



# **North Durham Agriculture-Related and On-Farm Diversified Uses Study**

## **Consultation Summary Report**

April 2025



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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Study Context

The Region of Durham (“Region”), in coordination with the Townships of Brock, Scugog, and Uxbridge (“Townships” or “North Durham”) have collaborated to undertake the North Durham Agriculture-related and On-farm Diversified Uses Study (“Study”). The purpose of the Study is to provide recommendations on an updated land use planning framework to better enable agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses. The objective is to support economic viability within the agricultural community by better enabling agriculture-related and on-farm diversified uses and in doing so, support a thriving agricultural system.

## 1.2 Project Team

The Region retained WSP Canada Inc. (“WSP”) to support undertaking the Study. Throughout the process, the Project Team regularly consulted the Province, Durham Agricultural Advisory Committee, Durham Region Federation of Agriculture, and the broader agricultural community. The Region, WSP, and the Townships have undertaken this Study through a collaborative process, working closely to ensure that the interests of the agricultural community are represented and advanced within the context of developing a clearer land use planning framework to better enable diversified farm businesses.

## 1.3 Consultation Summary Report

This Consultation Summary Report (the “Report”) summarizes feedback received from various audiences throughout the Study, and documents how this feedback informed the Final Recommendations Report. There were many opportunities for members of the community to participate in the Study and to provide meaningful feedback to the Project Team throughout the Study. These opportunities are documented in Section 2.2 of this Report.

## 1.4 Consultation Objectives

The following objectives informed the consultation approach for this Study:

1. Ensure that audiences with a heightened interest and informed perspective were consulted throughout the Study.
2. Provide meaningful opportunities for the audiences to share feedback and provide input to the Study and Project Team.
3. Undertake a range of different consultation activities to offer multiple opportunities and mediums for feedback and inputs to be provided to the Project Team.
4. Consult early and regularly to build transparency, collaboration, and trust in the Study process and outcome.
5. Work closely with key stakeholders to ensure the Final Recommendations address the Study purpose and objectives and respond to opportunities and challenges associated with better enabling diversified farm businesses within the Region.

## 2 Consultation Summary

### 2.1 Overview

This Section of the Report provides an overview of the consultation audiences, activities, and participation throughout the Study. A summary of the key themes based on this feedback and input received from the consultation audiences is also documented in Section 2.5.

### 2.2 Consultation Audience

The consultation plan for the Study was developed to engage a broad audience, each with a unique but important perspective on agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses. The following provides an overview of these audiences and their role in contributing to the Study:



**Township Planners:** Township planners are key stakeholders in the Study and were regularly consulted throughout the Study. As the Final Recommendations will ultimately be implemented by the Townships through local land use planning tools, such as official plans and zoning by-laws, it was critical to ensure the Final Recommendations were aligned with the expectations of planning staff and that their interests were represented.



**Farmers and Business Owners or Operators:** Farmers and business owners who are interested in diversifying their farm business are the ultimate beneficiary of this Study. An understanding of their perspective and interests was critical to ensure that the Final Recommendations effectively address both the challenges and opportunities associated with diversified farm businesses within the Region.



**Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness:** The Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness (“Ministry”) is broadly responsible for supporting the growth of the agri-food sector within the Province, as well as providing business support to farmers and ensuring the sustainability of agriculture. The Ministry is the publisher of the “Guidelines to Permitted Uses in Ontario’s Prime Agricultural Areas”, which represents a key resource that has guided the Final Recommendations.



**Elected Representatives:** Elected representatives include the Mayors and Councillors of the Townships. They represent the interests of the broader community and are also decision makers with regards to implementing the Final Recommendations through the Township’s local land use planning tools.





**Community:** The Community includes both residents and visitors to the Region that benefit from a viable and thriving agricultural system, including diversified farm businesses. A viable and thriving agricultural system provides fresh, nutritious food to nearby communities and beyond, but also offer unique farm-based experiences that contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the role of agriculture in contributing to overall community wellbeing

Regional economic development staff also had an important role in liaising with these audiences, coordinating meetings, facilitating dialogue, and ensuring there were meaningful opportunities to contribute to the Study.

