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For Immediate Release

### **Ag Leaders Explore Guatemala and Belize: Countries of Contrast**

**Guelph, ON** – Gaining perspective and understanding of Guatemala and Belize agriculture and society was the focus of a two week long international study tour by Class 13 of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP). The tour which recently concluded, allowed the 28 participants to explore many aspects of both developing nations through extensive travel in the countryside and cityscapes of these countries.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect,” said Nathan Klages from AALP Class 13, “but what I experienced and saw in Guatemala and Belize will stay with me forever. Not only was I impressed by the drive of the small producers to be leaders in their towns and collectively work towards a better life for their families, but also by their pride in what they do and willingness to share with our class.”

The group witnessed small but strong cooperatives in Guatemala and different value added groups such as, As Green As it Gets. In Belize, participants visited large scale cooperatives that process 95% of the country’s citrus and a burgeoning sugar cane business with up to 6,000 growers. Other tour stops included the Bank of Antigua, the Canadian Embassy, visiting with a small diverse cacao producer and having a meal with his family of fifteen.

Travels in Belize included a stop at the Mennonite community of Spanish Lookout. These people were true pioneers, establishing a farming settlement in the rainforest. Lunch was enjoyed with the Barkmans, a couple who had moved from Mexico in the 1950’s – to live the dream. True leaders!!

“In addition to all of the leadership aspects I saw with our agriculture stops, I will never forget the cultural experiences of visiting the Jaxha and Tikal Mayan ruins,” adds Neil Hemingway, an AALP class member from Brussels, ON. “To think how advanced these cities were over 10,00 years ago and then to have them abandoned, makes you reflect on the impact society is having to our existence on this planet.”

“What will forever stay with me is the image of the Guatemalan coffee producer bent over under the weight of a heavy bag of coffee freshly picked from up high in the mountain across the valley from where we were walking”, added Bruce VanderWees. “Farming is hard work at the best of times and this is amplified in developing countries,” adds Ben Sterk.

The AALP educational tour through these two countries was a true ‘eye-opener’ for the entire class and left many with a greater understanding of Central America with both the challenges and opportunities this region faces.

Established in 1984, the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP) is an executive development program for men and women who want to broaden their horizons and expand their networks to help shape the future of the agriculture, agri-food and rural sectors in Ontario. AALP is administered by the Rural Ontario Institute. Through a series of seminars, international travel, self directed study and distance education, AALP participants develop leadership skills and an increased knowledge of the agri-food system and perspectives on critical issues in the agricultural industry.

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