

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a red plaid shirt over a white and red striped shirt, and a red bandana with white text tied around her head. She is smiling and looking down at a small green seedling she is planting in a field. The field has rows of similar seedlings in the background. The bottom of the image features a green curved graphic element.

# AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

## SECTOR STRATEGY

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEPTEMBER 2017



*York Region*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The project team would like to extend its sincere gratitude to the York Region Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group (YRAALG) and York Regional staff, who volunteered time and effort to the development of this strategy.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As one of Canada's fastest growing communities, York Region is anticipated to grow from 1.1 million to 1.5 million by the year 2031. This forecasted growth has created unique opportunities and challenges for York Region's agriculture and agri-food sector. While a growing population means more pressure on the existing land base in York Region, it also provides access to a large and diverse customer base for primary producers and processors. The purpose of this agriculture and agri-food sector strategy is to understand the sector's current strengths, opportunities and challenges while also developing an action plan for the future. The York Region Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy demonstrates York Region's commitment to supporting the long-term economic prosperity and viability of the agri-food sector.

This strategy was informed by two research phases including a public stakeholder effort and an economic impact analysis of York Region's agri-food sector. These efforts are timely as the updated Census of Agriculture was released in May, 2017. **York Region's Agriculture and Agri-food Sector Strategy includes 5 strategic goal areas, accompanied by 47 recommended actions.** This executive summary provides an overview of the strategy, while the full report presents a complete account of the work undertaken. Section 7 of the full report outlines each strategic goal area in full detail, including timelines, lead responsibilities and performance metrics.

***This strategy is a living and breathing document that should be implemented and updated as the Agri-food sector evolves in York Region***



