

**NEWS RELEASE****For Immediate Release**

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**Going Forward We Must Make Our Voices Heard**

Farmers must make their voices heard as changes in agriculture accelerate. This was the key message for twenty eight emerging Ontario agriculture-sector leaders on their ten day journey through five Northeastern states visiting innovative farms, and hearing from government officials and researchers. As in Ontario, US farmers are also facing fluctuating prices, emerging Third World markets, trade negotiations, environmental regulations, energy prices, shrinking government budgets, development pressures and the increased public scrutiny of their operations. If farmers don't communicate to the public and government what it's really like to farm in today's world, they could be saddled with unrealistic regulations and expectations that could well put them out of business. The Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP) North American Study Tour was a highlight for the farmers and agri-food professionals who are participants in the 19-month AALP delivered by the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI), based in Guelph.

The group was privileged to experience inside tours and candid discussions as they examined a variety of agricultural, political, environmental, cultural and social issues in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Washington, DC and New York. They saw how agriculture makes up a bigger share of the economy in these states, than it does in Ontario, which makes it more of a focus for state governments. From deep in Amish Country in Berlin, Ohio to the Mason Dixon Line, the message was clear that farming can be a strong and viable business. Entrepreneurial farmers showed how their operations had made big changes in their efforts to adapt to new technology and changing regulations and how they have become more productive and environmentally friendly than ever before. The common message from the powerful US Farm Bureau, from Monsanto Company executives, and from the Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture was that of change. Dr. Michael Dykes, a Vice-President from Monsanto said, "If you haven't been on a farm in the last 5-10 years, you do not know production agriculture." This is a message that farmers in the US are trying to communicate to local officials and the public, and is a message that Ontario farmers can fully understand.

Stricter environmental regulations have come down from President Obama, as part of his efforts to revive the heavily polluted Chesapeake Bay, a watershed that touches 17 million Americans, 6 U.S. states and Washington D.C. These regulations are having an immediate impact on farmers in Maryland who are required to have Nutrient Management Plans and are now having to make big changes to the way they fertilize their land. While Ontario farmers have made great strides with their own operations as Ontario's regulations have developed, farmers in the US have also been addressing water pollution and wildlife habitat concerns. The participants had the opportunity to meet with staff at both the federal and state levels and learned that while regulations were increasing, government resources were being cut back in many states to deal with big budget deficits.

The challenges being faced by farmers and agri-business in the U.S. are very similar to those encountered right here in Ontario. In order to have farm voices heard, the group was told to reconnect farming to the city and to build relationships with government officials. Russell Redding, Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture summed up the message of the trip when he said, "Through all the transitions that we may encounter, going forward we must make our voices heard. Leadership is lonely but only our voices will ensure we can grow and sustain our industries."

The Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP) is a program of the *Rural Ontario Institute (ROI)*. AALP was established in 1984 and is a 19-month long executive leadership and personal development program for men and women in all sectors and from all regions of Ontario's agriculture and food industry who aspire to help shape the future of rural Ontario.

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