

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



Assemblée  
législative  
de l'Ontario

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**Official Report  
of Debates  
(Hansard)**

IN-38

**Journal  
des débats  
(Hansard)**

IN-38

**Standing Committee  
on the Interior**

Growing Agritourism Act, 2024

1<sup>st</sup> Session  
43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament

Tuesday 26 November 2024

**Comité permanent  
des affaires intérieures**

Loi de 2024  
sur le développement  
de l'agrotourisme

1<sup>re</sup> session  
43<sup>e</sup> législature

Mardi 26 novembre 2024

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Chair: Aris Babikian  
Clerk: Thushitha Kobikrishna

Président : Aris Babikian  
Greffière : Thushitha Kobikrishna

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON THE INTERIOR**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT  
DES AFFAIRES INTÉRIEURES**

Tuesday 26 November 2024

Mardi 26 novembre 2024

*The committee met at 0900 in committee room 1.*

**GROWING AGRITOURISM  
ACT, 2024**

**LOI DE 2024 SUR LE DÉVELOPPEMENT  
DE L'AGROTOURISME**

Consideration of the following bill:

Bill 186, An Act to limit the liability in respect of agritourism / Projet de loi 186, Loi limitant la responsabilité à l'égard de l'agrotourisme.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Good morning, committee members. The Standing Committee on the Interior will now come to order. We are here today for public hearings on Bill 186, An Act to limit the liability in respect of agritourism. Are there any questions? I see none.

I will now call on the member for Perth–Wellington, MPP Rae, to make his opening remarks. You will have 20 minutes to make an opening statement, followed by 40 minutes of questions from the members of the committee. The questions will be divided into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, seven and a half minutes for the official opposition members and five minutes for the independent members. I will give reminders of the time remaining during the presentation and the questions.

MPP Rae, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Matthew Rae:** Good morning, Chair, and my lovely colleagues, the members of the Standing Committee on the Interior. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you today and allowing me to say a few words about my private member's bill, Bill 186, An Act to limit the liability in respect of agritourism—or the short title is the Growing Agritourism Act.

As many of you will know, I have the distinct honour and privilege to represent the good people of Perth–Wellington and the many agri-tourism operators across Perth and Wellington counties in the Legislative Assembly. I'm also a proud son of farmers and represent almost 4,000 farm families. It is always great to talk about our agricultural sector in this place and specifically today to talk about the growing agri-tourism businesses in Perth–Wellington and across Ontario.

The agriculture and agri-food sector now contributes over \$51 billion in annual economic activity to our provincial economy, up \$3 billion since 2018. Over

870,000 jobs in Ontario are now directly involved in our agricultural sector, representing one in nine jobs in the province of Ontario. We have seen massive growth over the past few years within that sector.

Despite these major strides and growth in our agriculture sector, more people in Ontario today are removed from the farm than at any point in our country's history. Approximately 5% of Canada's population lives or is directly involved in an on-farm operation on a daily basis.

The legislation before the committee and the assembly today is a concise piece of legislation, but I would argue it's also very historic. This bill, if passed, would be the first legislation of its kind in all of Canada. This type of legislation may be new to the province of Ontario and to Canada as a whole, but it is an extremely common occurrence to our cousins south of the border. Agritourism risk liability laws currently exist in some form in over 30 US states. Their work at the state level and the National Agricultural Law Center have helped develop the foundation for this piece of legislation. In particular, I want to take a moment to thank Rusty Rumley, senior staff attorney at the National Agricultural Law Center, for his advice in developing this piece of legislation.

Chair, agri-tourism offers a bridge between our rural and urban communities. It helps strengthen the bond between these two groups. It builds understanding and appreciation for our agriculture sector that can only stem from first-hand interactions and engagement, where people who may have never visited a farm in their life can see for themselves the care and effort that goes into the food that we sometimes take for granted in our grocery stores or small grocers in our larger urban centres.

On-farm experiences allow people to not only enjoy a visit but also learn about the complex and complicated process of modern agriculture, as well as dispel some myths and misconceptions about agricultural production in Ontario and Canada.

The aim of the Growing Agritourism Act, if passed, would help remove barriers to investment, provide consistency across agri-tourism operators and help mitigate risks for farm businesses. At its core, this bill will help ensure that visitors to our great agri-tourism operators are aware of the inherent risks associated with visiting a working farm in the province of Ontario.

Chair, growth in the agri-tourism sector is ripe for growth at this moment. In 2022, the OFA conducted a local food and agri-tourism survey of their membership. They had 492 respondents to the survey, and they

indicated that they are or would like to offer some level of agri-tourism on their farm. More than 40% of respondents indicated that selling value-added products, ranging from baked goods and wool to preserves and prepared meals, as well as providing on-farm experiences, provided opportunities to both diversify farm income and raise awareness for the farm and agricultural sector within our urban neighbourhoods.

As Farm Fresh Ontario, who we'll be hearing from later today as one of the deputations, said in their support for this bill: "This bill serves to address one of those barriers or risks to the farm operation, identified by our members by providing a reasonable limitation of liability resulting from any harm a participant may sustain during participation in an agri-tourism activity."

This shows that there is a very real demand for these unique activities and provides opportunities to both diversify on-farm income as well as bridge the divide between our rural producers and our urban consumers by raising awareness of our agricultural sector. By supporting our farm operators, we are directly giving them the confidence to open their gates to people across Ontario, Canada, and international visitors, and allow them to boost our tourism economy in the province.

When farmers and farm operators, such as the members of Farm Fresh Ontario, as well as the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and, by extension, the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario, invite others to visit their farms, they're extending a warm invitation to educate and entertain these new guests. But this openness comes with a certain level of risk that simply cannot be mitigated. Farms are not just pretty landscapes; they're working environments with hazards. While farm operations take the responsibility of educating their visitors about these risks, they're also relying on the fact that their visitors exercise caution around the everyday risks that are simply inherent in an on-farm operation.

For example, someone from the city, potentially downtown Toronto, may decide to visit one of the new agri-tourism operators in my riding of Perth-Wellington, such as Applebottom Orchards to pick some delicious Ontario-grown apples. However, this visitor may choose to visit this farm, just outside of Palmerston, Ontario, and not wear the proper footwear and sprain their ankle when they are on their farm. Under current legislation, the farm operator—despite not going to pave over farmland, obviously, for that individual not wearing proper footwear—is currently liable under Ontario law. Bill 186, if passed, would address that simple aspect of agri-tourism operation around risk liability, ensuring that those individuals who visit Applebottom Orchards are aware of those risks and the uneven ground, in this case, that may be there.

Another example that obviously comes up very often: If there are live animals—a calf or goat will move erratically, depending if it's being fed or simply being pet. Obviously, the individual petting that animal needs to be aware that that animal may bunt them or may move unexpectedly, ensuring that they're aware of these

inherent risks. These types of accidents are not due to negligence on the part of the farm operator, and farmers cannot transform their workplaces and their homes, in most cases, in a way that removes every inherent risk while also being able to have an operating, working farm in the modern age.

Through the Growing Agritourism Act, farmers and farm operators will benefit from a standard set of rules, guidelines and practices to promote agri-tourism engagement that is both safe and responsible by erecting a sign that has a standard and clear language warning to visitors at agri-tourism locations about the inherent risks of farm life.