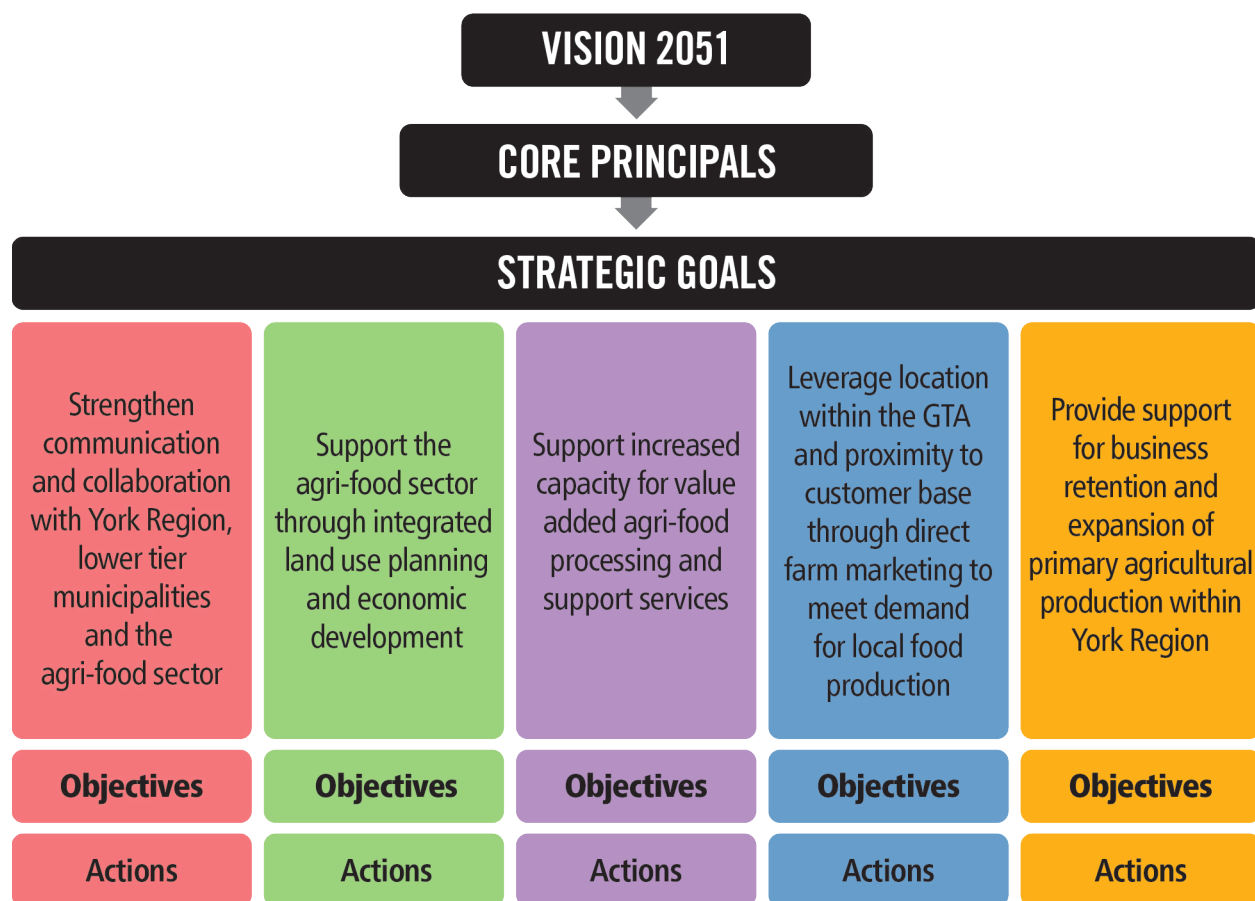


FIGURE 1: STRUCTURE of the YORK REGION AGRICULTURE and AGRI-FOOD SECTOR STRATEGY

York Region has demonstrated a commitment to a vibrant and sustainable agri-food sector through the *York Region Official Plan, 2010; Vision 2051*; and the Region's *Economic Development Action Plan*. These existing documents shaped the overall vision for this strategy. This strategy will add value to these policies and strategies by providing York Regional staff and Council with a roadmap to ensure agriculture remains a strong and viable sector in the future. It is crucial to have a comprehensive and informed strategy in place that will help the Region accommodate future opportunities and challenges.



