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Ag. safety week ahead

Canadian Agricultural Safety Week takes place Mar. 16-22. CASW is an annual national initiative delivered by the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA) that raises awareness about the importance of safe agriculture and showcases how safety directly contributes to the success and sustainability of farming operations.

www.casa-acsa.ca

Driving hunger away

Farm Credit Canada this week announced that Drive Away Hunger partners have more than doubled their contributions from last year and donated 514 million meals in 2024. FCC says its goal is to encourage more collaboration and innovation to get food to those who need it and address important issues like food waste.

Documentary chronicles fight against the Wilmot land grab

Ethan Braund
LJI reporter

"THE WILMOT LAND GRAB" IS the title of a new three-part mini-documentary chronicling the opposition to Waterloo Region's plan to turn 770 acres of Wilmot farmland into an industrial site.

The first two parts have been released. Episode one touches on the project's lack of transparency and non-disclosure agreements. Part two examines the "farm-to-fork "journey and emphasizes the need to protect prime farmland.

John Jordan, who works with Wilmot Civic Action Network (WilmotCAN) and is one of the executive producers on the doc, told The Observer the project started with a suggestion from his wife.

"I think she was scrolling through a bit of social media, and Thom Varey, a friend of our kids, had just finished a couple of short clips – one was on Ontario Place – and Kathy said, 'We need to get Thom to make a documentary.' That's how it started," said Jordan.

They contacted Varey, who runs Varey Sound, and he agreed to take on the project. He did not know what was happening in Wilmot, but when it was explained to him, the documentary "felt like the right thing to do," said Varey.

"I had no idea this was happening in Wilmot. I filmed music videos across the street from the land assembly years before. I have friends who live in the area, but have never caught wind of the situation. When it was first explained to me, I knew it was important, but I didn't grasp the magnitude of the issue until I began researching and speaking with those directly affected," said Varey.

The documentary features input from many farmers, experts and politicians, aiming to put the issue in a spotlight.

"I had kind of the basics as far as where we wanted to go to talk to each person, and because of their passion and their knowledge, it just all fell together," said Jordan.

In the documentary, farmer Jenn Pfenning mentions the need for food sovereignty and protecting prime farmland. Jordan noted this is even more remarkable since the interviews were filmed in October, well before the tariff threat came to light.

Pfenning's knowledge was also a memorable moment during filming, said Varey.

"What stood out most was the breadth of knowledge Jenn Pfenning shared on the biology of

→ DOCUMENTARY 14



The Orio field robot, capable of weeding, cultivating and seeding, is being tested at the Ontario Crops Research Centre. Submitted

Technological innovation seen as a key part of food sovereignty

Ethan Braund
LJI reporter

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY HAS JUMPED MUCH higher on the priority list as the agriculture industry grapples with the potential impacts of tariffs and other unknowns related to the new U.S. administration.

Continued investment in technology in agriculture is a key to achieving this, says the interim dean of the Ontario Agricultural College (OAC) at the University of Guelph.

"If you look at the course of history over time, going from animal-drawn farm implements to early combustion engines to what we have now, we can do so much more with some of our resources," said Dr. John Cranfield of the need to keep innovating.

"It's really about ensuring that we can continue with improvement and production efficiency."

That's particularly true in a sector that struggles with worker shortages.

The Canadian Ag Resource Council projects that by 2030 the industry will be short at least 100,000 workers.

Cranfield noted that technology allows the industry to work with the talent resources it has on hand since the shortage does not seem to be improving at the moment.

"New technology is a way for us to try to do more with our resources, and we recognize that at some point, there's going to be a substitution away from labour, which is a bit limiting, towards the capital. So, we look at technology that allows us to continue producing on the track that we have been."

Sustainability and how we use available resources are factors that show why technology is key to food security, he noted, pointing to the likes of soil health.

"Technology is really useful in that regard because it allows us to determine the quality of soil as it stands, and then how production practices and new methods of production can be used to actually improve the soil health by putting more organic matter, organic carbon, back into the soil," said Cranfield.