I know first-hand how crucial agriculture and agri-tourism is to our communities, our culture and our economy. That's true right across the board. When urban visitors come to the farm, they learn those lessons first-hand too. They don't just see where their food comes from, but they also gain an appreciation for the time, energy and expertise required to actually produce these goods that they can so effortlessly purchase at their local stores and markets.

#### 0910

Through this bill, we're creating the necessary conditions that give our farm operators the confidence to invite them onto their land. By doing so, we're letting agricultural businesses thrive by facilitating and equipping farm operators with the necessary tools to bridge the gap between urban and rural. We're not only supporting Ontario's farmers and agribusinesses but also supporting our entire population to understand how farmers are providing the healthy food that arrives on your plate every day.

I want to thank Farm Fresh Ontario, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario, the Ontario Apple Growers, the Perth County Federation of Agriculture and the Wellington Federation of Agriculture for their support of this bill. It has truly been an honour to bring forward this bill to this committee and to this place, and I appreciate their support and advice as we've been developing it over the year. In particular, I want to thank Kevin and Darlene from Farm Fresh Ontario for their support and guidance on Bill 186.

Chair, this committee has an opportunity to be a leader not just in the province of Ontario but a leader in the entire country. Since tabling this legislation, I've heard from many agri-tourism operators and legislators across our beautiful country. Other provinces are watching what the province of Ontario is doing right now on this file, and we can be a leader in supporting the growth of this sector.

In particular, I think of the Perth Farmhouse in my riding of Perth-Wellington, Chair. It's one of the newest agri-tourism operators in my riding. Steve and Casey opened their doors this spring on May 18—which also happens to be my birthday—as Perth county's first-ever winery. Yes, Perth county has its first winery. I know our friends in the Niagara region have many wineries and other parts of the province as well, including Prince Edward county, but it was the first winery in Perth county.

Steve and Casey are setting out to redefine the local wine scene with their Sip and Graze experience, inviting guests all summer to enjoy a self-guided tasting surrounded by a picturesque five-acre vineyard and towering willow trees while savouring the flavours of our local region. Chair, they also added a goat experience where visitors can pet and hold their friendly dwarf goats, and they even hired a goat nanny to help visitors understand the inherent risks of petting these animals.

Or I think of the Middle Farm, where Adam and Callee raise free-range chickens, grass-fed beef, pasture-raised pork and farm-fresh eggs.

Or I think of Tullamore Lavender Co., or TLC for short, near Arthur, Ontario, run by Stephanie and Steven. They work hard on creating thoughtful lavender products and on-farm experiences, and this past spring and summer was their first bloom season when they opened their doors and hosted almost 2,000 visitors over five weeks.

There are many more agri-tourism operators in my riding of Perth–Wellington. However, I wanted to bring these three up in particular because they are owned and operated by millennials. They are the next generation of our agricultural sector in the province of Ontario.

Agri-tourism in Ontario and Canada is a vibrant sector and ripe for growth if we build a supportive business environment. Across Ontario, family-run farms, orchards, vineyards open their doors and homes to the public, whether it's Halls apple farm in Brockville or Tincap Berry Farm also near Brockville, or Mapleton's Organic just north of Drayton, each experience allows visitors to learn more about Ontario's rich agricultural traditions. It fosters a sense of community and a deeper appreciation for the hard work our local farm families undertake every single day, 365 days a year.

Not every farm family in Ontario is going to open an agri-tourism operation, Chair; however, many more want to. Those families that choose to do so will continue the great tradition of being ambassadors of agriculture in Ontario and Canada, both to domestic and international visitors. These agri-tourism operators are the bridges between our farm families and our citizens living in our growing cities.

Today, Chair, we have an opportunity to move Ontario forward to support our rural communities, and I would encourage all members of this committee to support this vital piece of legislation moving forward.

With that, Chair, I thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much, MPP Rae.

We move to the first round of questioning. We will start with the official opposition. MPP Vanthof will lead the questioning.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you, Mr. Rae, for bringing this bill forward. We supported it when it was brought forward in the House for second reading, and we still solidly support—me, personally, as well—the intent of this bill. I think it is very important that people from urban areas understand where their food comes from, how things

work on farms. I brought this up in the House as well, and I'd just like to start this conversation.

I had a dairy farm for many years. We didn't run an agri-tourism operation, but we did a lot of school tours. We had a lot of kids come through our farm for the same purpose as your bill, and we discovered risks that we didn't know about. My wife also had a very friendly horse, and one of the people who were going through our farm decided to kiss the horse. None of us knew, including the boy who kissed the horse, that he was violently allergic to horses. Everything turned out well, but that was a risk that we didn't know.

Another example—and this wasn't on a tour. We had calves, we had goats—my kids had all these things. But one time—and this is a risk you won't think of—it was actually a feed salesman who was coming in our barn to look and he had his hand on the gate. Cows are not unfriendly, but when you have a 1,200-pound cow who decides to bunt your fingers—if that was a kid, that would have been a hospital trip.

The issue that I want to delve further into is that not all farm situations should be part of an agri-tourism operation; not all farms are equipped to do that. So is there something in the bill—and I'm asking this as a supportive question—that regulates or that, at some point, the safety is also inherent on the farm? Farms are dangerous places. There are ways to make them safe for the farm experience, but there are inherent dangers on farms. Farm accidents are a very serious issue.

Is there something in the bill, some type of level which—just putting up a sign and saying you're at your own risk? Well, some farms are too risky for that. So is there a regulating body?

**Mr. Matthew Rae:** Thank you, MPP Vanthof, through you, Chair, for the question, and thank you for your support. I know it was unanimous in the assembly, and I really do appreciate that, at first and second reading to get it to this point.

I do know, to your first example, around school visits—in most cases, the school will have a waiver. So there was a big discussion in developing this bill with the OFA and Farm Fresh Ontario. The way the bill is written, you can put it in the waiver, that language, or you could put it on a sign. For example, the Perth Farmhouse made us put it at the front door when they walk in. For others, depending on their experience, it will be in a waiver, and that was discussions, again, with the National Agricultural Law Center in the States and others in Canada on how, more or less, the common law system is developed.

The waiver in that aspect—adding that would provide that because the waiver is already addressing whether there's food involved, because this does not. Obviously, that falls under public health. Lynn River Farm, for example, in my riding, provides an on-farm dining experience. This bill would help address any uneven ground, but if there's an issue with the food, that's under public health and they have to get a public health licence, obviously, for that. So this bill, if you are inviting members of the general public—a school group, for example, and it's in the waiver

that the school group includes—then this would help provide some of that stability or consistency.

Again, we'll hear later today from some of the operators. This will also help them raise—they understand they have a role to play in this too, making everyone aware, “Hey, the cow is going to hit—don't put your hand in the pen” sort of thing. They have an opportunity to raise that, and they've appreciated that opportunity through this bill, potentially, if it's passed, to provide that consistency across Ontario.

**0920**

Whether you have a waiver form or have a sign: We left that flexibility because each operation is different, because if they have zip lining on the farm—potentially some eastern Ontario farms have that option—they have a waiver, obviously, for a variety of other health and safety things, and this would just complement that.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm not trying to be difficult; I don't think that really—I don't know how to express this. I have been to several agri-tourism operations—all good. The reason we're all here isn't for the 95% or 99% of people who do things right. The reason we have laws isn't for the ones who do things right; it's for the 1% that do things wrong. I want to know how we are going to make sure that putting that sign up doesn't give someone the idea that they can allow or that they don't have to protect against inherent risk.