## 2.3 Consultation Activities

Various consultation activities were held where the Project Team consulted key stakeholders and members of the broader community. These activities included:

- > Five meetings and a half-day, in-person workshop with staff from the Townships and Durham Region were held on May 16, June 20, July 24, August 22, October 10, 2024, and January 20<sup>th</sup> and March 28<sup>th</sup>, respectively;
- > A presentation and discussion with the Durham Agricultural Advisory Committee (DAAC) on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2025, and again on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025;
- > A presentation and discussion with a subcommittee of the Durham Agricultural Advisory Committee (DAAC) on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024, and again on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2025;
- > A presentation and discussion with the Durham Region Federation of Agriculture (DRFA), Durham Farm Fresh, and members of the public on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024, and again on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025;
- > Two online public surveys, one in Summer 2024 and another in Winter 2025, which collectively garnered approximately 70 individual responses;
- > Input from peer municipalities, including a meeting with the Township of Pelham in December 2024;
- > A dedicated project webpage hosted on “Your Durham”, the Region’s online engagement platform; and
- > An in-person tour of local diversified farm businesses and discussions with business owners and operators on July 17, 2024.

\* Presentations to each of the three Township Councils, and a final presentation to the Durham Region Community Growth and Economic Development Committee will be given by the Project Team prior to Study conclusion.

## 2.4 Project Webpage

A dedicated project webpage was created on the “Your Durham” engagement platform upon Study initiation. The project webpage was used as a central resource to share important information and updates with the broader community, including general study information,

contact information, meeting notices, background resources, draft documents, and survey dissemination, for example. In total, there were over 2,000 webpage visits, 110 document downloads, and nearly 70 survey responses.

## 2.5 Summary of Consultation Themes

The following is a summary of key themes that were observed through consultation with the various audiences. A detailed overview of “what we heard” and how this feedback informed the Final Recommendations is documented in Section 3 of this Report.



There was broad consensus that it should be easier for farmers and business owners to diversify and grow their businesses. A key aspect of this was interest in a clearer land use planning framework to enable diversified farm businesses, and a consistent framework across the Townships.



Many participants noted their understanding for due process to ensure that good outcomes were achieved, principally that new or expanded diversified farm businesses were appropriate and desirable within the agricultural area. While support for due process was noted, there was also support for a streamlined process that minimizes the number of barriers and reduces the level of effort, both for business owners and Township staff.



There was strong preference to recommend a land use planning framework that is coherent and understandable for everyone, with clear direction on land use permissions and associated criteria for starting or growing a diversified farm business.



Many participants observed the diversity of diversified farm businesses, and how the agricultural community continues to evolve in response to changing economics and market interests. An important observation was that the implementing land use planning framework would also need to offer flexibility over the longer-term as diversified farm businesses continue to adapt and grow.



There are many different interests and perspectives with regards diversified farm businesses, including from farmers, non-farmers, municipal staff, and elected representatives. The recommended land use planning framework needs to balance these varying interests and perspectives, while ensuring good outcomes with regards to the objectives of this Study.

## 3 What We Heard

### 3.1 Overview

This Section provides a more detailed overview of the various feedback and input that was shared by the audiences through the consultation activities. Many different consultation opportunities and mediums were employed through the Study; the themes documented in this Section represent the aggregate of various inputs and are organized based on the audiences identified in Section 2.

### 3.2 Townships

The following themes were identified by the Townships:

#### 1. Updated Land Use Planning Framework

- > **What We Heard:** The Townships local land use planning documents, including official plans and zoning by-laws, do not reflect current provincial policy and guidelines for on-farm diversified uses or agriculture-related uses. This includes, for example, the Provincial Planning Statement, 2024 and the Guidelines to Permitted Uses in Ontario's Prime Agricultural Areas. Updating the Township's land use planning framework to align with provincial policy and guidelines would better enable diversified farm businesses within the Townships and ensure these documents are more aligned with the intent of provincial land use planning framework.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Project Team worked closely with the Townships and representatives from the Ministry to ensure that, at a minimum, the Final Recommendations were aligned with provincial policy and direction. For example, the definitions for "agriculture-related uses" and "on-farm diversified uses" and associated criteria from the Provincial Planning Statement, 2024, as well as the Guidelines, were included in the Final Recommendations. Overall, the Final Recommendations are broadly aligned with provincial direction and guidelines, and in some ways, are more flexible. This ensures that the interpretation of the provincial framework, and subsequent implementation of the Final Recommendations, is consistent with provincial direction.

