

5-Year Impact Report and 2024 Annual Report

Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario



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Dear Members and Friends,

What a journey the past five years have been. As we wrap up EFAO's 5-Year Strategic Plan, this report represents both our 2024 Annual Report and a reflection on everything we've built and learned together from 2020 to 2024.

Looking back, it's clear that our strength lies in community—farmers helping farmers, knowledge shared in fields and over fence lines, and a shared belief that ecological farming is a powerful force for change. With this report, we've tried to capture not just the numbers, but the stories and relationships that have helped shape our work.

We asked big questions: Are farmers feeling more confident and capable in ecological practices? Have new techniques made a real difference in their fields and bottom lines? Are we building a community that's truly inclusive, where everyone feels they belong?

There's a lot to be proud of. We've more than doubled our membership—from 527 to 1,062. EFAO's annual conference, heading into its 12th year, continues to be a highlight of the year for many members and growers across the province.

The Farmer-led Research Program has supported 163 research trials, proving again and again that farmers are some of the best scientists out there. We've worked with growers to save and adapt seeds to our unique climates through the Bauta Family Initiative in Canadian Seed Security. Over 10,000 acres have seen more diversity thanks to the Small Grains Program. We have significantly increased membership, engagement and leadership from equity-deserving groups, and over the past two years have fostered new relationships and collaborations with inspiring Indigenous leaders and organizations.

Through it all, our focus has stayed the same: build real relationships, support each other, and share knowledge that keeps farmers and farms resilient. We hope this report gives you a sense of how far we've come, and where we're going. Thank you—to every farmer, member, supporter, partner, and funder—for believing in this work and being part of it.

With gratitude and solidarity,



Ali English
Executive Director



Katrina McQuail
Board President



About



Established in 1979 by farmers for farmers, the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario (EFAO) is a membership organization that focuses on farmer-led education, research and community building. EFAO brings farmers together so they can learn from each other and improve the health of their soils, crops, livestock and the environment, to steward resilient ecological farms.

Vision We envision an Ontario where thriving ecological farms are the foundation of our food system, and where agriculture protects our resources, increases biodiversity, mitigates climate change, and cultivates resilient, diverse, equitable communities.

Mission EFAO supports farmers to build resilient ecological farms and grow a strong knowledge sharing community.



Our Team - 2024 Staff

Ali English, Executive Director

Allison Muckle, Northern Outreach, New Farmer Programs
& Operations Director

Angel Beyde, Strategic Partnerships & Eastern Outreach
Director

Cassie Wever, Education Coordinator

Chloe Rodriguez, Communications & Events Coordinator

Heather Newman, Research Coordinator

Jackie Clark, Small Grains Program Manager

Katie Baikie, Education & Policy Director

Laura Northey, Communications & Engagement Director

Martina Schaefer, Administrative & Membership Manager

Rachel Lachance, Northern Events & Outreach Manager

Rebecca Ivanoff, Seed Program Manager

Sarah Larsen, Research & Small Grains Program Director

Sophie Clark, Education & Conference Manager

Taryn Bobiwash, Indigenous Outreach & Engagement
Coordinator



**Thank you to the EFAO staff for
their hard work and dedication.**

Our Team - 2024 Board of Directors

Thank you to the EFAO Board of Directors for their leadership.



**Annette Peltier-
Flamand**



Rav Singh



Sarah Martin-Mills



**Katrina McQuail,
President**



**Melissa Watkins,
Treasurer**



Anan Lololi



**Brent Klassen,
Vice President**



Isabelle Rodé



Denise Miller



**Ricardo Ramirez,
Secretary**

STRATEGIC PLAN

2020-2025

EDUCATION

Events and resources for farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing



Vision We envision an Ontario where thriving ecological farms are the foundation of our food system, and where agriculture protects our resources, increases biodiversity, mitigates climate change, and cultivates resilient, diverse, equitable communities.

Mission

EFAO supports farmers to build resilient ecological farms and grow a strong knowledge sharing community.

OUTREACH

Promoting ecological agriculture in the wider farming community



ACTIVITIES

OUTCOMES

IMPACTS

2025

2x the number of farmers practicing ecological agriculture
2x the number of acres under ecological agriculture

Support EFAO members to run profitable, resilient ecological farms
Scaling deep

Broaden adoption of ecological agriculture among other farmers
Scaling out

Achieve provincial and federal policies that support ecological agriculture
Scaling up

RESEARCH

Farmer-led research as a tool for innovation and adoption



POLICY

Advocating for government policies and programs



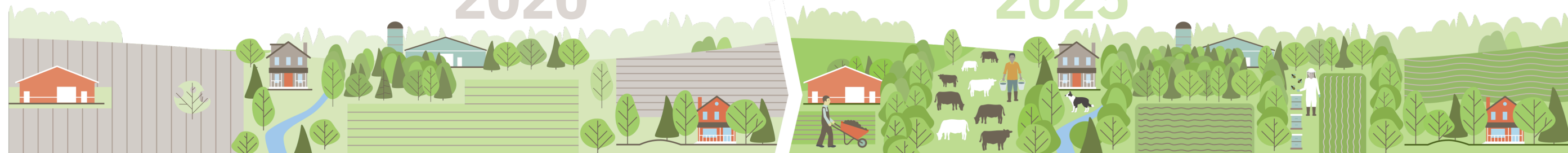
INCENTIVES

Start-up grants for new farmers and payments for ecological practices



2020

2025



KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS

2020-2025

To what extent are we increasing farmer interest in ecological agriculture and enabling farmers to express their interests and needs?

