

On-Farm Diversified Uses and Farmland Protection in Ontario

A Planning Approach to Supporting Farm Viability and Rural Economic Resilience



INTRODUCTION

This document summarizes research by Wayne J. Caldwell, Pamela Duesling, and Emily C. Sousa (2022) examining how on-farm diversified uses (OFDUs) are being implemented within Ontario's agricultural planning framework.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Ontario's prime agricultural lands are finite and non-renewable, essential to food production, rural economies, and long-term sustainability. Meanwhile, many family farms—especially small and mid-sized operations—are under increasing financial pressure.

This study explores how on-farm diversified uses (agri-tourism, value-added production, and small-scale commercial activities) can help farms remain viable while maintaining agricultural use. Based on input from municipalities, provincial agencies, and over 150 farmers, the research highlights how planning policies are applied across Ontario and the importance of local context and municipal decision-making in balancing farmland protection with economic opportunity.



HOW PLANNING CAN SUPPORT OFDUs



Clear Policy Framework

Strong Official Plan and zoning direction improves clarity and consistency for planners and farmers.



Streamlined Approvals

Pre-consultation, scaled requirements, and timely processes reduce barriers and support uptake.



Collaborative Approach

Partnerships between municipalities, the Province, and farm organizations strengthen implementation and provide better support.



WHAT WE LEARNED

- Diversification supports viability**
OFDUs provide additional income streams that help sustain family farms.
- Policy direction exists—but varies locally**
Provincial guidance is clear, but interpretation differs across municipalities.
- Municipal planning shapes outcomes**
Official Plans, zoning, and approvals determine how OFDUs function in practice.
- Process and cost matter**
Complex approvals, timelines, and fees can discourage farmers from diversifying.

WHY IT MATTERS



Keeps farms economically viable while remaining in production



Supports rural economic development and local business activity



Reinforces clear, place-based planning decisions



Maintains the long-term integrity of Ontario's agricultural landscapes

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report is available at www.waynecaldwell.ca/projects/omafra-permitted-uses-2/

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PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS



Align planning policies with real farm operations and seasonal realities.



Scale requirements to reflect size and impact of the use.



Encourage reuse of existing farm buildings where possible.



Support early and open communication between farmers and planners.