I'm going to repeat: Agri-tourism, we fully support, but not every farm operation or farm operator is suited for agri-tourism. Even though they might think they are and they might think it's some benefit to their bottom line, they're not all suited for it.

So I just want to know, is there anyone that's going to say, “Well, you know what? Maybe you should fix”—and I'm not talking about food safety. I get it; the public health unit is for food safety. I get it. But going through an elevator complex, and sometimes equipment—even on my dairy farm, it goes on timers—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you, MPP Vanthof. The time is up. You can keep the rest of your thoughts for the next round.

We move to the government side now. MPP Jordan, go ahead. The floor is yours.

**Mr. John Jordan:** Thank you, MPP Rae, for the presentation. As the PA to agriculture, food and agri-business, I've been involved in a number of round tables and meetings, and I can offer the committee that this bill has been well socialized, and it's called the Matt Rae bill. So it is well known out there, and it is well received from our agribusiness partners.

I'm wondering if you can just expand on the risk mitigation this bill offers—and some of that was in your presentation—agri-business or a future agri-business wanting to start up.

**Mr. Matthew Rae:** Thank you, MPP Jordan, through you, Chair, to my great colleague, very nice in his compliments around this being known as the Matt Rae bill. Really, it's working with the OFA, Farm Fresh Ontario, TIAO and many other agri-tourism operators out there. I

know having that exposure has been very helpful. Having that ability in eastern Ontario, from where you represent in particular, MPP Jordan, to be able to visit that area, and meet and talk with some agri-tourism operators all across Ontario—northern Ontario, eastern Ontario, southwestern Ontario. They exist in every region of our great province.

Around the risk liability, which this hopes to address—as I mentioned, 30 US states have some form of this already in place. It varies widely, because, obviously, the US is also a very diverse country with a large geographic area. But it really is looking at how we provide some protections around the inherent risk on farm operations while also ensuring that our agri-tourism operators are operating at a high standard, making visitors aware of those inherent risks. But it will also remove some of those barriers to investment. I go back to the OFA survey that they did in 2022, where there is an interest in offering agri-tourism as a component of their on-farm operation, diversifying that income stream. But they don't want to make that significant investment to put up—even if it's like Perth Farmhouse. I go back to the most recent one, the agri-tourism operating in my riding. Putting up that building costs a lot of money, renovating that building costs a lot of money. They hired multiple staff—great for economic development—a significant investment for a young family just starting out.

They want to ensure that there is some protection around some of the inherent risks: uneven ground, or a goat, in their instance, butting someone, or a child just—and they did a great job. Again, as I mentioned, they hired someone specifically to go in with you, supervised, to the goat pen. They were like, “Just FYI, don't pick up any goats that aren't essentially babies. This goat doesn't like to be touched. Don't touch it.” They were making sure everyone was aware of avoiding those situations. But obviously, you can't avoid everything and maybe a goat had a bad day. It's really just removing those barriers to that additional investment, because I think there is a large potential.

Again, to our NDP colleagues, not every operator is going to run an agri-tourism, 100%. I had to argue with a vast—there are thousands upon thousands of farmers, as you know very well, MPP Jordan, in this province. Not everyone is going to want to open their—you're opening it to the public. Even if you post hours on your website and on your sign, people are just going to show up at random times, for example.

So it's really for those who are interested in it and it's really got to be their passion. It's really providing that consistency across Ontario. And I think, if it is passed, other provinces, in particular Alberta, would probably pass something similar.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Gallagher Murphy.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Thank you, Chair, and through you to MPP Matt Rae, thank you very much for bringing this bill forward. It was interesting, as I was listening to you speak about some of the examples, one in particular stood out to me.



My family are dairy farmers, back in Ireland—still today. I remember the day when I showed up with my high-heeled suede boots on and my aunt said, “Och, you can’t be wearing those down at the farm,” so I quickly put on her wellies, and I know why. It’s because of the fact that the land was not even, even in the barn, back in those days. But they aren’t agri-tourism either. They’re specifically doing their work. They do not open it up. So I hear what you’re saying.

However, one of your examples I was very intrigued by: 2,000 visitors over two weeks at a lavender farm. That’s amazing. My question to you would be, how would this legislation help this lavender farm, if passed?

**Mr. Matthew Rae:** Thank you, MPP Gallagher Murphy, for that very important question. It was actually 2,000 visitors over five weeks—sorry, I don’t know if I had misspoken—spring-summer, early summer, because that’s when lavender is usually in bloom. This was their first year as well.

And for an agri-tourism operator near Arthur, again, similar situation: Steven and Stephanie grew up on a local dairy farm and they wanted to come back. They worked in agriculture, as they referred to it, “behind a desk.” They weren’t on-farm but worked in the industry. They wanted to build off of that experience and so they have a small farm now outside of Arthur.

This bill would help them in that aspect, similar to your experience with your family in Ireland, obviously. They do yoga in a lavender field that’s large. They have thousands of plants now planted, but obviously, uneven ground there. They recently held a holiday market on the farm, even though they’re not really in-season, but they would obviously still have many people come through their operation for a holiday market locally.

Again, just sort of making them aware of that, and if they have someone bring in a goat to yoga in lavender farms, as it’s very popular, then, obviously, having live animals potentially—just some of those inherent risks around that and ensuring that people are aware when they come experience the great lavender farms in my riding.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** You have 32 seconds.

**Mr. Matthew Rae:** We’ve got another round. Don’t worry.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** We move to the second round. MPP Vanthof.

0930

**Mr. John Vanthof:** We are in support of this bill. We’re trying to make this the best bill and the best for agri-tourism that we can. I think of agri-tourism outfits in northern Ontario. Leisure Farms in West Nipissing run one of the largest market gardens in the province. They have an on-farm bakery. They do many tours. They hold a big pumpkin fest in the fall. Thousands of school kids come. This bill will help them. Carnor Farms, next to my old dairy farm, plant a few acres of sunflowers and have tours going through their sunflower field. This bill will help them. I get this. We are 100% behind this.

But I need to stress that there are inherent risks on farms, and what I don’t fully understand in the bill—or if

it’s in the bill—is what is inherently too great a risk. The way I understand it, we’re leaving this up to the individual operator. I get that, but at some point, that might cause a risk in itself.

Once a year, in our area, they hold a day at the farm. They find four or five operators, and they tour thousands of people through there. It’s done by the Northern Ontario Farm Innovation Alliance and the Temiskaming Federation of Agriculture, all the commodity groups—the dairy producer committee. It’s an awful lot of work. It’s really beneficial—but it’s also very hard to make sure that everything is covered. This bill will likely help them.

Things that a farmer might not even think of as a risk—and it’s a big one, if something happens; if it goes wrong, it’s going to go incredibly wrong. I get that there are organizations—there must be an agri-tourism organization that monitors. That’s what I’m getting at. I don’t want that sign to just be, “Buyer beware,” and you don’t want that either. I’m not trying to speak for you. But none of us want that. So I think that’s the only caveat that we need to be very careful with—that there are inherent risks on a farm.