To what extent are we enabling farmers to engage in EFAO programs and activities?

To what extent are we enabling farmers to have increased confidence in and knowledge of ecological agriculture?

To what extent do farmers adopt or adapt ecological practices and technologies?

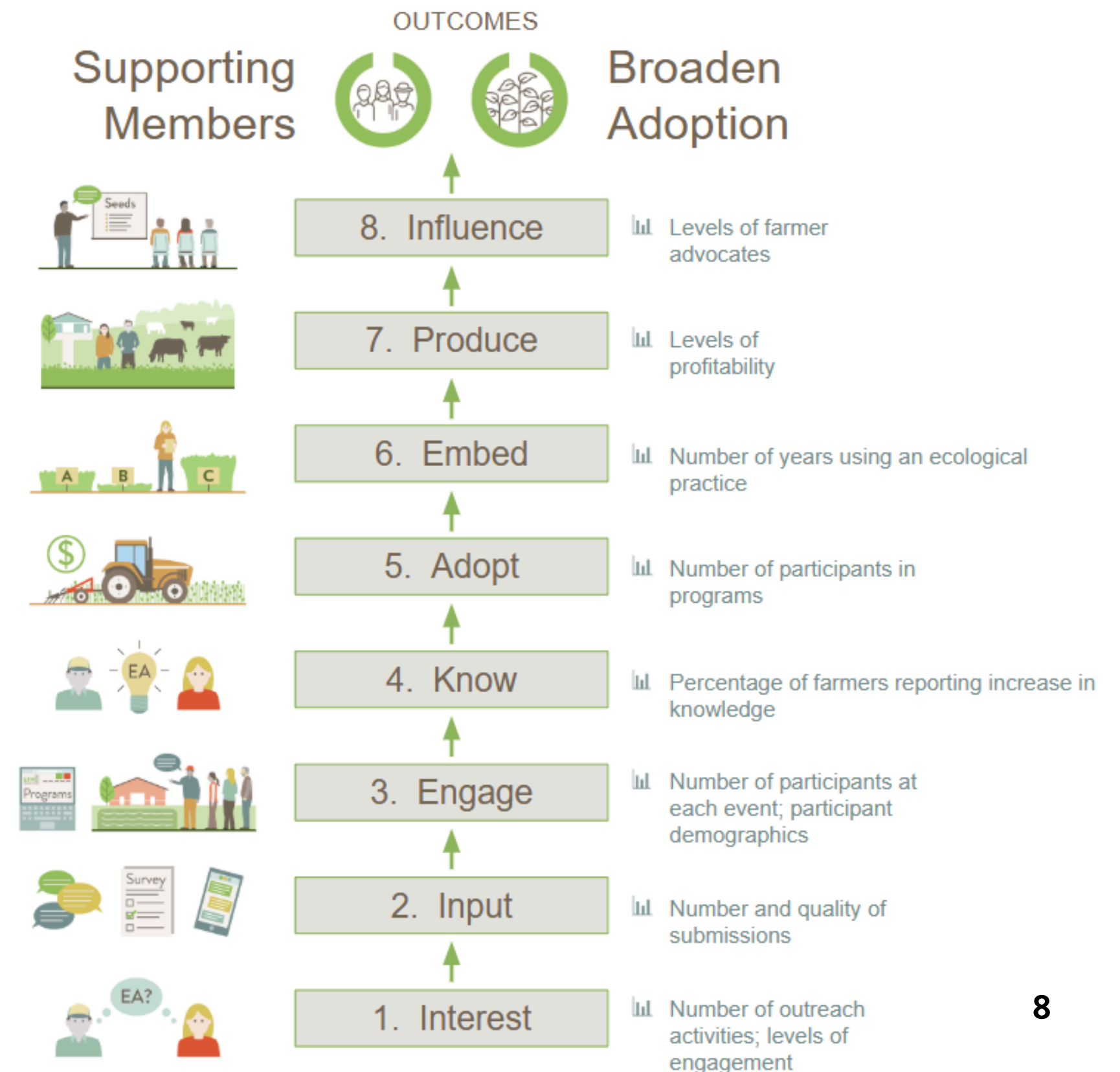
To what extent do farmers embed ecological practices and technologies?