#### 2. Clear Land Use Planning Framework

- > **What We Heard:** In the absence of a land use planning framework that is aligned with provincial policy and guidelines, the Townships expressed that it was challenging to implement a clear and consistent approach to enable diversified farm businesses. For example, this includes the absence of definitions for "agriculture-related uses" and "on-farm diversified uses", as well as associated criteria and expectations. This creates heightened administrative effort for staff, as well as uncertainty for farmers and business owners or operators who are interested in starting or growing a diversified farm business.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Project Team, in close consultation with the Townships, have developed a thoughtful approach to ensure the Final Recommendations contemplate a clearer framework for enabling diversified farm

businesses, including through the official plan and zoning by-law, as well as alternatives to the current Site Plan Control process such as Minor Site Plan Control or being exempt from Site Plan Control altogether. across the Townships to facilitate equitable opportunity to farmers and business owners or operators regarding diversified farm businesses.

### 3. Support Diversified Farm Businesses

- > **What We Heard:** The Townships expressed a strong intent to better support farmers and business owners or operators who are interested in diversified farm businesses. In the absence of an updated and clear land use planning framework, it is challenging for the Townships to fully support farmers and business owners or operators in this regard.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Final Recommendations were developed to align with provincial policy and guidelines, as well as best practice from other municipalities in Ontario, but were also developed through a lens of economic development. For example, the Final Recommendations include direction for a more permissive policy and streamlined process, such as being exempt from Site Plan Control, as well as the Application Toolkit, which is intended to function as a resource for applicants and the Townships. Working closely with the Townships, the Project Team explored many different opportunities to ensure that the land use planning framework and associated processes are transparent, clear, and understandable for everyone.

### 4. Managing Land Use Compatibility

- > **What We Heard:** A key consideration of provincial policy and guidelines regarding agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses is to ensure that these uses are compatible with, and do not hinder, the continued viability of the surrounding agricultural system. The Townships expressed that there were risks associated with certain types of agriculture-related uses or on-farm diversified uses, or the scale or intensity of these uses, and their potential adverse impact to the surrounding agricultural system.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Project Team worked closely with the Townships to recommend a framework that would mitigate potential land use conflicts between adjacent or nearby land uses. For example, particular consideration was given to ensuring that stormwater runoff could be managed and not result in runoff to adjacent properties. As another example, careful consideration was also given to ensure that uses do not adversely impact environmentally sensitive areas, or that uses with larger scales or intensities are not located in close proximity to adjacent neighbours who might experience impacts from the agriculture-related use or on-farm diversified use.

### 5. Specific Land Uses

- > **What We Heard:** Certain types of agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses may warrant heightened review and consideration by the Townships due to the nature and scale of the use itself, and potential adverse impact to the surrounding agricultural area. For example, this may be due to demands that would be placed on water and septic systems, traffic, the natural environment, emergency services, or noise, dust, and/or vibration, amongst others.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** Working closely with farmers, business owners, and the broader community, the Project Team and the Townships



carefully considered specific land uses that have the potential to result in undesirable impacts to agricultural areas. Through the Final Recommendations, various mitigation measures and processes are proposed, including but not limited to, the ability for the Townships to request more detailed information from applicant as well as consulting relevant authorities or agencies (e.g., public health), and establishing an appropriate scale and intensity that is compatible with the agricultural area by recognizing the criteria established by the Province. This is intended to be assessed through the Pre-Application Process, which facilitates preliminary discussion between an applicant, the Region, and Townships, or if needed, through the Site Plan Control process itself, where the Townships may request more detailed information.

### 3.3 Agricultural Community

The following themes were identified by the agricultural community:

#### 1. Consistent Land Use Planning Framework

- > **What We Heard:** The agricultural community emphasized the importance of having consistent policies, regulations, and processes for enabling agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses across the Townships. This consistency would support more streamlined processes and outcomes and mitigate potential barriers such as time and resources.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Final Recommendations have been developed collaboratively with the North Durham Townships with the intent to be applied consistently across the Townships once implemented. Due to local land use planning processes, there be some variation in how the local land use planning tools are updated to align with the Final Recommendations, but it is expected that their overall intent would be maintained.