On our own farm, I’ve seen the benefit of having a child pet a calf or pet a goat. Believe me, it’s a life-changing experience. I’m not going to contradict that at all.

But some farms just do not lend themselves to agri-tourism—and the vast majority of those farmers want nothing to do with agri-tourism, who know this. The vast majority of people know that speeding at 130 or 140 clicks is also dangerous, and still people do it. That’s the only thing that I think leads me a little—but otherwise, I don’t have a lot to question. We support the intent of this bill, and we will continue to support it.

**Mr. Matthew Rae:** Thank you, MPP Vanthof. I really do appreciate that. And don’t worry; my dad would have called them milk producers as well, so I know what you’re referring to there.

Your points are well taken. I don’t take them as partisan or criticism or anything like that. It was something in developing the piece of legislation, both with legislative counsel and our team at the Legislative Assembly, and also with the experts in the field and with Farm Fresh, which is the main organization that represents agri-tourism operators in Ontario—obviously, the OFA and the tourism association are involved as well. It was a discussion around how specific you want to be around inherent risk, and it’s literally how our legal system is set up. If you’re way too specific, you’re going to leave something out, so it’s always a balance on that side.

Again, as you know very well—you’ve been here longer than I have in this place—PMBs are usually pretty concise. There are many, and we’ll hear from presenters about other issues beyond the scope of this bill, which is totally fine—valid concerns around, for example, municipal zoning. But it was really: What is one sort of thing—one part of, obviously, a larger component in this industry.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Mr. Matthew Rae:** Around inherent risk, it’s similar language that has been used in US bills. Most refer to

inherent risk in that aspect and it's how there are inherent risks. I go back to my father; he would not be one of those farmers who is going to open an agri-tourism operation. There is obviously more work to do to ensure farm safety, both at the provincial level and with our stakeholders within the OFA.

I remember when I was a child, St. John Ambulance—my dad made sure that me and my sister—I think I was 10 at the time: “You’re going to this course because they’re going to teach you about not putting your hand in an auger, for example, or something like that.” That’s beyond the scope of this bill, but there’s obviously more work that all of us can do on that aspect.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** That concludes the second round of official opposition questioning.

We move to the government side. MPP Jordan.

**Mr. John Jordan:** The Grow Ontario Strategy has ambitious goals. This government has ambitious goals relative to growing production and consumption within Ontario by 30% and our exports by 8%. I like to look at this bill as a risk mitigation factor that removes barriers to new businesses starting up.

I’d like to refer back to MPP Vanthof’s question. Due diligence has always been a factor in liability cases. With my understanding that this bill is risk mitigation, it does not remove the responsibility of the operators relative to due diligence and making their agribusiness as safe as possible for those participating.

**Mr. Matthew Rae:** Thank you, MPP Jordan, for that very important question. Yes is the short answer. I know, with the growing agriculture sector, the Grow Ontario Strategy, there’s a big push for growing more food domestically and obviously increasing our exports as well over the next few years, which is very important for our rural communities—having that economic development as I mentioned in my remarks: \$51 billion now in economic activity for agriculture and agri-food in the province of Ontario. There’s huge potential—I know as you know, MPP Jordan, working in the Ministry of Agriculture—in every single region of this province for that growth.

This is one key component, as I mentioned, that bridge between the urban and rural visitors to our rural communities, having them experience—roughly only 5%, as I mentioned, of Canadians are involved directly in on-farm operations and agriculture. There’s a big removal from that compared to when my grandfather was alive in the late 1940s or 1950s. When they were farming, many people that were farming had that connection.

There is a responsibility on the operator to provide a safe environment, but as I’ve referred to earlier, there are situations where you can only do so much, compared to, for example, if you go to a VR thing in downtown Toronto. The ground will, obviously, be in a building, so it’s cement or pavement wherever you are. Even then, though, they get you to sign a waiver in most cases, around twisting your ankle. So it’s still in that aspect, but it’s a more safe, closed environment.

**0940**

I know if you visit a farm that has beehives—to MPP Vanthof’s point around the horse and the boy—you may

not know the child is allergic to bees, for example, but if they get stung, you’re going to find out real quick, unfortunately. My sister has a small business and keeps bees. There is very little way you’re going to be able to control bees in that way—so just so they are aware of that and that aspect.

For example, if a bee farmer has an agri-tourism component of their operation—not keeping the beehives right next to the front gate, sort of thing, or in a certain area, but they will be on the property, just so people are aware of that and are prepared accordingly. This bill helps with some of that liability, which has been a challenge for Ontario operators, a challenge for expansion and a challenge to obtain insurance, because many of these farm operations have different farm insurance because they’re having visitors to the farm. This will help provide a level playing field and help them obtain some of that insurance.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** MPP Dowie.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Thank you to MPP Rae for this bill. I look at the tremendous, tremendous potential of agri-tourism down in the southwest. I know in Prince Edward county as well we’ve got a growing culinary tourism approach, trying to market our foods. Truly this is the kind of experience that brings in those that are weekenders or conference-goers. Even when visitors come down to our region it’s not for vacation, but it’s, “What can we do?” Having experiences like what are being proposed for agri-tourism really helps to broaden our portfolio for tourism and attract people from the United States or from other parts of Ontario.

I know we certainly have an extensive greenhouse industry. We’ve got dairy. We’ve got all kinds of different crops in Essex county, so having this limitation on liability effectively allows those doors to be opened up and allows those that wish to show their product to do so well.

I’m hoping you might be able to elaborate a bit upon how you see the next five years upon passage of the bill. What sorts of new experiences would you envision being developed as a result of this change?

**Mr. Matthew Rae:** Thank you to MPP Dowie for that very important question. I know we are already potentially seeing that growth of interest. It’s usually younger farmers in the industry wanting to get into the industry or coming back to the rural communities they grow up in, as I mentioned in some of my examples. I know you are closer to the US border than I am, based on your riding, but I have the distinct pleasure of representing the Stratford Festival. It attracts many visitors from Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania every summer.

I know there is a great synergy potential between having the festival seated there but then also these agri-tourism operations around the city of Stratford, for example in Perth county—having that ability for them to see how our farm operators operate in Ontario. Our Michigan colleagues may have come from Detroit or a larger city in Michigan and may not have visited a farm there, even in Michigan, so you’re having that ability for education. It complements their visit to our communities and gets them to stay longer. The whole idea is to get them

to stay more than a day. Day trips are great—my riding is a little closer to the GTA so day trips are good—but it encourages them to make a little longer trip, make it maybe an extra-long weekend with the family. This bill will help improve that and encourage more investment within that for those who want to do it.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much.

Thank you, MPP Rae, for sharing your ideas and vision with us. Thank you to the committee members. This committee is recessed until 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when we are going to have our first round of hearings, listening to witnesses.

*The committee recessed from 0945 to 1500.*

MS. DARLENE DOWNEY  
FARM FRESH ONTARIO  
CULINARY TOURISM ALLIANCE

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Good afternoon, everyone. The committee will resume public hearings on Bill 186.

The remainder of our presenters will have seven minutes for their presentations, and after we have heard from all three presenters, the remaining 39 minutes of the time slot will be for questions from members of the committee. The time for questions will be broken down into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent member.

