the return of her grandson.

The Metcalfs are not the only farmers feeling the pressure of urban sprawl in Durham Region.

"Some people in the south feel they're being displaced, some are moving up north because it's their only option; they can't buy the farm beside them because some guy's already got houses on it," said Warren Jibb, president of the Durham Region Federation of Agriculture and owner of Shady Way Farms in Sunderland, which has been in operation since 1945.

"It has more of an impact in areas closer to towns and cities," he explained, noting Sunderland and other northern Durham towns have thriving agricultural communities. "There are still farmers like ourselves who are growing and taking people on."

Farmers are also under pressure to produce more with less to meet the growing market locally and across the country.

"Today one farmer feeds more than 100 people, 100 years ago one farmer would feed 10 people," Ms. Metcalf explained. "Everyone was self-sufficient 100 years ago, they had a cow in the backyard, a couple chickens and a garden. Now very few people can make that claim so we have to be more efficient to meet the demand."

The Region is hoping to help stop loss of farmland through support and public education.

"Urban centres are growing and there's a lot of cultural changes happening," said Nancy Rutherford, manager of rural and economic affairs for the region. "It's important children are made aware how their food is produced, food doesn't just magically appear in stores."

That disconnect is something that continually inspires awe at Almet Farms.

"A lot of education I do is a real eye-opener," said Ms. Metcalf, who hosts school tours as part of Durham's Farm Connections program and volunteers at information booths at events such as the CNE.

"It makes you realize people really don't know about farming. There's a lot of misinformation that comes through. People think because we have biosecurity or 'do not enter' signs that we're hiding something, but it's just for the well-being of our animals."

The protection of farmland is key to ensuring the continued security of food resources in Canada, maximizing economic opportunities, and making sure the sector continues to grow.

"Farmers are becoming an endangered species," Ms. Metcalf said. "We can't afford to lose any more farm land. We'll become a third world country, we won't be able to feed ourselves. I think people don't realize that with all the food that's on grocery store shelves."