

# ONTARIO MARKET INVESTMENT FUND

## *Building opportunities for Ontario-produced foods*

The OMIF program is targeted to promoting consumer awareness of Ontario-produced foods and encourages Ontarians to buy locally.

### **Holland Marsh Grows “Gold” for Consumers**

Farmers in the Holland Marsh area are pitching in to put their rich, fertile area on Ontario’s map and make local consumers more aware of the bounty of produce they grow.

The 11,000 acres of land, just 40 kilometres north of downtown Toronto, is home to about 130 farm families. It straddles Highway 400, one of Canada’s busiest highways. On either side of the highway, row upon row of some 47 different vegetable crops, stretch as far as the eye can see. From artichokes to zucchini, this cornucopia of produce – valued at between \$47 million and \$72 million each year – is grown, harvested and packed in the region.

While the Holland Marsh is right next door to Toronto and within a 450-kilometre radius of approximately 26 million consumers in Ontario, Michigan and New York states, 55 per cent of the produce is exported to other parts of the world. Few local consumers know about the area or its great agricultural wealth.

However, that’s all changing.

In July 2008, area producers formed the Holland Marsh Growers’ Association. Their mission is to improve economic conditions for its farmer members, foster co-operation among farmers, packers and retailers, and promote its high-value food and region to local consumers.

With the support of \$75,000 from the Ontario Market Investment Fund (OMIF), they are now implementing a strategic marketing and communications program designed to educate consumers, retailers, and the agricultural community at-large about this bountiful region.

They started by developing the “Holland Marsh Gold” brand identifier, and moved on to market it wherever and whenever possible.

Recognizing the growing momentum toward local foods, much of the work focuses on educating consumers about the area and its multitude of crops grown for today’s consumers.



**The branding of Holland Marsh products has been a true collective effort from area farmers**

Association executive director Jamie Reaume is passionate about the collective efforts of the participating farm families. "So many of them are dedicated to providing consumers with locally grown, locally harvested food that they are farming. We're all working together to make sure the brand is known, and we're keeping up with the trend toward local, home grown products".

"Consumers want assurances that the food they eat is local, that it is safe, and that it is grown and harvested by reputable farmers. Our farmers have the unique opportunity to meet their demands, given our close proximity to such a large local market," he says.

The OMIF backing has been vital to the effort, according to Jamie. It helped them move into high gear with an aggressive marketing and education program, allowing them to develop a website, point of purchase displays, media and consumer education materials and the brand logo itself.

The results indicate that association members know as much about growing awareness as they do about growing food.

The Holland Marsh Gold logo is visible on soon-to-come highway signage, grocery bags, point of purchase displays, an informative website, recipe cards, trade show exhibits, and a harvest of other promotional materials.

The website has had more than one million hits since it was launched in November 2008, and the association continues to cultivate relationships with the media. There have been articles in all major Toronto-area newspapers as well as coverage on CBC, CTV and local cable networks and the message is also on Facebook and Twitter.

In December 2009, a 13-part television series was launched on Sun TV and the Men's Network, featuring local farmers along with a number of chefs cooking up a storm using Holland Marsh produce.

The message is being driven home in other ways. Today, millions of drivers travelling along Highways 400 and 9 north of Toronto are greeted with signs that introduce the Holland Marsh Gold brand.

"Thanks to OMIF support, we've been opening doors that have never been opened before and bridging the rural/urban gap," says Reaume.

The association is working with two conservation authorities in the area to ensure the most effective and sustainable farming methods. They are also aligned with Local Foods Plus (LFP), a not-for-profit organization that nurtures regional food economies by certifying farmers and processors for local sustainable food production and helping them connect with buyers of all types and sizes. Close to 2,000 acres of in the area are now LFP-certified.

Another key focus is bringing retailers on side, starting with independent grocers. The team was at the Grocery Innovation Show in Toronto in October 2009, armed with information and signage available for display in stores.

Awareness is growing, and so too is association membership. Today more than 70 per cent of the local farmers have joined and more are coming on side every month. "We have it all up here – high quality produce, dedicated farmers, environmentally responsible practices, and terrific community support," says Reaume. "And OMIF has been a huge assistance to what we are trying to do."

## **Ontario Market Investment Fund**

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