I will now call on Darlene Downey to start her presentation. The floor is yours. Please identify yourself, the organization you represent and your title.

**Ms. Darlene Downey:** My name is Darlene Downey, Farm Fresh Ontario, and owner of Downey's Farm.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you. Go ahead.

**Ms. Darlene Downey:** Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in support of this critical piece of legislation. My name is Darlene Downey, and I'm the owner of Downey's Farm in Caledon. We are a fourth-generation farm and have been farming in the Caledon area for over 100 years. Thanks to the vision of my parents, we are also a second generation of agri-tourism.

The transition from dairy farming to tourism-based agriculture started with a roadside stand, selling corn with my four siblings so we could purchase hockey equipment. Diversifying our offering provided additional income for our family; it gave the community a trusted and local fruit and vegetable source and also five kids a summer job.

As we approach our 40th year in the agri-tourism field, Downey's Farm continues to be privately owned and operated by myself, my husband and our four children. We believe in providing a safe, educational and fun experience for guests—cultivating happiness through outdoor fun for

over 170,000 guests per year, including over 25,000 Ontario students through school tours. For many of our guests, it is their first time visiting a farm, petting a goat, picking a pumpkin or venturing through a corn maze. We have created a unique agriculture-based experience at our home to ensure the general public remains connected to agriculture.

Agri-tourism across the province has seen tremendous growth over the past several years. With growth comes challenge. Challenges we have encountered include skyrocketing insurance costs and an increase in lawsuits. Our liability premiums increased from \$20,000 to over \$100,000 in the course of a year—an astonishing rise with absolutely no outstanding claims. These unexpected spikes make it extremely challenging to run a business.

This legislation is critical to keep farms open, thriving and welcoming the public. We believe this proposed legislation will provide us and others in the sector the necessary protection against frivolous claims and give us the confidence to continue to grow and invest in our business.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, we are not seeking complete immunity from lawsuits. We are asking for protection from baseless claims that continue to threaten our businesses and way of life. We are opening up our homes to the general public who, in turn, need to be accepting that there are natural and inherent risks when participating in activities such as picking apples or petting a farm animal. If one of our members is at fault, or gross negligence on the part of the owner leads to injury or damage, they should absolutely be held accountable. This is not up for debate. In fact, this legislation will encourage our members to be even more vigilant, to maintain and improve safety measures and to prioritize the well-being of our visitors above all else. Thank you for your time today.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you.

Our next presenter is Farm Fresh Ontario and Kevin Vallier. Please identify yourself, the organization and the title. You have seven minutes.

**Mr. Kevin Vallier:** Thank you. Kevin Vallier, CEO of Farm Fresh Ontario.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members. I am pleased to be joined here today with our board chair, Darlene from Downey's Farm, as well as long-time member Chris Hiemstra from Clovermead, who submitted a written submission outlining the importance of this piece of legislation.

Mr. Chair, while agri-tourism or diversified agriculture has skyrocketed in popularity in the past few years, it has been attracting families to farms for decades. In fact, our association was formed in 1973 to assist and navigate for farmers who had on-farm markets.

Today, the list of fun family farm activities is endless, from corn mazes to hayrides, from pick-your-own-fruit to cutting your own Christmas trees. Farmers in Ontario are diversifying their revenue stream so that they can continue to farm, while at the same time welcoming people onto their family farm so that visitors can see first-hand how food is grown, cows are milked and apples are picked.

Not only is there fun to be had on many Ontario farms, but there's also a huge learning opportunity. Many of our nearly 300 members offer school tours—experiences that Ontario children won't ever soon forget. For many, it's their first time on a farm, their first time seeing a cow up close, their first time picking fresh fruit from a tree. Children get a new understanding and appreciation for locally grown.

But at the end of the day, all of these people are walking onto a working, active farm, and as such, as Darlene said, there are inherent risks.

With this legislation, we can protect our farmers, who open their farms to the public so they can enjoy and experience the farm life.

Currently, our members, frankly, are terrified of frivolous lawsuits that can ruin a family farm that has been operating for generations.

Just one example: We currently have a member defending themselves against three frivolous lawsuits—all injured ankles, all because the ground was wet or uneven. One individual crossed over two highly visible barriers and walked into a clearly marked “staff only” section of the farm before injuring himself. This farm owner has now spent \$285,000 in defence of these frivolous claims, and he is now waiting to see if the farm will be insurable going forward. It is a farm that sees thousands of visitors every year, and it is a community landmark. That is just one example of many we are seeing each year. Without this legislation, our fear is that it will get worse.

Insurance companies used to just settle these lawsuits with a payout, but now even the insurance companies themselves are fighting back against these frivolous claims. The problem, though, is, either our members can't find insurance or the cost, as you've heard, is so high it can force them out of business.

There are inherent risks when you walk onto an active working farm. Our members do their best to mitigate these risks and to provide the absolute safest environment for visitors to experience life on a farm, but in an on-farm environment, as many of you know, there are hazards.

The proposed legislation before you today is critical to the sustainability and growth of agri-tourism and agriculture in Ontario. It would provide a layer of protection and peace of mind to farm owners who open their doors to the public. It by no means excuses owners who turn a blind eye to health and safety. In fact, this legislation will help ensure that our members and anyone who welcomes the public onto their farm provide the absolute safest environment possible.

What we are asking for with the passing of this important legislation is protection against frivolous lawsuits, costing farmers hundreds of thousands of dollars, astronomical insurance rates and potentially driving farms out of business.

I can assure this committee that our plan as an association is to launch a public awareness campaign that will educate Ontarians as to what to expect when visiting a farm. In other words, we will do our part. We will help educate them as to proper footwear; hand hygiene after,

perhaps, a petting zoo; that there will be uneven ground; that there may be machinery and other risks that may occur while on a farm.

As the only association in Ontario solely dedicated to the agri-tourism sector, we want to work with the government, with all parties and stakeholders to continue to grow agri-tourism, encourage people to visit their local farms, learn more about agriculture in Ontario and its vital importance to communities. The legislation will go a long way in helping do that.

On behalf of all of our members, we thank you very much for allowing us to be here today and for your continued support for Ontario farmers, particularly those in agri-tourism. And a very big thank you to MPP Rae for his hard work on drafting the Growing Agritourism Act. His tireless efforts and those of his colleagues are greatly appreciated. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

1510

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you.

Our third presenter here is the Culinary Tourism Alliance, and Ian Worte will join us virtually. Please identify yourself, your organization and your title, and the floor is yours.

**Mr. Ian Worte:** I am Ian Worte. I'm the destination development manager at the Culinary Tourism Alliance.

I'll begin just by giving you a bit of a background on just who the Culinary Tourism Alliance is and why we're here today. The Culinary Tourism Alliance was originally established in 2006 as an Ontario-based non-profit, in order to implement Ontario's first culinary tourism strategy. We've subsequently evolved into a national, Canada-wide non-profit with members across the country.

Just in case: It's not always clear to folks what our interest is in agri-tourism. Agri-tourism is a big part of what our organization does. We view agri-tourism, and agri-tourism is seen in the industry, as a subset of food tourism that focuses on the production side of food and drink and in showcasing the unique processes and people and places involved in our food system.