To what extent do farmers have increased farm resilience, productivity, and financial viability?

To what extent do members influence their peers and networks?

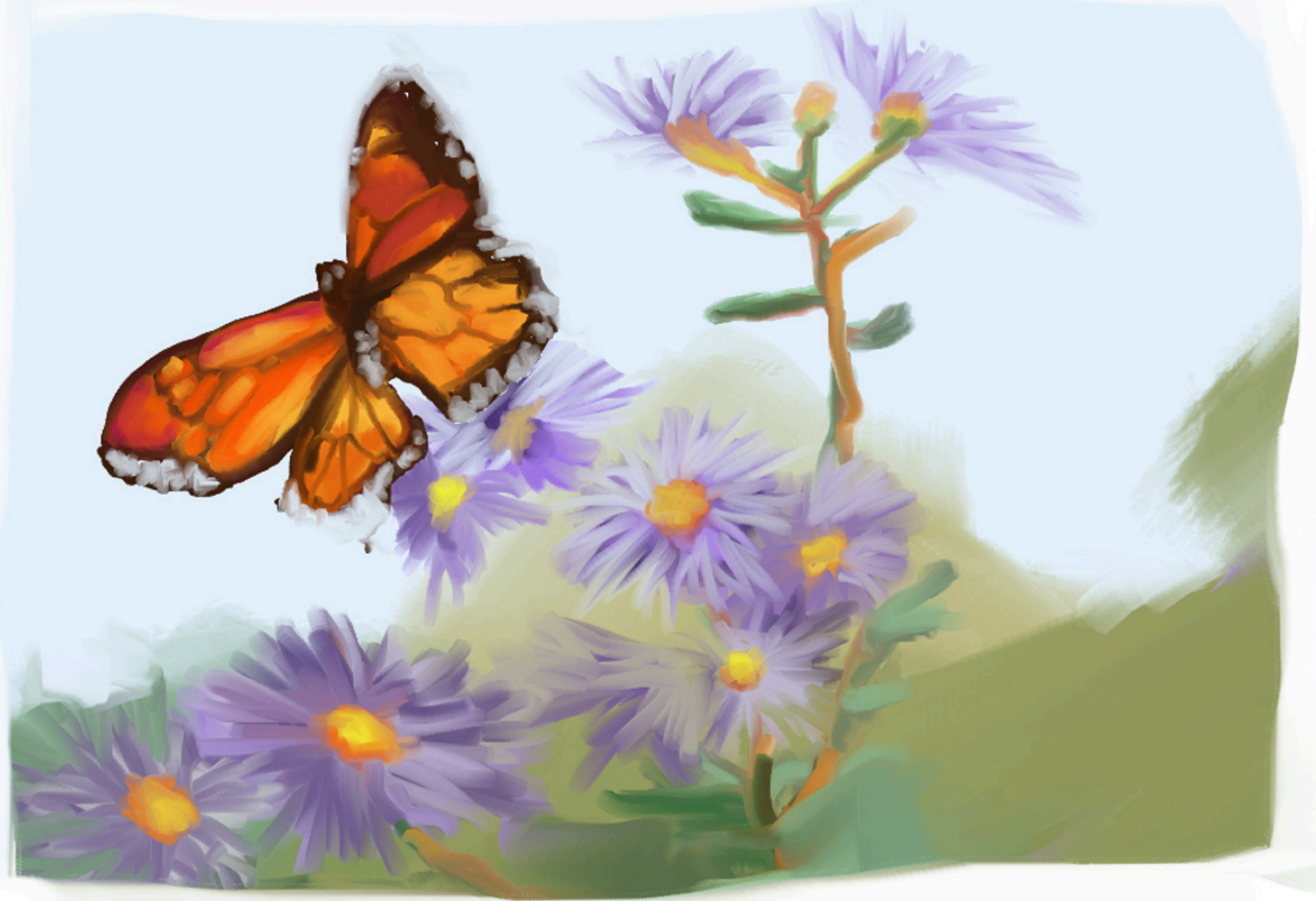
THEORY OF CHANGE

2020-2025



Membership

"EFAO has created such an amazing community of farms new and old, it has been a heart warming privilege to be a part of this community."



Membership

EFAO's Membership has more than doubled since 2019! This goal was reached four years into our five year strategic plan.

EFAO Members in 2019: **527**



EFAO Members in 2024: **1062**

Number of
members
has doubled!



Membership

EFAO Member Acres in 2019

47,525



EFAO Member Acres in 2024

84,665 +78%

Median Farm Size in 2019

75 Acres

Median Farm Size in 2024

50 Acres

While acres under production by EFAO members increased by 78% over 5 years, median farm size actually decreased. This reflects an increase in small scale and urban growers.