The university is working on some technologies, including autonomous planters and semi-autonomous equipment for the hoeing of carrots. Drone technology has also shown how different fertilizer application rates can have a differential effect on various parts of a field.

Artificial intelligence can be used to cut the time breeding programs take to complete significantly, said Cranfield.

"In conventional plant breeding programs, if you wanted to develop a new variety, that would sometimes take years and years and years of successive cross-breeding. At the plant genome level, you can use machine learning and artificial intelligence to select the varieties and lines you want to cross-breed to have particular outcomes in those plants," he explained.

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Wilmot Land Grab documentary looks at the Region's attempt to buy 770 acres of farmland in Wilmot. Submitted

DOCUMENTARY: Third installment due out soon

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soil and the rarity of class-one farmland. Class one farmland comprises only 0.5 per cent of Canada's landmass and is crucial to our food security. If we continue prioritizing industrial development over farmland, we will run out of land to feed ourselves," said Varey.

"Furthermore, once this land has been developed, it can never be turned back into farmland due to soil contamination. We can't eat batteries –let's keep factories on brown-



fields and protect our remaining farmland."

This documentary is a way to get the word out to a wider audience so that more people can learn about what is happening in Wilmot.

"I'd like to add that this is part of a bigger issue, and people must get involved. Share the video and talk to your friends and family about what is happening in Wilmot and all over the province with this government's abuse of power, destruction of farmland, ecosystems, backroom deals and massive subsidies to private corporations," said Varey.

With part three of the series to be released soon, you can watch the first two parts at the WilmotCAN YouTube page online at www.youtube.com/@WilmotCAN.

TECH: Developing new capacity and jobs in the industry

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"Whether that's disease resistance, drought tolerance, heat tolerance, and so on, it will speed up the innovation process in developing new plant varieties, sometimes significantly."

One not-for-profit group in this space is the Canadian Ag. Food Automation Intelligence Network (CAAIN), funded by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada.

"We are a not-for-profit organization focused on bringing together a network of ag tech stakeholders across Canada through online and in-person networking events. Our unique focus is on data-driven ag tech, including AI, machine learning, and digital agriculture technologies," said Darrel Petras, CEO of CAAIN.

With all of the benefits of agriculture tech, CAAIN faces challenges in getting farmers to adopt new technology. The industry is doing a good job at promoting this new tech that might help farmers, but sometimes it has to get into the hands of producers due to the risk, said Petras.

"How do we get those tools into the hands of the farmers? That can be a challenge at times. It's not that farmers are risk averse. In my view, in my experience, farmers are at their risk capacity," said Petras.

"They need to do their best formulation of inputs, what to grow, when to plant, when to harvest, and then they pray that it rains and the weather cooperates. When we say, 'We have something to make your life easier,' there's a degree of skepticism at times, but there's also a calculation going on in their mind, saying, 'OK, how much better is this going to be?'"

That said, Petras notes that farmers adopt technology and have been phenomenal in terms of technology turnover. However, they must help provide some confidence in this new technology as an industry.

One way CAAIN tries to do this is through smart farms, which can test technology against the industry standard in different locations across many provinces.

"The idea is, if a technology works in central Alberta, would it work in Saskatchewan? Would it work in Ontario? Let's find out, I would say, but in a commercial environment where the people running these tests can fully evaluate the potential of technology before it goes into the farmers' hands," said Petras.

This new technology in ag-tech is helping to make up for the lack of talent and creating new jobs in engineering and working with this technology, he added.

"We're creating some new employment opportunities, not just filling those seats on a tractor or combine three weeks a year. It's about a whole new industry and capacity being built in Canada," said Petras.

Cranfield and others agree that developing new Canadian technology is the key to helping with food security in Canada, especially during these uncertain times.

"It's about producing more, it's about producing better and how technology helps us solve some of these problems that otherwise would mean that we're not able to feed Canadians, let alone be a net exporter of food products into the world," said Cranfield.

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