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Ontario farmers urge protection of private and secure information



By Keith Currie, President, Ontario Federation of Agriculture

Ontario farmers put a high priority on protecting data and proprietary information related to their farm businesses. The threat of disclosing that type of information poses a significant risk to the health, safety and security of farms, families and operations across the province. The recent freedom-of-information (FOI) request submitted to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) to release a list of names of all businesses with a Farm Business Registration (FBR) has the potential to jeopardize the privacy and security of that information.

Although the request impacts Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) members that are FBR registrants, it does not pertain to OFA's membership database or any related information. The individual who filed the FOI request is seeking FBR information from OMAFRA's records.

The release of this information would affect all Farm Business Registrants across the province, and not solely OFA members. The concern surrounding the potential disclosure of information is shared by all three general farm organizations in Ontario.

All freedom-of-information requests are subject to a thorough legal process defined under the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA)*. As part of the legal process, farmers potentially impacted by the disclosure of this information were asked to provide their comments and feedback to OMAFRA's Freedom of Information and Privacy Coordinator. OFA is aware of a substantial number of members that responded, stating their opposition to the requested disclosure of their information.

When notified about the FOI request made to OMAFRA, OFA took immediate action on behalf of our 38,000 farm family members in an effort to maintain the privacy and security of those with a Farm Business Registration. OFA communicated our awareness of the situation to members and immediately consulted legal counsel and sought advice on how our members could best

respond to the FOI request. We engaged with members on a regular basis, informing them of the situation and providing guidance and clarity on responding to OMAFRA's letter.

From the outset, OFA urged OMAFRA to deny the release of this information and responded quickly by submitting our own freedom-of-information request in an attempt to learn the identity of the individual who filed the request for FBR information. We believe farmers have the right to know who wants their names and business information.

In support of the concerns shared by our membership, OFA provided a submission to OMAFRA opposing the potential release of farm business information. As stated in our submission, the names of FBR registrants should not be disclosed by OMAFRA. It has the potential to cause severe financial loss to farm businesses through possible fraudulent use of the information by the individual collecting it or may be used to facilitate identity theft. It's OFA's belief that the release of this personal information infringes on the privacy and security of farm operations across the province.

Ontario's agriculture industry is aligned in strongly opposing the disclosure of information related to Farm Business Registrants. OFA has collaborated and coordinated with commodity organizations such as Dairy Farmers of Ontario, Ontario Pork, Beef Farmers of Ontario and Ontario Sheep Farmers in response to this potential threat.

Although it was stated in OMAFRA's formal letter to more than 450 farmers across the province that July 17, 2020 was the deadline to express concerns regarding the disclosure of FBR information, OFA continues to encourage members to share their comments and concerns. All impacted farmers deserve the right to voice their concerns and provide their feedback to OMAFRA.

All members with a Farm Business Registration are strongly encouraged to submit their comments to OMAFRA's Freedom of Information and Privacy Coordinator at FOIaccess.omafra@ontario.ca. It's important they understand the severity of the situation and the impact the disclosure of this information could have on their farms, families and businesses.

It's been publicly stated that OMAFRA intends to issue a Notice of Decision to the requester of the FBR information by August 10, 2020. Collectively, as farmers, let's all do our part to urge OMAFRA to deny such a request to ensure we maintain the health, safety and security of our farm operations.

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