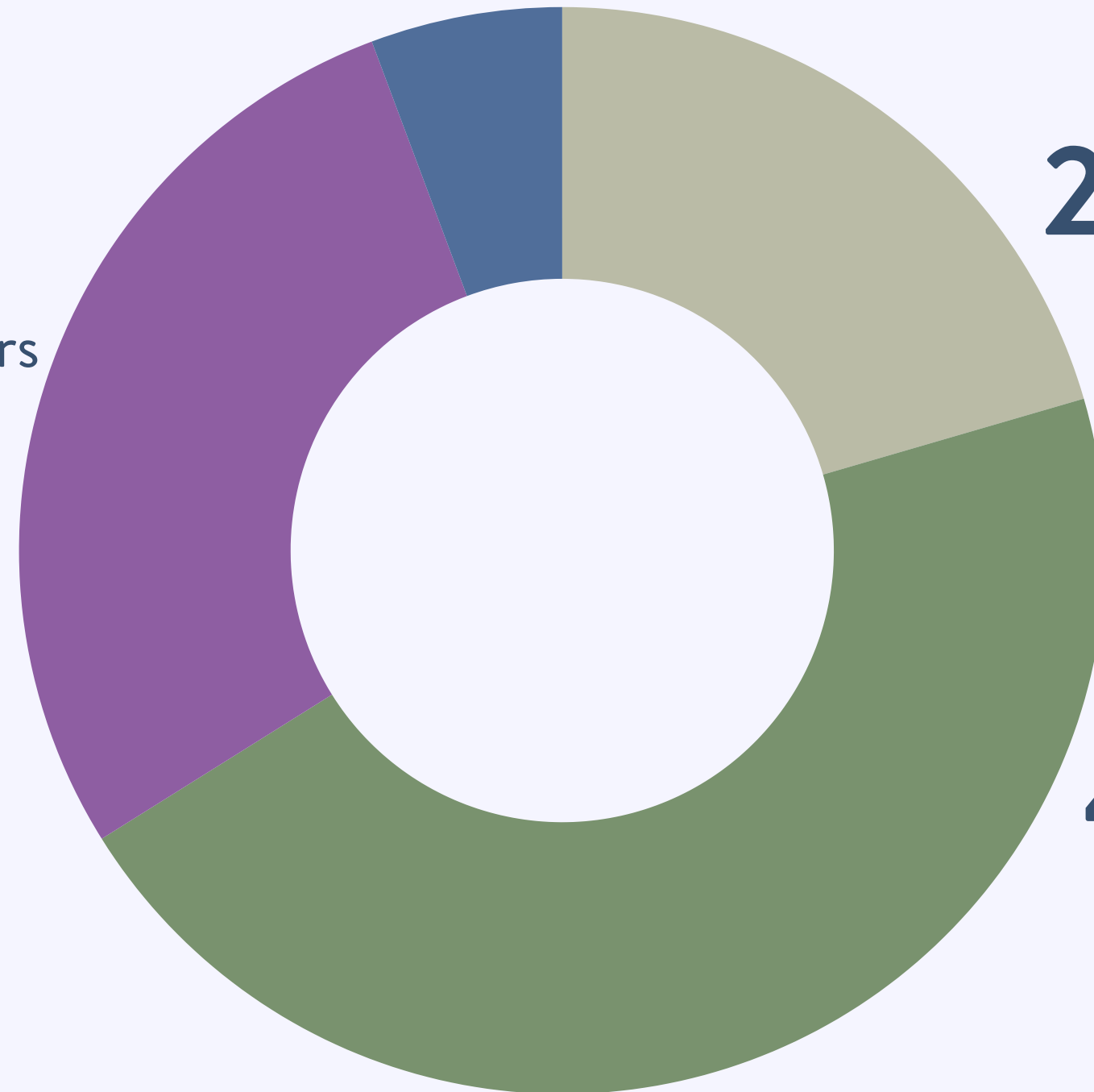
Membership

28% of EFAO farmer members
farm **100 - 500 acres**

6% of EFAO farmer members
farm over **500 acres**