FIGURE 2: OVERALL VISION for the AGRICULTURE and AGRI-FOOD SECTOR STRATEGY

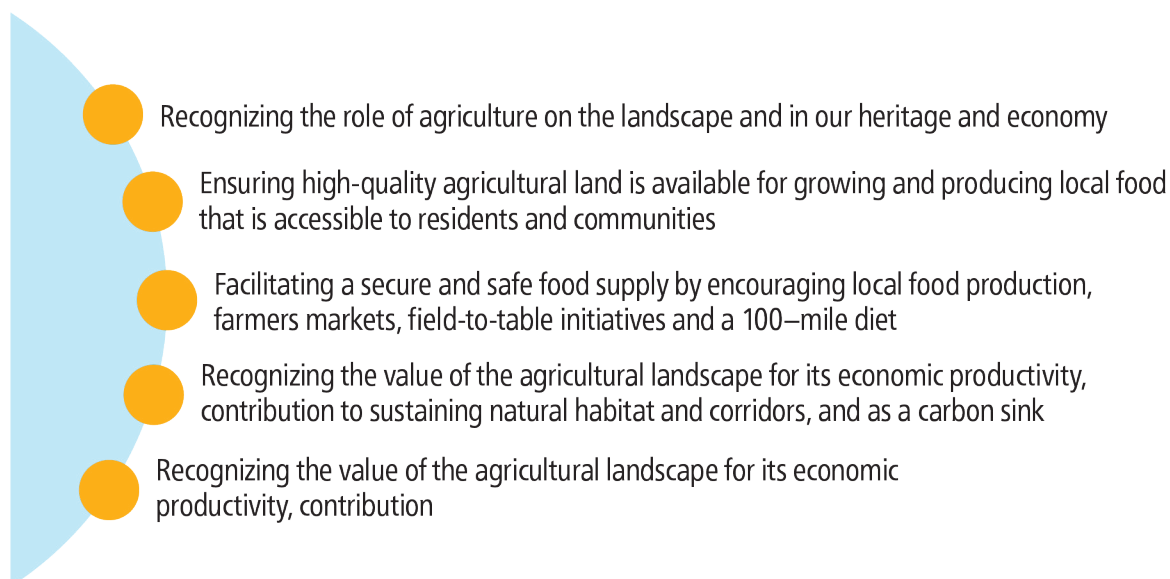


FIGURE 3: CORE PRINCIPLES from VISION 2051 (A Resilient Natural Environment and Agricultural System)

The quadrant below is a summary of the Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities and Threats (SCOT) exercise based on online survey, key informant interviews and open house findings.

<p><b><i>Strengths</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proximity to markets and diverse customer base</li> <li>• York Region is a “great place to do business”</li> <li>• Abundance of prime agricultural land</li> <li>• One of two provincial Specialty crop areas (Holland Marsh)</li> <li>• Strong agricultural heritage</li> <li>• Diverse range of production across the Region (livestock, field crops, vegetable production)</li> <li>• Strong broadband connectivity in some parts of the Region</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Challenges</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urbanization and growth across the Region</li> <li>• Challenging regulatory environment</li> <li>• Lack of profile for agriculture in the Region</li> <li>• Broadband connectivity issues in some parts of the Region</li> <li>• History of poor consultation and communication with the agricultural sector</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Opportunities</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing demand for local food and specialty products</li> <li>• Agri-tourism</li> <li>• Educational opportunities</li> <li>• Technology and innovation (vertical farming, improved farming practices)</li> <li>• Demand for healthy food (Interest in local food procurement)</li> <li>• Rouge National Urban Park</li> <li>• Unique Partnerships</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Threats</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forecasted growth and urbanization</li> <li>• Difficult for new entrants into the sector</li> <li>• High rental land rates may result in less sustainable farming practices (not invested in long-term production)</li> <li>• Tightening of provincial regulations may limit on farm value-added opportunities</li> </ul>

FIGURE 4: YORK REGION AGRI-FOOD SECTOR SCOT ANALYSIS (based on stakeholder consultation findings)

## CENSUS of AGRICULTURE and ECONOMIC IMPACT ANALYSIS FINDINGS

Key findings from the updated Census of Agriculture and economic impact analysis include:

- The number of farms in York Region has dropped since 2001 and has decreased by 116 since 2011, yet size of farms are increasing
- Gross farm receipts per farm, which is a measure of farm business income, is rising in the Region
- York Region's farm cash receipts per acre is \$1000 higher than provincial farm cash receipts per acre due to high value crop production (such as vegetables)
  - East Gwillimbury in particular has notably high farm cash receipts value per acre
- The average age of producers in York Region has increased from 56.9 in 2011 to 58 in 2016, which is reflective of overall trends across Canada
- Data on direct farm marketing was included for the first time in the 2016 Census; 17 per cent of farms in York Region reported direct-to-consumer sales using farm gate sales/kiosks/pick-your-own
- In York Region, 52.7 per cent of the land is either rented, leased or crop shared (compared to 32.4 per cent in Ontario)
- The economic impact of primary production agriculture in York Region extends well beyond the \$302 million of direct farm cash receipts in 2016.
- When the indirect and induced economic activity are included the total economic impact is over \$552 million<sup>1</sup>

