

## BUSINESS

## Farmers' markets reap bonanza

BY KAREN PINCHIN

TORONTO ♦ Farmers' markets are booming across Ontario thanks to environmentally conscious shoppers, but the province needs to help put local produce on grocery store shelves if the farm sector is to survive, advocates say.

Aided by the push to cut transportation-related carbon emissions, the number of farmers' markets has ballooned, said Bob Chorney, executive director of Farmers' Markets Ontario.

"People are becoming increasingly concerned about what it takes to get their food to them," said Chorney, who added the average meal travels some 4,000 kilometres.

"It takes 535 calories to move a seven-calorie strawberry from California to Ontario. It takes 400 times more energy to ship lamb from New Zealand than it does to buy local lamb."

The number of farmers' markets in the province has risen from 60 to 135 in the past 15 years, with annual sales of almost \$700 million, Chorney noted.

The net sales for all Ontario farms were almost \$9 billion, according to the 2005 census.

Food harvested in Ontario is of high-quality than imports, but the lack of consumer education means farmers



ASHLEY HUTCHESON, THE TORONTO STAR

**A country has to feed itself to remain sovereign, says farmer Bette Jean Crews.**

are struggling to make ends meet, said Bette Jean Crews, vice-president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

People take the safety and low price of their groceries for granted, said Crews, who is also a farmer.

"We won't really realize the impact of

that until food is coming into this country that doesn't have the standards we have," she said.

The climbing attendance at farmers' markets is heartening, said Lorenz Eppinger, an organic farmer from Greenfields Farms in Campbellville.

Still, Eppinger said he's a little worried it might be a fad.

"It's almost so hyped right now I'm a bit worried," he said. "Whenever something like this appears so quickly, sometimes it ebbs off very quickly too."

Fruit and vegetable farmer William Blyleven said the province is putting the food supply at risk because the wholesale price of food is so low.

Ministry of Agriculture spokesperson Brent Ross said the province is negotiating with the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors to get more local food on store shelves.

Ross said there's an increased demand from consumers for local foods.

Although Crews says her son will be taking over her Trenton-area farm, she said the average age of an Ontario farmer, which is more than 50, is dangerous for the province's food supply.

"I know that sometimes you need to buy the cheapest food, but the consumer needs to make that educated choice as to exactly what they're buying and who they're supporting," she said.

"If people realized that you need to be able to feed yourself to be a sovereign country, I think you'd get more buy-in from consumers."

*Hamilton Spectator wire services*