Just to explain where the Culinary Tourism Alliance fits in Ontario's agri-tourism ecosystem: Our colleagues here at Farm Fresh Ontario, and other organizations you may have heard from like OFA, represent farmers and agri-tourism operators. Our role is, we represent—our members are organizations. Our members are destination marketing organizations, regional tourism organizations, municipalities, sector organizations, craft beverage associations. We have 70 member organizations across Ontario. We approach agri-tourism from the destination level, and we work with our members to grow food tourism and agri-tourism in their destinations. Through these organizations, we work with agri-tourism operators on a daily basis, generally through a project or a partnership.

Basically, I wanted to talk about two things in my time today: first, just a bit about the opportunities for agri-tourism in Ontario that we see from our organization's perspective, and second, just around some of the barriers to agri-tourism growth across Ontario that we see.

I'll start with the opportunities. An increasing number of our member destinations across Canada and in Ontario are targeting agri-tourism growth in their communities as a way to grow their local economies. We have supported numerous agri-tourism initiatives in Ontario destinations recently, from Ottawa Valley to Waterloo region across to the town of Essex, and sector organizations like the Ontario Craft Cider Association and the Ontario Craft Brewers association often have businesses and experiences that are part of the agri-tourism world.

Of particular interest with agri-tourism is developing what we call tourism products: things like food trails and farm gate trails, initiatives or itineraries that really feature and promote high quality agri-tourism businesses that can be packaged and marketed externally to tourists. This is what tourism marketers are looking for, and there is a demand among tourism marketers to market agri-tourism both locally and internationally.

Interest in agri-tourism in the past few months has grown to a national level. I recently came back from an exploratory trip to Saskatchewan and Alberta, where Destination Canada has made a significant investment in creating an agri-tourism corridor in those provinces, and we're working with them on a strategic plan to help them become more investment-ready and to help them become a global agri-tourism destination. This is something that Ontario really needs to take notice of, because this has gone to a national scale, and our national tourism authorities are looking to market Canada internationally as a destination for people to come to participate in agri-tourism. I know we often see these things as something where somebody from Toronto heads up to Waterloo region for an afternoon to participate in a farm tour, but this is also something where there's international visitors and international dollars at stake.

We are also, the Culinary Tourism Alliance, in the midst of developing a national culinary and agri-tourism action plan for Canada, again, with the view of making Canada internationally recognized as a destination for culinary tourism and agri-tourism.

Obviously, there's economic benefits. I don't want to go too deep into them, but: diversifying revenue streams, encouraging the next generation of farmers to stay with their businesses, consumer education.

But I want to just focus specifically on some of the challenges we run into. Every agri-tourism project I work on, every time I'm talking to an agri-tourism business, it turns to things like insurance, zoning, land use planning. These are not unique to Ontario; these are national issues, these are global issues. Any time you're dealing with agricultural land, which is highly regulated, you encounter a lot of regulatory issues. But we always run into operators who either cannot find an insurance provider or—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Mr. Ian Warte:** Sure. Thank you.

So I wanted to finish with a quick example, which is, recently, I was delivering a workshop in New Hamburg, Ontario, talking to some agri-tourism operators, and they began to talk about their concerns about insurance. I

mentioned to them that this bill was before Parliament right now, and the response was essentially that there are people with money and investors who are ready to go and they want to invest, but they can't because they're hindered or they're afraid of these insurance issues.

So we at the Culinary Tourism Alliance support this bill. We think this would have an immediate impact on unlocking some of these investments and to helping agri-tourism in Ontario grow on the national stage and the international stage.

Thank you so much for your time.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much to our three witnesses.

We will start the first round of questioning. We will start with the official opposition. MPP Vanthof, the floor is yours.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Thank you to all three presenters. If you don't mind, can I use your first names? Okay—very much appreciated.

I'd just like to—and I'm sure you know this, but I'll put this on the record: Although our name—I represent the official opposition. There is no opposition, officially or otherwise, to the intent of this bill. We understand. I'm a farmer myself, never been involved in agri-tourism—well, no, that's not true. We did farm tours when kids came to our farm, and we did a lot of them.

So we are in favour, but I'm glad you took the time to come, because one of the—something we were talking about this morning, inherent risk—but we didn't talk this morning, when MPP Rae made his presentation regarding the bill, about insurance costs. I won't talk too long. I always like to relate things to personal things, so: Our family went to Quebec two years ago, to the Gaspé region, and my kids found a place where they did skeet shooting and they had wild boar barbecue, and we went to that. It was so much fun, but I thought, "Oh, my God, the insurance here must be nuts."

So, all three of you mentioned it, and you can all three take the question: Will this bill have a tangible effect when you go looking for insurance? I'm sure you've looked at it, because you mentioned \$100,000—that's a significant cost. I'm sure you've talked to insurance suppliers. What was their reaction?

Darlene first.

**Ms. Darlene Downey:** I believe, if this bill were to be passed, it would just give us more comfort knowing that we can continue to invest in our business and organization. Our fear is that we will be dropped by an insurance company because of all these frivolous lawsuits because an insurance company all of a sudden, or all of them, will say, "Why are we insuring these guys when it's just one after the other?" So I think it gives us more clout and it backs us up to say we're doing the best we can, and there won't be as many silly lawsuits going through.

1520

**Mr. John Vanthof:** If I could just add, I know for other businesses, including commercial farmers, especially northern Ontario—just access to insurance, right?

**Ms. Darlene Downey:** Yes.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** There is a point where insurance just goes goodbye.

**Ms. Darlene Downey:** Yes, goodbye.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Right.

Kevin?

**Mr. Kevin Vallier:** Just to add to what Darlene said, I think there are a couple of components from an association, broader perspective. One, of course, is we hope that, immediately, this will sort of flatline insurance rates. We will certainly get this out to insurance brokers, insurance companies and sort of educate them, and then hope to see the insurance rates come down and be much more affordable, and for businesses to be able forecast what their expenditures are and not get these surprise increases from \$20,000 to \$100,000 in one year. I think it will certainly give peace of mind to not only the farm owners, but the insurance companies as well, to know that this is in place.

It will take a little bit of education as well. There's the liability piece, which is huge, and then there's the other piece where insurance companies—agri-tourism isn't new, it's just new on the scale and the popularity. So I think a lot of insurance companies don't know where to put it. It's not an amusement park, it may not be a traditional farm, so how do we do this?

We work a lot with insurance companies just to say, "First of all, come visit the farm." Then once they're there, they think, "Okay, I understand. Now I get it." So that's a big piece. It's a layer in a multitude of layers that we work on. Again, we never want to come to the government and say: "Do this for us." It's, "Help us do this."

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Ian, is there anything you would like to add?

**Mr. Ian Worte:** Absolutely. Just building on the example I just mentioned of—I wasn't trying to focus group the room. The conversation became about insurance, and I started talking to them about what can we do about this.

Obviously, there's the potential for folks like Darlene, who have had their costs increased dramatically and that has caused challenges for them. I think, from my experience and what I've seen, the potential is in the money and the businesses and the operators who don't exist yet, because people just don't want to get involved in the first place because they're afraid of insurance costs, they're afraid of their provider dropping them.

Genuinely, I was in this room about three weeks ago, and two or three people said afterwards: "If this bill passes, I will invest in agri-tourism."

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Cool.

**Mr. Ian Worte:** That wasn't me asking them first; that was just what they said.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm sure that's music to MPP Rae's ears—as it should be. We all support this bill.