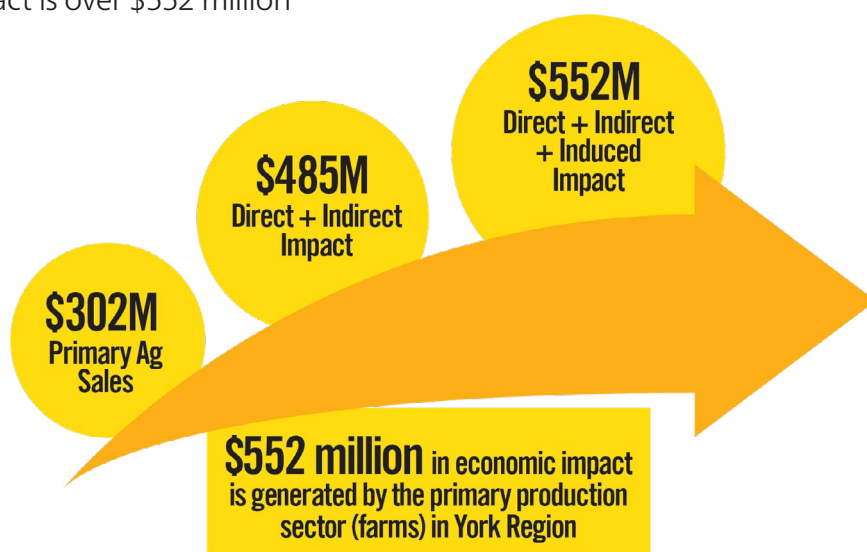


FIGURE 5: YORK REGION PRIMARY PRODUCTION (Farms) SECTOR ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION

<sup>1</sup>Please note, total economic impact has been calculated for primary production rather than the entire agri-food value chain. Primary production was selected for analysis as calculating for the entire agri-food sector tends to overstate economic contribution (due to double counts).

## OVERVIEW of STRATEGIC GOALS, OBJECTIVES and RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Note: This strategy covers the time period of **September 2017 to September 2022** (five years in total), however, a number of these actions and activities should be considered as ongoing beyond 2022.

GOALS				
Strengthen communication and collaboration with York Region, lower tier municipalities and the agri-food sector	Support the agri-food sector through integrated land use planning and economic development	Support increased capacity for value added agri-food processing and support services.	Leverage location within the GTA and proximity to customers through direct farm marketing to meet demand for local food production	Provide support for business retention and expansion of primary agricultural production within York Region.
OBJECTIVES				
i) Foster more communication to enable collaboration, business growth and local food awareness  ii) Facilitate and support existing and emerging organizations to deliver programming in an effective and cost-efficient manner	Encourage regional and municipal land use policies, development fees & approval processes to align with updated provincial policy and support York Region's agri-food sector now and in the future	Connect local producers with value added & processing opportunities, while attracting new investment.	Support and facilitate opportunities to meet local food demand through direct farm marketing.	Support existing agricultural operations in the Region by leveraging opportunities for value-added production and/or expansion.



## STRATEGIC GOAL 1: STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION and COLLABORATION with YORK REGION, LOWER TIER MUNICIPALITIES and the AGRI-FOOD SECTOR

ACTION ITEM	SUMMARY of RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	Ongoing	Short Term (1 year)	Medium Term (2 to 4 years)	Long Term (4+ years)
1.1	Create a York Region agri-food specialist role dedicated to supporting the Agri-food sector in York through business retention and expansion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This position requires someone with an educational background in agriculture due to the complexity of the agriculture sector in York Region</li> <li>This role would liaise between economic development and planning, while investing time and leadership into YRAALG</li> </ul>		✓		
1.2	Build internal staff capacity at the Regional level to provide direction to lower tiers on agri-food issues; coordinate programming and initiatives between planning, economic development and tourism at the Regional level through an annual staff agri-food workshop (could include tours of local farms, processing plants, and guest speakers)	✓			
1.3	Develop a communication roadmap/strategy to ensure open and transparent communication pathways <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen communication by developing and distributing a document/handout that helps connect agri-food stakeholder with the appropriate department/staff person if they have a question (e.g. Help understand Regional issue vs. municipal issue)</li> </ul>		✓		
1.4	Create a directory/resource that includes names and contact information of producers in the Region; to be used by the Region for collecting employment data, information, etc.			✓	
1.5	Create annual opportunity to collect feedback from the agri-food sector to strengthen York Region staff and Council's understanding of farm and food businesses and their needs by engaging with local famers and agri-food experts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through open house consultation, work with agri-food sector to identify aspects of public infrastructure supportive of the agri-food sector (e.g. roads, drainage, broadband connectivity) requiring attention</li> <li>Ensure meetings/open houses are held at a time that is convenient and accessible for primary producers</li> </ul>	✓			
1.6	Continue to support and collaborate with the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance through projects and update inventory of agri-food assets and resources in York Region including agri-tourism, livestock, equine, etc.	✓			