20% of EFAO farmer members
farm **less than 5 acres**

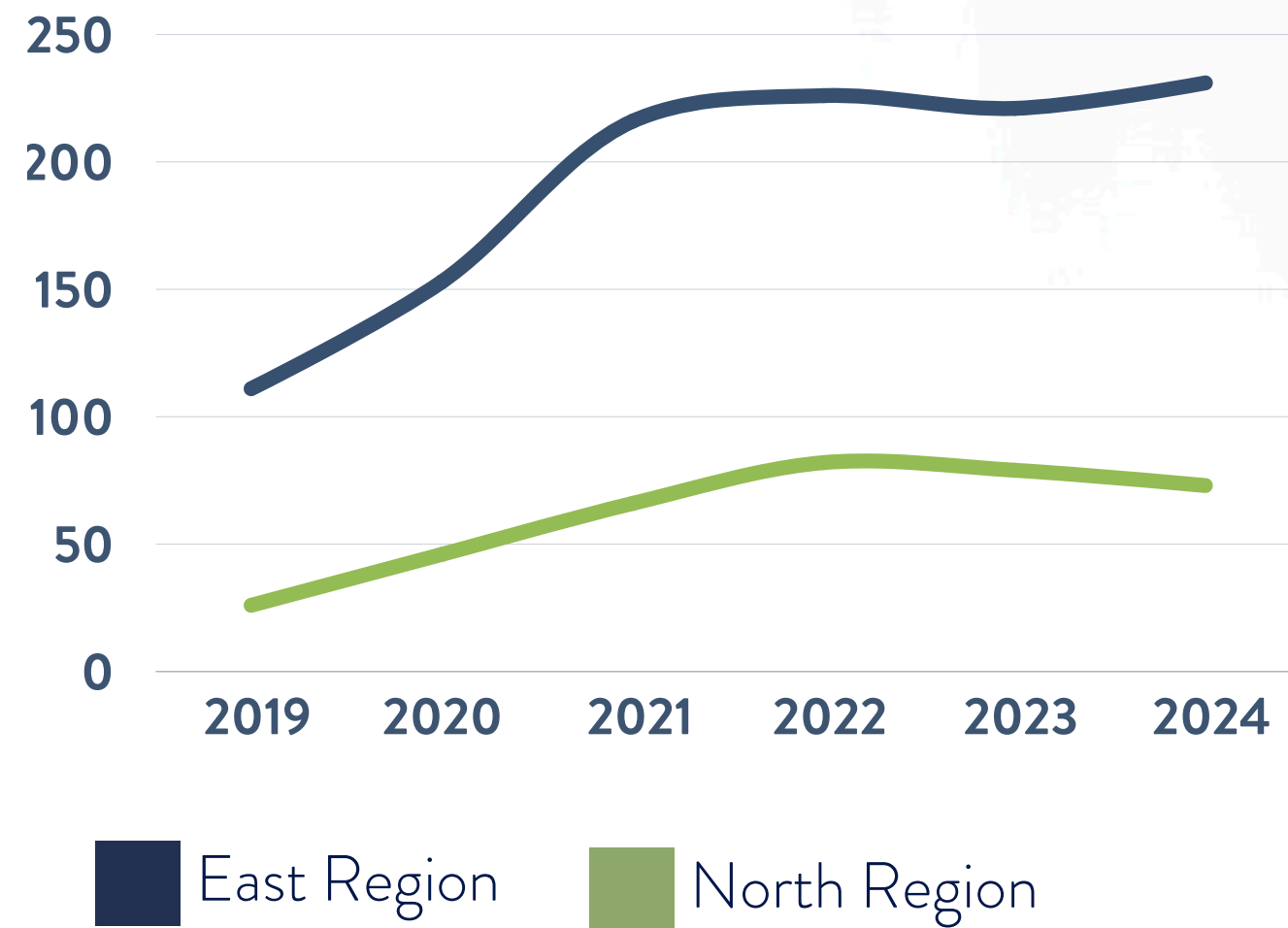
46% of EFAO farmer members
farm **5 - 100 acres**