The one thing that I think we all agree on, and we discussed it this morning—regarding due diligence. You're in the business. You know what it means. How can we ensure that everyone who enters into the businesses knows? This bill is going to bring more people in. We want

that. The more people who understand agriculture, the more people who can actually profit from that understanding—that's great, right? But how can we ensure that everyone who enters understands that this isn't just a free pass? It almost increases the need for due diligence.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Ms. Darlene Downey:** It's really about Farm Fresh Ontario increasing exposure to Ontarians who want to get into the sector. Farm Fresh Ontario being the voice of agri-tourism and saying, "You have to join our organization so that you have resources, that you can talk to people who have been in agri-tourism for 40 years." So I think it's advocating Farm Fresh Ontario.

We were talking this morning about creating guidelines with agri-tourism, with tips and all that, so they have resources as well.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Okay.

**Mr. Ian Worte:** Yes, and just to add to that too, we are in constant communication with our members. Once this is passed, part of it will be webinars, walking them through, explaining what's in the act, distributing the act to them, and then also, again, the responsibility on their end to say all parties have stepped up to support this and we need to make sure that we're doing—

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you. The time is up for this round.

We move to the government side. MPP Pinsonneault.

**Mr. Steve Pinsonneault:** Chair, through you, I'd like to thank the presenters for being here today and giving your input on this very important bill. How will this legislation, if passed, provide consistency to the members that you represent—keyword being "consistency"?

**Mr. Kevin Vallier:** The consistency piece is huge because this kind of levels the playing field for everybody, and whether they have been in agri-tourism for generations or they're new, they know that in terms of a liability piece, there is this kind of layer of protection. Again, our members, and even those who aren't members yet, will elevate their game in terms of health and safety.

One of our members has a great line, and it gets back to one of the questions earlier. It's not necessarily about protecting the farmland, it's about protecting the farmer. And if you protect the farmer through pieces of legislation like this, through reduced red tape, through reduced costs, be it taxes, whatever, that the next generation is going to step up and continue to work that farm. If the generation coming up sees that it's an awful headache, not making much profit, I can't diversify, then they're going to walk away and go do something else, and then you end up losing the farmland.

I think that's a good point in terms of protecting the farmer. If you help the farmer, then you protect the farmland.

**Ms. Darlene Downey:** Just to build on that, I agree. You have to protect the farmer before you protect the farm.

We've been in the agri-tourism business for numerous years, and we have young children. My husband and I talk about it often. At this point, we don't think it's going to be us deciding to close down the farm. It's going to be

insurance dropping us, forcing us to close down. Or we continue to plug along, and our children see how tough it is with insurance and lawsuits coming in and they won't want to continue in the agriculture sector. Even for those thinking of getting into diversified farming, like we had talked about before—if we want to encourage people to diversify agriculture and agriculture to remain a very important and strong sector.

**Mr. Steve Pinsonneault:** I guess it's really refreshing, too, to hear everybody say that you understand, you do have a part in it with the due diligence. Yes, so I'm looking forward to this bill moving forward. Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Any more questions? MPP Dowie.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Thank you, Chair, and I want to thank everybody for being here. Actually, my question will be directed to Ian.

First off, I want to send my best regards to Rebecca, who I worked with in the Windsor-Essex culinary tourism strategy many, many years ago now, but it was such a privilege to work with the organization.

Just looking at this, I see the tremendous potential that not only benefits rural communities, but certainly the spillover can go for urban areas as well, particularly with the food-to-table type of environments. So with the Growing Agritourism Act, I wonder if you could elaborate on how the measures in this act help to mitigate some of the risks that operators may face in the culinary tourism sphere.

Secondly, do you believe that the consistency of application of this act will help to encourage others to begin their own agri-tourism operations?

**Mr. Ian Worte:** Absolutely. Thank you, and I'll tell Rebecca that you said hi.

A couple of things: Nobody gets into agri-tourism lightly. Honestly, I come across restaurants, coffee shop owners who have gotten into that field lightly—they'll figure it out as they go. Anybody who's thinking about doing agri-tourism takes it very seriously.

Regardless of whether or not they know about the insurance challenges, they're already thinking about, "How am I going to protect my farm? How am I going to protect my family? How am I going to protect people?" There's already that built-in responsibility that we find that agri-tourism operators have, where I don't think anybody is just going to wake up tomorrow morning and say, "You know what? I'm going to start inviting people around to my farm and see if I can make some money off of them." I'm always really impressed with the level of just responsibility and thoughtfulness of them.

1530

I also think that because of how tourism works—generally, tourism or destination development work is done by either a destination marketing organization person or municipal government. In rural areas, where the most potential is for agri-tourism, it's generally done by an economic development department staffer who probably works on tourism four to eight hours a week. It's not a big priority for them because they have so many other

responsibilities, and they're so much less resourced than an urban area, like Toronto. So I think that by them understanding that one of the big barriers is down, it will make them more likely and feel more equipped to work with potential operators and encourage them to get into the industry. I hope that answers your question.

**Mr. Andrew Dowie:** Yes, it does. I'd just like to follow up on a point you raised. What kind of growth do you see in your sector that could result from the passage of this bill? Do you see the overall experience, when it comes to culinary tourism, being expanded by adding agri-tourism? Is it the same clientele? Is it similar clientele? I just want to see what your forecast is.

**Mr. Ian Worte:** The target markets for agri-tourism versus just culinary tourism—foodies, as people sometimes call them—they are very similar people. The agri-tourists are generally people who, in addition to just wanting to have good food, they want to understand the food system and where their food comes from. They want to understand the processes and the people who are involved in that. It's often, I think, the same target markets, which is why it's always fantastic if you can really kind of marry these two industries and have restaurants and farms as part of the same tourism product.

In terms of the growth potential economically, it would be a whole other discussion, but there are a lot of challenges around measuring agri-tourism and measuring the size of it. But based on comparable destinations in US states, I think you could conservatively estimate that it could easily be worth \$1 billion or \$2 billion to our economy. But honestly, it's a systemic issue, the challenges in measuring the economic impacts of agri-tourism, and that's something that the whole world struggles with.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much. The time is up.

We will start with the second round of questioning. We will go to MPP Vanthof.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** I'm going to start the second round more with a statement than a question.

My area in northern Ontario is more known for hunting and fishing than agri-tourism. But in West Nipissing, we have leisure farms and they do something called—and I'm sure this happens all over—Farm to Fork. Local chefs put up tables in their market, in their cornfields, in their strawberries.

My wife is Dutch—Dutch Dutch, like immigrated Dutch, not second-generation Dutch. She's even more stubborn than I am. Anyway, whenever we have people from Holland come, if they're there, we try to bring them there. It's amazing, the impact that that has on their understanding of our country. So I think we can't underestimate the international impact that Ontario agri-tourism, Canadian agri-tourism, can have on our worldwide reputation. If anybody wants to jump on that, I am happy to take comments.

**Ms. Darlene Downey:** We are doing great things in Ontario. Actually, this week, a few days ago, there was a couple from Austria that came and visited us at Downey's. She said she'd been following us on Instagram for years

and they just started—they're the first agri-tourism business in Austria, with a pumpkin farm. I gave her Kevin's contact for Farm Fresh Ontario, as well as our friends at the North American association.