#### 2. Support for Diversified Farm Businesses

- > **What We Heard:** There was broad support for enabling a greater range and type of agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses across the Townships. The agricultural community expressed that expanding land use permissions, and ensuring that a clear, transparent, and flexible framework would better support farmers and provide more opportunities for diversified businesses to thrive and grow.
- > **How This Informed the Recommendations:** The Project Team worked closely with the Townships to propose a framework that aligns with provincial policy and guidelines but is appropriately flexible and transparent to the ultimate benefit of the agricultural community. For example, this includes recognizing the provincial definitions of “agriculture-related uses” and “on-farm diversified uses” to equip the Townships with flexibility when assessing applications, recognizing the growing range and evolving nature of diversified farm businesses within the Region. Additional processes and tools, such as the Pre-Application meeting and the Application Toolkit, are also proposed to support a more streamlined and barrier-free framework. A Planner Toolkit is also being developed to help the planners be better equipped to support applications.

#### 3. Unfamiliar Process and Risk

- > **What We Heard:** Feedback was provided that the process for obtaining necessary land use planning approvals for diversified farm businesses was unclear, or that there is uncertainty about the process timelines and outcome. Ultimately, this is sometimes viewed as a risk as well as a significant barrier for farmers, businesses owners or operators that are interested in starting or growing a diversified farm business. Overall, it was shared that a more simplified, transparent, and clear framework and process would encourage growth of diversified farm businesses within the Region.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Final Recommendations were developed with the intent to be clear and understandable to a broad audience and are supported by supplementary documents to assist both the Townships and applicants. For example, this includes encouraging agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses being exempt from Site Plan Control, meaning that applicants may proceed directly to applying for a building permit under certain circumstances. Another example is the Application Toolkit, which includes supporting resources, contacts, and information regarding the process, such as a step-by-step by step guide and questionnaire.

#### 4. Interpretation of the Land Use Planning Framework

- > **What We Heard:** There was some concern regarding interpretation of the Final Recommendations and how they will ultimately be implemented and administered. This was principally based on an acknowledgement that the Townships have the authority and discretion to separately interpret the land use planning framework, which may result in some variation in how the Final Recommendations are implemented.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Final Recommendations were developed collaboratively between the Region and the Townships, with the intent that this would result in a shared understanding and support for the updated land use planning framework. It is understood that this will contribute to a more equitable outcome regarding implementation and process across the Townships. An important component of the Final Recommendations also includes continued collaboration between the Townships and Region on an ongoing basis to receive, review, and coordinate applications for diversified farm businesses, which will contribute to a shared approach and understanding amongst the Townships, contributing to more equitable outcomes.

#### 5. Municipal Fees

- > **What We Heard:** Many members of the agricultural community indicated that municipal fees associated with development, including applications, permitting, and development charges, can represent a significant financial barrier.
- > **How This Informed the Study:** Municipalities are afforded the ability to establish fees for different types of development applications and permitting, and it is recognized that this may vary between the Townships. These fees are determined through a separate process, and it was not within the scope of this Study to make recommendations in this regard. However, the Townships are aware of this feedback and future opportunities to reduce financial barriers may be explored in the future. There are aspects of the Final Recommendations that in part addresses this feedback, including:
  - > Reduced fees for a Minor Site Plan Control application, or no fee at all where an application is exempt from Site Plan Control altogether.

- > A Pre-Application Process, which does not have a fee, but is designed to streamline the process by mitigating heightened costs that might otherwise be incurred by an applicant through the process.
- > Permitted agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses “as-of-right” and not requiring an amendment to the official plan and zoning by-law, which would otherwise be subject to a municipal fee and require additional resources from an applicant.
- > The Final Recommendations also propose that provided certain criteria are met, an application may be exempt from Site Plan Control or subject to Minor Site Plan Control. In both scenarios, it is the intent that there would be a reduced need to retain professional consultants because the type of information being requested may be less formal.

## 6. Viability of Diversified Farm Businesses

- > **What We Heard:** The agricultural community expressed that an updated land use planning framework must establish regulations that would not unduly restrict the economic viability of diversified farm businesses. In other words, regulations that are too restrictive could limit the scale or intensity of certain uses to the extent that they are no longer financially feasible, and therefore not function to further support the long-term economic viability of farm operations.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Project Team worked closely and listened carefully to the agricultural community, and in particular to diversified farm business owners and operators, to recommend regulations that align with provincial policy and guidelines but are tailored to ensure they do not undermine economic viability. For example, this includes permitting agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified use as-of-right, generous maximum areas for agriculture-related uses, maximum areas for on-farm diversified uses that are aligned with the Guidelines, and enabling the scale of on-farm accommodations and event venues that contribute to their financial viability.