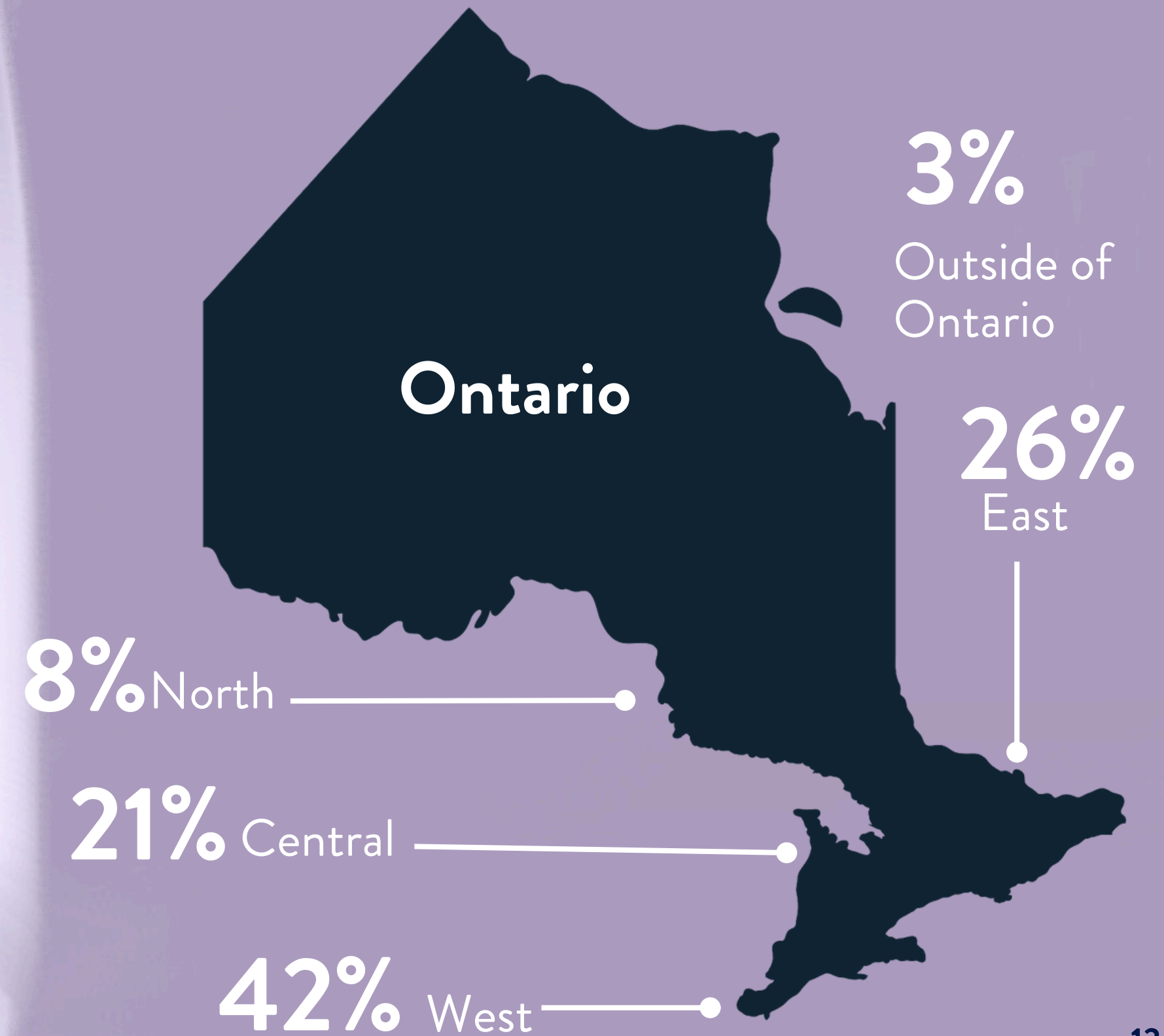
Almost half of EFAO farmer members farm 5-100 acres. At 20%, a significant portion of members farm on less than 5 acres.

Membership

Regional distribution in 2024



The largest proportion of EFAO members live in the southwest, but membership elsewhere in Ontario continues to grow. Membership in northern and eastern Ontario has more than doubled!



Membership

EFAO Membership vs Ontario Farm Census Data

	EFAO Members (2024)	Ontario Farm Operators (2021 Census)
Under 35 years old	17%	8.4%
Women	50%	31%
Black, Indigenous or people of colour	18%	4.1%* *Canada-wide
Average farm acreage	130	249

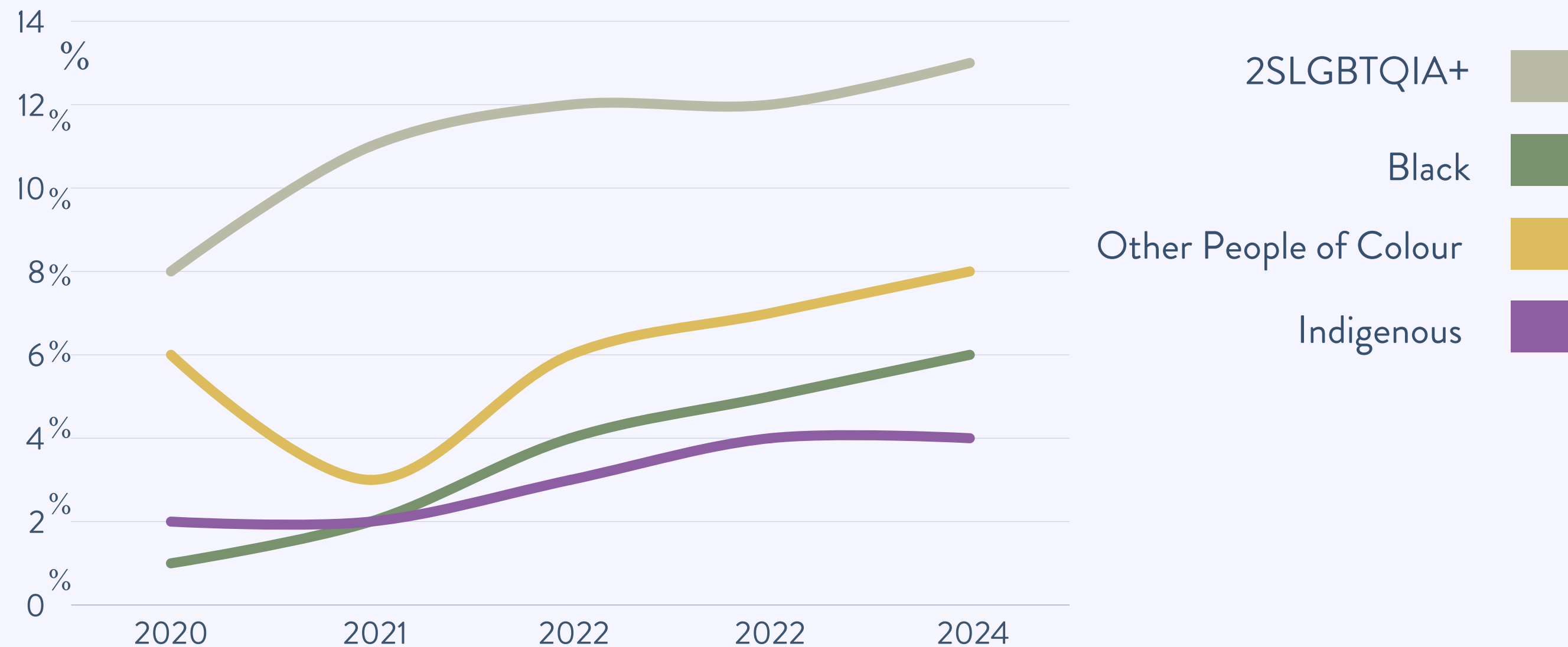
Compared to 2021 census data, EFAO has a higher representation of young farmers, of farmers who are women, and of farmers who are Black, Indigenous or other people of colour.

