

OFA continues to emphasize need for reliable broadband accessibility across rural Ontario

By Keith Currie Director

Ontario Federation of Agriculture

As we pass the one-year mark of living this virtual lifestyle, access to fast, reliable broadband continues to be a hot button issue for many farmers and rural residents.

People have adapted to working from home, learning from home, delivering e-commerce platforms from home and even participating in recreational activities from home. The world has changed drastically to rely on virtual platforms that require reliable internet. For those with a strong connection, adapting to virtual platforms was a relatively seamless transition with the biggest challenge being how to navigate and understand ZOOM, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom or some other platform. However, many living in rural communities with limited or no access to reliable internet, have faced significant challenges when logging on to the virtual world.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) believes access to fast, reliable and affordable internet is a necessity in our modern world and needs to be considered an essential service.

Much like electrification in Ontario over 80 years ago, broadband expansion must be a prioritized and rapid process. OFA has advocated for the expansion of rural broadband for years. It has been a key pillar of our Producing Prosperity in Ontario campaign that was initially launched ahead of the 2018 provincial election.

Prior to the Producing Prosperity initiative, OFA put a spotlight on rural communities and shortcomings related to accessible broadband as part of a 2015-member survey. As we fast forward to today, farm businesses and rural communities continue to struggle to find internet capable of supporting their needs. Results from OFA's recent 2020 broadband survey reflect the growing frustration of Ontario farmers.

Agriculture has rapidly evolved to embrace new technologies which allows Ontario's agri-food sector to be competitive worldwide and produce food, fibre and fuel more efficiently. The implementation of technology such as robotics, sensors and GPS mapping require reliable connectivity to be successful. Rural demand for bandwidth is quickly outpacing the expansion of broadband infrastructure as farmers continue to increase the use of digital technology. Simply having an adequate internet connection is not enough to meet the needs and demands of running a modern-day business. Our members need speed, reliability and bandwidth that provides the ability to carry high loads of data to remain competitive in the digital world. Unreliable internet is more than an inconvenience in a year where internet connectivity is an essential service. OFA's latest survey shows 62% of participants say internet outages are causing an inability to conduct normal business activities, which impacts productivity and profitability. In comparison to the 2015 internet survey, farmers that require stable internet to run their business has more than doubled.

Additionally, 53% of survey participants have increased the amount of digital technologies on their farm, and this significant investment in on-farm technology is critical to the growth of the agri-food sector. Precision agriculture also relies on accessibility to fast, reliable broadband internet, which can increase our industry's resiliency and mitigate the potential impacts of climate change. Still, 57% of survey participants admit unreliable connectivity has resulted in a delay or rejection of investment in precision technologies.

For many farmers, the primary internet options available in rural areas do not provide a stable enough connection to run or manage digital technologies in their farm equipment. For the most part, we are lucky to have a stable connection on our farm in Collingwood, but an increase in heavy winds or snowfall can interfere with connectivity. We are also paying a substantial fare for an unreliable connection which is another major barrier to the success of our farm business.

Unfortunately, rural residents often face competitive disadvantages when it comes to internet accessibility as there tends to be only a handful of service providers that cater to rural markets.

Therefore, with limited options, the customer is at the mercy of the service provider when it comes to cost and delivery.

More than 70% of survey participants reported they believe they are not getting sufficient value for the services they pay for from internet providers. In terms of satisfaction, a total of 75% of respondents indicated they are unsatisfied with options and accessibility in their area.

As entrepreneurs, we can understand providers not wanting to implement more infrastructure on their own dime. Especially, when it does not add to their bottom line. Therefore, OFA continues to lobby both the federal and provincial governments to invest in expanded broadband for all rural, northern and remote communities.

It's clear that homes, businesses and farms in rural Ontario currently face a competitive disadvantage when it comes to broadband access and reliability in comparison to their urban counterparts. We hope to change that by continuing to lobby both the federal and provincial governments to invest in expanded broadband for all rural, northern and remote communities.

To achieve sustainable progress, the key is to have a long-term vision that will provide the necessary infrastructure to deliver reliable internet for generations to come.

The agri-food sector in Ontario is an economic powerhouse with substantial growth potential. To keep this sector profitable and productive, we need strong and vibrant communities with the infrastructure to support growth. Our sector grows jobs, contributes to economic productivity and produces prosperity for the province and the country. Our province cannot afford to cap the growth potential of farms, agri-businesses and our rural communities due to a lack of broadband infrastructure. These investments can help grow existing businesses, attract new companies and boost opportunities for regional economic development.

Beyond our businesses, farmers are also humans that require social interaction and deeply care about their community. Isolation in rural communities has become much more apparent as parents struggle to work from home and youth try to connect with their teachers and classmates. Stable internet is necessary for connecting with the outside world, which in turn supports mental health. Internet has also become essential for online learning and virtual health care.

Quality of life and education should not be compromised for those choosing to live, work and play in rural Ontario.