## STRATEGIC GOAL 1: continued

ACTION ITEM	SUMMARY of RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	Ongoing	Short Term (1 year)	Medium Term (2 to 4 years)	Long Term (4+ years)
1.7	<p>Continue support for the York Region Agricultural Advisory Liaison Group (YRAALG) by allocating annual budget for special projects and events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop standard practices to collect feedback on issues prior to reports being drafted</li> <li>Develop advisory memos that outline issues and feedback required with clear timelines</li> <li>Refer agri-food related issues to the advisory group for feedback</li> </ul>			✓	
1.8	<p>Explore and identify ways to celebrate and showcase agricultural innovators/champions in the Region using existing communication efforts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider using existing communication efforts such as online newsletters and social media to share videos/photos/blogs about agriculture in York Region</li> <li>Build support and understanding for the agri-food sector by showcasing best practices used by local producers (e.g. minimizing impacts on the environment through sustainability innovations)</li> </ul>	✓			
1.9	<p>Seek opportunities to collaborate with partners in York Region and beyond the Region</p> <p>E.g. Facilitate networking sessions for local producers and restaurant/hospitality stakeholders in the Region/GTA (e.g. a "dating service")</p>	✓			
1.10	<p>Develop York Region agri-food educational materials for general public to share at regional and community events (e.g. Fall Fairs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Include accessible data such as contribution of the Region's agri-food sector and case studies of innovative operations in the Region</li> </ul>	✓			
1.11	<p>Investigate and explore opportunities for teaching youth about agriculture and food production in the Region</p> <p>E.g. Agriculture in the Classroom</p>			✓	

## STRATEGIC GOAL 1: continued

ACTION ITEM	SUMMARY of RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	Ongoing	Short Term (1 year)	Medium Term (2 to 4 years)	Long Term (4+ years)
1.12	Demonstrate a commitment to the agri-food sector by supporting agricultural events and conventions through sponsorship or in-kind support	✓			
1.13	<p>Collaborate with organizations such as Rouge National Park, Oak Ridges Moraine Trust, Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA), and Ontario Farmland Trust to conduct a study to understand current land stewardship practices used by York producers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>E.g. Environmental Farm Plan, Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program</li> </ul>			✓	

## STRATEGIC GOAL 2: SUPPORT the AGRI-FOOD SECTOR through INTEGRATED LAND USE PLANNING and ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

