Agricultural Education/Extension in Ontario: Large Need, Little Supply

Roslynn Brain, University of Florida, USA
James P. Mahone and Glen Filson, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Introduction  Agriculture is Canada’s third largest industry and it contributes more than $25 billion (Canadian) each year to the provincial economy. In Ontario, however, a gap between this important industry and the wider consumer base has developed, resulting in constant difficulties for the agricultural industry. This research study assessed the extent of agricultural awareness and literacy in Oxford County, Ontario, and the possible connections between literacy levels and lacking agricultural extension/education.

Methods  A total of 400 questionnaires were administered and completed throughout six grocery stores within Oxford County, Ontario (383 were required for a representative sample of the county). Several questions were also incorporated from (and compared with) three nation-wide studies: two American (Hallman et al., 2003 & 2004) and one Canadian (Einsiedel, 2000).

Purpose  The ultimate goal of this research project was to determine the potential for a large void between consumers and agriculture, assessing the need for enhanced agricultural education programs and extension initiatives in Ontario.

Results & Discussion  In comparison to the US studies, Oxford County respondents were generally less aware of and more negative towards particular aspects of contemporary agriculture, and they also rated their knowledge on a lower level in comparison to the Americans in Hallman’s studies. Most respondents did not feel that Canadians were “food smart” as a population and they could not recall having learned anything about agriculture in school. Forty-eight of the 400 respondents either were or hoped to be teachers/professors. Of the potential or existing teachers/professors, 40% could not recall any courses throughout their education that discussed agriculture, and 87.5% would have liked to have learned more about it in school. Almost all participants indicated they would have liked to have learned more about agriculture throughout their education.

Even though the desire among the public to learn more about agriculture in school is strong, there is no agricultural segment in both the primary and secondary levels of the Ontario curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Ontario does have a non-profit, optional agricultural education program in place (Ontario Agri-Food Education Inc.). Yet, according to the low amount of people who could recall having learned about agriculture in school, it seems that teachers have either not heard about this program, or, if so, they have not made the effort to incorporate the material. In addition, the government phased out agricultural extension from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food in the mid 1990s, and extension officers have disappeared as a result. Also, in his 18 page speech to the throne, the only mention of agriculture from the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario (2003: 12) was in two brief sentences on food safety.

Implications  Although the agri-food industry is one of the most important in Ontario, government support and agricultural education/extension initiatives are lacking, if not non-existent. In comparison to the USA, where there are Land Grant Universities, government-funded extension officers, and agricultural extension, education, communication, and education at Graduate levels, Canada faces a much larger challenge on increasing awareness. Agricultural outreach programs have been developed sporadically on a county-wide basis, but there have not been any significant large-scale initiatives.