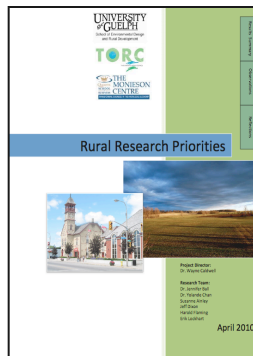

Key Research Interests in Rural Ontario

By Wayne Caldwell, Jennifer Ball, Yolande Chan, Jeff Dixon, Harold Flaming, Suzanne Ainley, Sarah Thomson

How relevant is university research to the on-the-ground realities faced by rural communities in Ontario? Unfortunately, it often isn't!

Matching the needs of rural communities and academic research is the goal behind a new report entitled *Rural Research Priorities*.



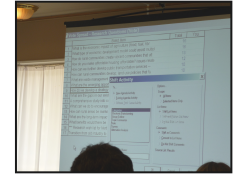
Rural regions are often limited in their capacity to conduct research and in many ways rely on outside academics at the university level to provide them with research that is relevant to their communities.

However, this creates a gap between what the communities desire to be researched and what the universities feel are relevant areas of research.

A recent government commissioned report stated that Ontario's prosperity hinges on creativity. This is a challenge for rural Ontario in many ways because, though it does not lack creativity, it often lacks coordination, resources and information to adjust to changing economic realities. Businesses, municipalities, and various regional development organizations are striving to develop and implement local and regional strategies to help their rural communities adjust but there is often a vital link missing in quality information and research to base their decisions on.

To bridge this gap the University of Guelph, the Monieson Centre at Queen's University, and The Ontario Rural Council (TORC) (now the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI))

collaboratively worked together with funding from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) to develop a report of what the research needs are of rural communities province-wide, from their own perspectives.



Surveying 23 communities, four provincial organizations and including data from the provincial Northern Growth Plan, the Rural Research Priorities report provides a listing of the top key issues of concern to rural communities and more specifically a listing of research questions they would like answered about their top concerns.

The top key issues from the community and organizational workshops from Central/Southwestern and Eastern Ontario, in alphabetical order, not ranked for importance, include:

- ☐ Agriculture/farm revitalization
- ☐ Broadband
- ☐ Economic diversification
- ☐ Efficient, cooperative government
- ☐ Employment opportunities
- ☐ Environmental sustainability
- ☐ Financial sustainability at a community level
- ☐ Healthcare
- ☐ Infrastructure
- ☐ Regional strategies and collaboration.
- ☐ Skills training/education/literacy
- ☐ Sustainable economic development
- ☐ Transportation improvement
- ☐ Youth retention.

The four provincial organizations that took part in the research were the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI), Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO), Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA), and Ontario Association of Community Futures Development Corporation (OACFDC).

Both the key issues and research questions identified are invaluable in providing direction for researchers to choose projects that would be of practical assistance to communities needing answers to current and future or evolving issues. They establish a clear link between the community's needs and the potential research activity. These key issues can also help government and policy makers better understand what is happening at the local/
regional
level in
Ontario.



We found that there was considerable regional variation with a number of the issues and thus that regionally specific research would be of great value. For example, in Southwestern Ontario agricultural issues ranked highly while in the North issues are based more around isolation and distance.

We also identified emerging issues in the report. These issues were based on our reflections of the discussions at the workshops with both the communities and the organizations, and our reflections after reviewing the Northern Growth Plan. Emerging issues are ones that are new or are known to exist but have not received significant

research attention. This list includes:

- ☐ Aboriginal issues
- ☐ Access to capital for small business
- ☐ Adequate services in rural areas with declining populations
- ☐ Aging populations
- ☐ Climate change
- ☐ Immigration – attracting new immigrants and labour migration
- ☐ Poverty
- ☐ Rising energy price and the impact on rural communities
- ☐ Safe drinking water (a specific priority in the North)
- ☐ Women's issues.

Research into emerging issues may be critical to the future of rural Ontario. Even though they have not placed high on the priority list at the moment, they are areas that can contribute to an important and evolving research agenda.

For more information about Rural Research Priorities and to read the report in full online go to <http://www.easternontarioknowledge.ca/index.php/swontario.html> ; <http://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca> and at <http://www.waynecaldwell.ca/Projects/ruralresearch.html>.

Also of interest in terms of past research done with rural communities, you might check out the report “Sustainable Rural Communities Research Program – Research Summary 1998-2008” at http://www.uoguelph.ca/research/omafra/omafra/reports_and_reviews.shtml.