## 6. Partner with the Agricultural Community

- > **What We Heard:** The agricultural community greatly contributes to the economic prosperity of the Region and beyond, while also supporting broader community wellbeing. They are important partners in community building and economic development and require continued support and partnership to ensure that agriculture remains viable over the long-term.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** Agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses function to contribute to the overall economic viability of the agricultural community. Recognizing this, the Project Team worked closely with the agricultural community to understand their interests and perspectives and reflect their input through the Final Recommendations. Examples of this include supporting a clearer, streamlined process for enabling agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses, permissive regulations that contribute to these uses being economically viable over the long-term, and a process that encourages a collaborative and transparent approach between the Region, Townships, and applicants.

## 3.4 Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Agribusiness

The following themes were shared by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Agribusiness:

### 1. Align with Provincial Direction

- > **What We Heard:** Representatives from the Ministry broadly encouraged, and supported, the Project Team to align the Final Recommendations with provincial policy and the Guidelines. It was also encouraged to tailor the Final Recommendations to ensure they were responsive to the local context, including local priorities, while aligning with provincial direction.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Project Team consulted regularly with representatives from the Ministry regarding the Final Recommendations, as well as worked closely with the Townships, to ensure they are aligned with provincial direction. Careful consideration was also given to ensure the Final Recommendations were responsive to local priorities, challenges, and opportunities, as shared by the agricultural community. Ultimately, the Final Recommendations are intended to establish a balanced approach in this regard.

### 2. Peer Municipal Practice

- > **What We Heard:** Many municipalities in Ontario are prioritizing better enabling diversified farm businesses and supporting the agricultural community. The Ministry has a province-wide perspective and depth of knowledge regarding what other municipalities are undertaking or have completed with regards to updated land use planning frameworks to better enable agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** Representatives from the Ministry were regularly consulted and shared relevant municipal practice and experience with the Project Team. This included providing resources such as official plan and zoning by-law examples to inform an approach for the recommended land use planning framework.

## 3.5 Durham Community

The following themes were shared by the broader community:

### Celebrating the Agricultural Community

- > **What We Heard:** Community members noted their appreciation and respect for the agricultural community, and the important way in which agriculture contributes to a complete, healthy, and economically prosperous community. There was general support for the agriculture community to benefit from additional economic opportunity through diversified farm businesses, and an understanding that these uses can be an important way to ensure that farming operations remain viable over the long-term.
- > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Final Recommendations support enabling of agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses and are fundamentally intended to provide additional economic opportunity to the agricultural community. This meaningfully supports the long-term viability of farming operations, and contributes to a complete, healthy, and economically prosperous community.

### Seeking Educational Opportunity and Unique Experiences

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- > **What We Heard:** Agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses can offer unique experiences and education opportunities to the broader community. It was noted that this was particularly valued and appreciated, while meaningfully contributing to a sense of community while offering important opportunities for overall wellbeing and quality of life.
  - > **How This Informed the Final Recommendations:** The Final Recommendations contemplate a broad range of agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses, and support enabling the inherent range of these uses. For example, this includes markets, farm-to-table restaurants, on-farm accommodations, and event venues, among others. The Final Recommendations also ensure that the scale and intensity of these uses are economically viable, while not hindering or otherwise adversely impacting the surrounding agricultural area. This approach meaningfully contributes to enabling a diverse range of unique and educational experiences and opportunity, while also supporting agriculture and fostering a sense of appreciation for the broader agricultural community.



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## 4 Conclusion

This Study was informed by a broad audience, each of whom offered a unique but important perspective and interest. This Report has documented who these audiences are, how and when they were consulted, certain consultation metrics, and a summary of key consultation themes that emerged through these various activities. Importantly, this Report also documents themes that emerged through consultation with each of the different audiences and indicates how that input informed the Final Recommendations.

This Study was undertaken with a spirit of collaboration and good intent to better support the agricultural community and develop a framework that would meaningfully contribute to the long-term viability of the agricultural system. The findings of this Report and the information presented herein demonstrates the Project Team's commitment to a process that was undertaken in the interest of trust, transparency, and collaboration. It is with this spirit that diversified farm businesses within the Region will continue to grow, thrive, adapt, and fundamentally contribute to the overall well-being of our community.