EFAO's average farm size is nearly half that of the average Ontario farm.



Membership

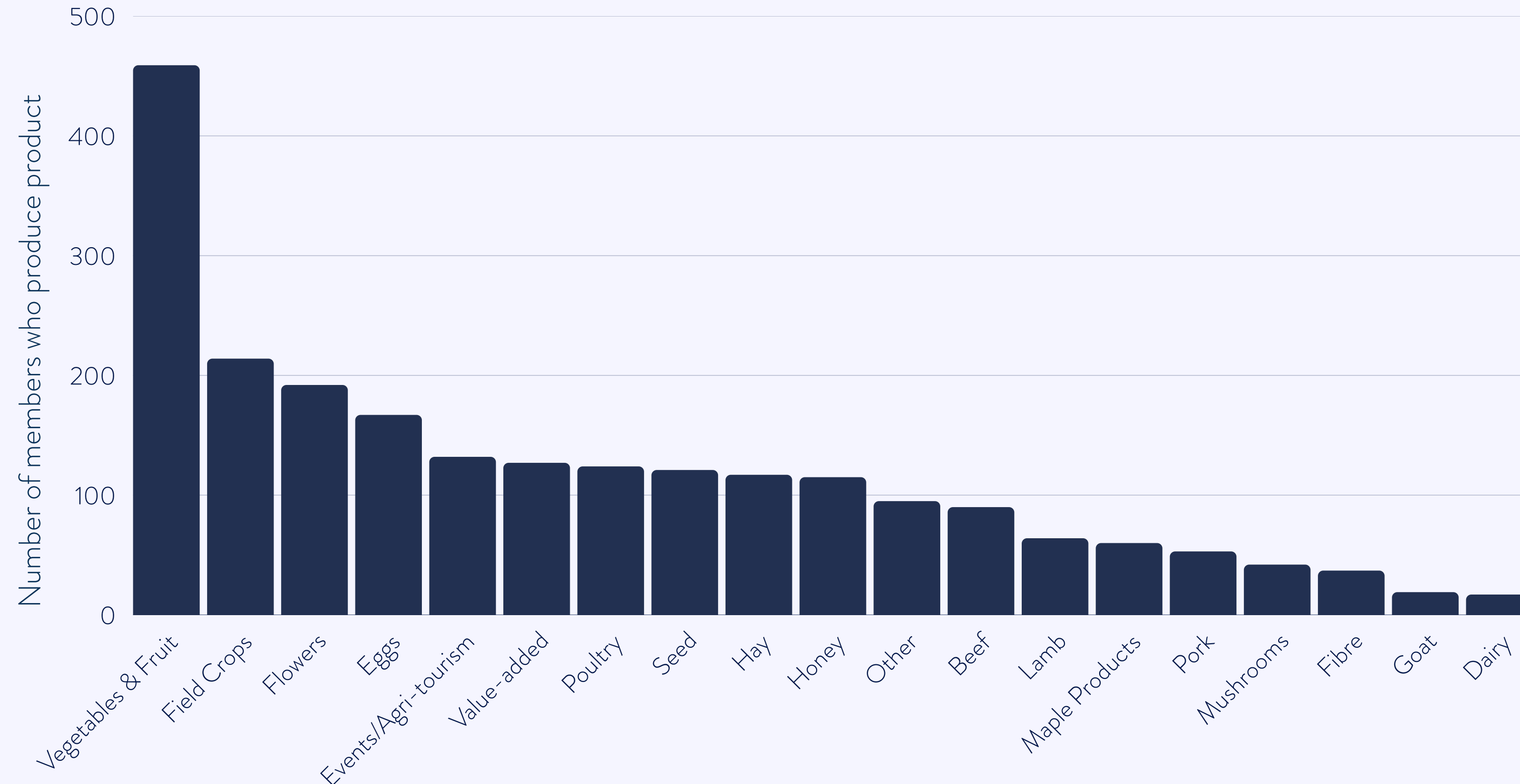
In 2024, **128** members indicated they are Black, Indigenous or other people of colour. This number has increased from **23** members in 2020!