ACTION ITEM	SUMMARY of RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	Ongoing	Short Term (1 year)	Medium Term (2 to 4 years)	Long Term (4+ years)
2.1	At next review, update York Region's Official Plan to conform and align with recent changes to the <i>Greenbelt Plan, Growth Plan and Oak Ridges Moraine Plan</i> (2017 updates) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with lower tier municipalities as they review and update processes</li> <li>A full list of changes to consider is included in Appendix F of this report</li> </ul>			✓	
2.2	Prior to next Official Plan review, reexamine Land Evaluation and Area Review (LEAR) study and determine if updates are needed to reflect changes at the provincial level (agricultural system mapping)			✓	
2.3	Through the Municipal Comprehensive Review, review York Region's Official Plan (and lower tier plans) agricultural and rural policies related to ensure they encourage and support investment and employment in the agriculture sector	✓			
2.4	Conduct a study that investigates innovative financial mechanisms that incentivize producers and land owners to keep land in agricultural production <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suggestions from consultation include: reduced development charges; reduced farmland tax rates; longer term leases; and a land speculation tax to increase the tax rate for foreign buyers</li> <li>Identify ways to further incentivize landowners to provide long-term leases to farmers</li> </ul>			✓	
2.5	Conduct a review of policies and regulations related to environmental performance of food processing operations within the Region <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Streamline process and explore incentives and subsidy programs to assist companies as they transition to clean technologies</li> </ul>		✓		
2.6	Participate in the upcoming consultation and review for the Greater Golden Horseshoe's <i>Agricultural System</i> policies (led by OMAFRA) which recognizes <i>farmland and clusters of agri-food infrastructure and services need to co-exist alongside rapidly-growing communities and infrastructure</i>		✓		
2.7	Recognize and acknowledge the agri-food sector's role as an economic driver in the Region through updates to plans and policies, such as York Region's <i>Economic Development Action Plan</i>			✓	

## STRATEGIC GOAL 2: continued

ACTION ITEM	SUMMARY of RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	Ongoing	Short Term (1 year)	Medium Term (2 to 4 years)	Long Term (4+ years)
2.8	Conduct a study and review of edge planning practices and identify planning tools the Region can use to resolve conflicts between adjacent urban and agricultural land uses			✓	
2.9	Monitor the province's development of <i>Agricultural Impact Assessment</i> (AIA) guidelines and provide feedback through consultation with planning staff, YRAALG and other relevant stakeholders	✓			
2.10	Encourage local municipalities to develop and implement an Agricultural Community Improvement Plan (CIP) to incentivize on-farm diversification and value-added operations	✓			
2.11	<p>Create factsheets and accessible materials to help agri-food stakeholders interpret land use policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Based on stakeholder feedback, potential topics could include: Farming in the Greenbelt; Interpreting Permitted Uses in Provincially protected areas (Greenbelt, Oak Ridges Moraine)</li> </ul>	✓			



## STRATEGIC GOAL 3: SUPPORT INCREASED CAPACITY for VALUE-ADDED AGRI-FOOD PROCESSING and SUPPORT SERVICES

ACTION ITEM	SUMMARY of RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	Ongoing	Short Term (1 year)	Medium Term (2 to 4 years)	Long Term (4+ years)
3.1	<p>Develop and implement a Food Processing Action Plan that demonstrates York Region is 'open for business' to attract and retain food processing businesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sub-sectors to target for continued growth include: bakery and tortilla manufacturing; fruit and vegetable processing; and the beverage sector</li> </ul>			✓	
3.2	<p>Establish an agri-entrepreneur mentor program in conjunction with the York Small Business Enterprise Centre to support existing and potential entrepreneurs with mentoring and business guidance</p>	✓		✓	
3.3	<p>Investigate and identify opportunities to develop a regional food incubator/hub to support fruit and vegetable value-adding opportunities to increase farm revenue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Services could include washing, cutting, quick chill, flash freeze, labelling, cold/frozen/dry storage, packaging while providing a space for training and development (including a commercial kitchen)</li> <li>Identify funding opportunities (Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation; Trillium Foundation, etc.)</li> <li>E.g. <b>Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre</b> in Northumberland County</li> </ul>				✓

## STRATEGIC GOAL 4: LEVERAGE LOCATION within the GTA and PROXIMITY to CUSTOMERS through DIRECT FARM MARKETING and MEET DEMAND for LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