As much as we're small, we have such a huge impact on the rest of the world. People are watching us. So if we can pass this legislation—I mean, it's incredible to be the first in Canada. We're setting the bar if we can do that together.

**Mr. Kevin Vallier:** I would just add to that too, and Darlene can correct me if I'm wrong: Farm Fresh Ontario has been working with our colleagues south of the border, the North American direct farm marketing association, and I believe it's the first time ever that—they do a bus tour every year to various states, and they're coming to Ontario in July, and we've helped them coordinate. They're visiting eight farms over a couple of days. And, frankly, for the Americans to have some of these massive operations—to say, "Hey, reach out to us, in Ontario," and say, "We're seeing and hearing about all the great agri-tourism operations up there. We want to come and check them out for ourselves." So they're bringing one or two busloads up in July, and I think that's great.

I had a couple of Zoom calls from a gentleman in Alberta who is trying to, basically, get a Farm Fresh Ontario association, because their associations—plural—there are many of them running agri-tourism all over the place. He said, "You guys are doing such great things in Ontario. We want to replicate that here. How are you doing it?"

So you're right; the credibility and the reputation have increased dramatically over the last decade or so.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Ian, would you like to add to that?

**Mr. Ian Worte:** As I was saying, I was just in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. I was at an agri-tourism operator in west Manitoba, and they were saying that people come from—farmers, in general, I find, don't think what they're doing is that interesting, but to outsiders it's fascinating, and to people who farm in other types of communities, it's fascinating. They were saying that people come from Europe because the equipment is different, the fields are different, the practices and processes are different. So people come from all over Europe to see how tractors work and how you plant a field in this part of the world.

I'm always telling farmers that they need to remember that what they do is super interesting to outsiders.

**Mr. John Vanthof:** Just as an anecdote, some of my relatives are farmers in the Netherlands, and they saw their first groundhog in one of my fields. That's not adding to the debate, but it's just an anecdote.

I'm happy this bill is in committee. I hope it goes for third reading. We will support it wholeheartedly and do anything we can to help your success in the future.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** We'll move to the government side. MPP Jordan.

**Mr. John Jordan:** Thank you to all the presenters. As you probably know, this government has a Grow Ontario Strategy and is looking to increase production by 30% by

2032—so I want to recognize and thank the work of Farm Fresh Ontario and the Culinary Tourism Alliance as well.

This is a great bill, so we thank Matt Rae for bringing that forward, because it does help to mitigate the risk. As you can tell, we're all in agreement with the legislation.

I'm wondering if there are other things, through your experience and your organizations, that you're aware of, similar to this bill, that would help agri-tourism in particular and growing the production within Ontario that you think the government can play a role in. I'll leave that open to anybody who wants to answer.

**Mr. Kevin Vallier:** I think from an association point of view, MPP Jordan—I actually don't like using the term because it's too general, but "red tape reduction" is certainly one, and I think that comes down to a regional or municipal government level, not as much as the provincial level. So in terms of regulations, restrictions—and it's a tricky one because they vary from municipality to municipality, region to region. But on the same hand, I think our members would agree that a blanket, consistent approach across the province also doesn't work, because it's different from Barrie to London to Windsor to northern Ontario etc.

For example, in Niagara, we have members that maybe want to expand their operation in terms of something similar: a building, a new barn, an on-farm market. Well, then you have the municipality, the region, the Greenbelt Foundation, the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority—I'm missing one; I think there are five levels that they have to go through.

**1540**

They're there for a reason, and again, it's not asking for carte blanche to do what our members want on their farm, but it is one of the things where if we could take a high-level view of some of those regulations and restrictions moving forward, we can kind of—again, it's what fits, right? Because from a planning point of view, similar to insurance, where does agri-tourism fit? Members aren't building a Walmart, but they're not building a subdivision. So a lot of times, planners come out with their book—"Okay, so page 35, section (c) of the municipal planning regulations, says you can or can't do this"—and it's not based on an agri-tourism operation. We just have to catch up to the popularity of agri-tourism.

**Ms. Darlene Downey:** My husband was an engineer before I roped him into coming to the farm, and he knows all about someone in their office just reading a book versus coming out to the farm. We're very fortunate in the town of Caledon—we have a great municipality we work with, and we do encourage them to come onto the farm—but it's a lot of work to work with them. For example, we wanted to put in a new culvert, and the guidelines said 10% of your property has to be landscaped, and on a 150-acre farm, it doesn't fit. So it's really a big educational piece.

**Mr. John Jordan:** Ian, did you want to—

**Mr. Ian Worte:** Just building on those points: The consistency in how the Ontario planning regulations are applied in municipalities is—I do understand Kevin's point about there are different needs in different regions of



the province. I do a lot of work with Waterloo region with agri-tourism, and there are some townships where if you're in one township, these are planning regulations around agri-tourism, and if you're in another township, these are the planning regulations. From a destination development perspective, it's extremely difficult to encourage investment in growing Waterloo region's agri-tourism when two different townships—one allows something and another one doesn't; one allows four events a year and another one allows 10. If you wanted to create a farm tour or something, that's super challenging.

The issues, too, with site plan approvals and potential: We've come across examples of people who've said they have to spend \$200,000 on a multi-year site-plan approval process to build a farm shop. That's really frustrating. That consistency in application of the Ontario government's own guidelines would be, I think, a fantastic obstacle to overcome.

**Mr. John Jordan:** Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Any further questions? MPP Gallagher Murphy.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Thank you, Chair. Through you to Ian Worte: Thank you very much for your presentation, Mr. Worte. I noted something you were talking about right in your last minute of your speech about investments being available, but they're basically on hold due to insurance issues. I think that was the gist of what you were saying.

**Mr. Ian Worte:** Yes.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** So my question is—obviously that's a challenge. Obviously we want to see investment here in the province of Ontario. Obviously people are still going to need insurance. But what do you see your members currently facing with risk liability issues?

**Mr. Ian Worte:** Thank you for the question. I'll just make it clear that our members specifically aren't the operators themselves; our members are the destinations, so it would probably make sense for Kevin to speak to that more.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** One minute.

**Mr. Ian Worte:** Generally, I don't usually get into the details very much with these operators. Usually they just say, "The insurance costs too much; I'm not going to invest in this." For the specifics of that, I'd refer to Kevin and his team, and Darlene.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** I don't know how much time we have, but go ahead.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Forty seconds.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** There you go.

**Mr. Kevin Vallier:** I'll be quick. In terms of the specific risks—is that what you were asking?

*Interjection.*

**Mr. Kevin Vallier:** Yes. The on-farm petting zoos are a big risk, and the transfer of communicable diseases. There's been some terrible situations in the United States around that. It's not an indoor shopping mall. Not all of the surfaces are flat, there's not railings—so it's just the natural and inherent risks of being on an outdoor, active, working farm I think is the issue.

**M<sup>me</sup> Dawn Gallagher Murphy:** Great. Thank you.

**The Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian):** Thank you very much. That's time. We've finished our questions.

That concludes our session for this group of witnesses. Thank you very much, all of you, for coming and sharing your valuable experience and skills with us.

The committee now is adjourned until Wednesday, November 27, 2024, at 9 a.m. for clause-by-clause consideration of Bill 186.

*The committee adjourned at 1546.*





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