

IDENTIFYING RURAL RESEARCH PRIORITIES THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Building a Community-Driven Research Agenda for Rural Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

Research can play a critical role in helping rural communities address economic, social, environmental, and governance challenges. Too often, however, research priorities are established without direct input from the communities expected to benefit from the results.

This project brought together community leaders, organizations, researchers, and government partners to identify the issues that matter most to rural Ontario and to develop a practical research agenda grounded in local realities.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH



The project was completed between September 2009 and April 2010 through a partnership involving:

- University of Guelph
- The Monieson Centre (Queen's University)
- Ontario Rural Council (TORC)
- Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)

- 23 community workshops across Ontario
- Participation from approximately 400 individuals
- Engagement of municipal leaders, businesses, CFDCs, planners, economic developers, and community organizations
- Input from four provincial organizations (OPPI, EDCO, ROMA, OACFDC)
- Integration of perspectives from Northern Ontario Growth Plan consultations

The workshops used electronic group decision-support technology to anonymously identify, discuss, and prioritize rural development issues and research questions.



KEY OPPORTUNITIES IDENTIFIED

Supporting Rural Prosperity

- Strengthen youth retention strategies
- Expand skills training opportunities
- Improve transportation and broadband infrastructure
- Support economic diversification and entrepreneurship
- Encourage sustainable economic development
- Strengthen regional cooperation and governance

Emerging Research Priorities

- Immigration and labour attraction
- Climate change adaptation
- Access to capital for small businesses
- Aging populations
- Rural poverty
- Safe drinking water
- Indigenous participation and engagement
- Energy costs and rural resilience



These issues were identified as growing concerns likely to shape future rural policy and research agendas.



KEY FINDINGS

Top Rural Development Priorities

- 1 Youth Retention
- 2 Skills Training, Education and Literacy
- 3 Transportation Improvements
- 4 Economic Diversification
- 5 Infrastructure
- 6 Employment Opportunities
- 7 Agriculture and Farm Revitalization
- 8 Sustainable Economic Development
- 9 Efficient and Cooperative Government
- 10 Regional Collaboration and Partnerships



These priorities consistently emerged across communities despite significant regional differences.



WHAT WE LEARNED

- Rural communities know their research needs**
Community leaders identified highly practical questions focused on jobs, infrastructure, governance, agriculture, and long-term sustainability.
- One-size-fits-all solutions do not work**
The research revealed considerable regional variation. Agricultural priorities dominated in Southwestern Ontario, while labour attraction, infrastructure, and collaboration were particularly important in Eastern Ontario.
- Community engagement improves research relevance**
The Discovery Workshop process successfully linked researchers with practitioners and established a direct connection between community needs and future research opportunities.
- Collaboration matters**
Strong partnerships between municipalities, organizations, governments, and researchers were repeatedly identified as essential to rural success.



FURTHER INFORMATION

Full report: *Rural Research Priorities: Results, Summary, Observations and Reflections* (2010)
www.waynecaldwell.ca/projects/rural-research-community-engagement/

RESEARCH CREDITS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and conducted in partnership with The Ontario Rural Council (TORC), The Monieson Centre at Queen's University, and the University of Guelph.