ACTION ITEM	SUMMARY of RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	Ongoing	Short Term (1 year)	Medium Term (2 to 4 years)	Long Term (4+ years)
4.1	Facilitate the formation of the York Farm Fresh Organization to support the growth of York's agri-food sector and demand for farm-direct production. Particular efforts to support include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guiding the organization through the development of directional signage</li> <li>Facilitate the development of an online platform that consumers can use to find local farms/products (an interactive map)</li> </ul>	✓			
4.2	Continue annual production of the York Region Farm Fresh Guide Map and initiatives like the Pumpkin Pie Trail Map to promote and raise awareness of locally produced agricultural products <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Release the Farm Fresh Guide map and Pumpkin Pie Trail Map in additional languages to reflect the Region's diversity and attract larger numbers</li> <li>Release the maps by April 15 each year</li> </ul>		✓		
4.3	As encouraged in the Regional Official Plan, continue to support the provision of community gardens and/or urban agriculture projects that promote agricultural awareness in settlement/urban areas through educational programs/initiatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify ways to synergize community gardens and the food incubator/hub (Action 3.4) if successfully implemented</li> </ul>	✓			
4.4	Support the development of agri-tourism programming such as "Farm Tour Hikes" (an organized, self-guided farm tour in cooperation with local farm organizations)	✓			
4.5	Raise awareness around the diversity of production and processing found in the Region through promotional materials (e.g. Ontario's 'soup and salad bowl' in the Holland Marsh; world crop production)	✓			
4.6	Revisit York Region's Food Charter and broaden support across the agri-food sector	✓			
4.7	Develop local food-sourcing policies for Regional facilities and encourage other public sector agencies within the Region to adopt similar policies			✓	

## STRATEGIC GOAL 4: continued

ACTION ITEM	SUMMARY of RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	Ongoing	Short Term (1 year)	Medium Term (2 to 4 years)	Long Term (4+ years)
4.8	Facilitate relationship building between producer, processors and retail companies that support local food production (e.g. Longos, Metro) through networking events			✓	
4.9	<p>Communicate and promote existing online tools to help connect producers with the local market through workshops and seminars. Examples of existing programs include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ontario Fresh</b> is an online network and marketing service designed to help Ontario businesses buy and sell more food</li> <li>• <b>Farm to City</b> links farmers to customers seeking locally-produced beef</li> </ul>			✓	
4.10	Partner with <b>Rouge National Urban Park</b> and <b>Toronto and Region Conservation Authority</b> to increase collaboration and learning amongst new entrants in to the agri-food sector and with agri-tourism businesses and potential new entrants into agri-tourism through hikes, education programs and/or peer-to-peer learning groups			✓	

## STRATEGIC GOAL 5: PROVIDE SUPPORT for BUSINESS RETENTION and EXPANSION of PRIMARY AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION within YORK REGION

ACTION ITEM	SUMMARY of RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	Ongoing	Short Term (1 year)	Medium Term (2 to 4 years)	Long Term (4+ years)
5.1	Conduct Agriculture and Agri-Food Retention and Expansion studies (supported by OMAFRA) to assess and evaluate the needs and opportunities in each lower-tier municipality			✓	
5.2	Conduct a study and develop a long-term sustainability strategy for the Holland Marsh through collaboration with stakeholders and partners (e.g. Simcoe County, Lake Simcoe Regional Conservation Authority, Holland Marsh Growers' Association, OMAFRA, etc.)			✓	
5.3	Continue to work with industry and government agencies to support the employment of seasonal and foreign agricultural workers, with respect to working conditions, accommodations, cultural services and accessibility to workers	✓			
5.4	Undertake an equine industry study and consultation to identify barriers and opportunities for growing the Region's equine industry including research on successes in other regions (e.g. Greater Toronto Area, Caledon, Halton Hills, etc.)			✓	
5.5	Explore opportunities to increase the production of world crops within York Region	✓		✓	
5.6	Continue support to improve broadband connectivity across the Region through the Region's Broadband Strategy; particularly in rural and agricultural areas to help businesses develop and grow	✓			
5.7	Develop template and prepare annual report card to record and evaluate achievements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop indicators and measures of success for the agri-food sector to track the overall health of the sector and identify appropriate adjustments</li> </ul>			✓	
5.8	Conduct a five-year review of York Region's Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy				✓