Membership

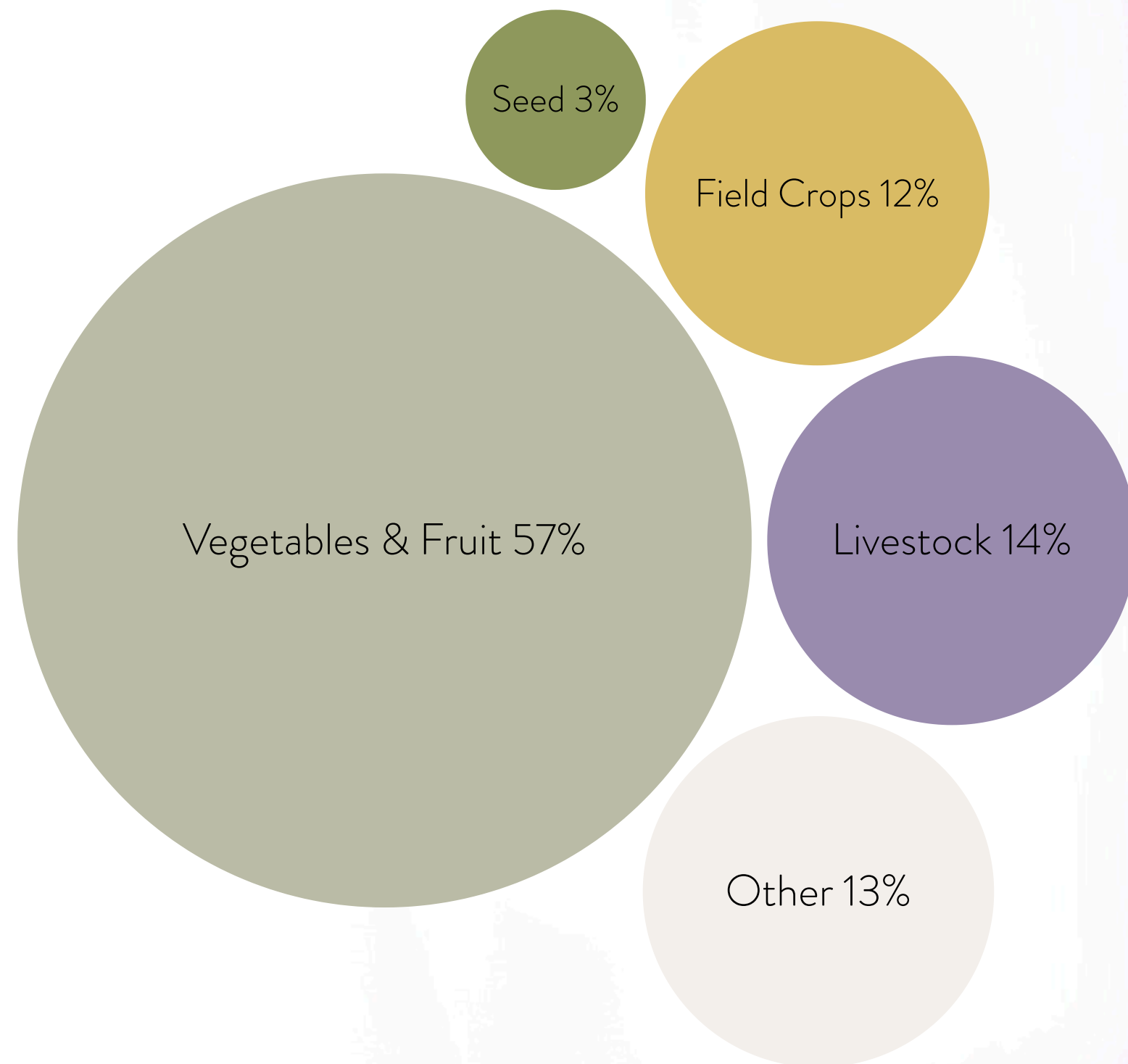
All Farm Products (2024)

EFAO members grow a wide variety of products!



Membership

Main Category of Production (2024)



Vegetables and fruit are the most popular type of production among EFAO members, but many products are well represented within member farms, including livestock, field crops, seeds, and cut flowers.



Membership

Member Surveys: Farm Financial Viability

Over the past year, your farm's financial viability has:	2021	2022	2024
Increased	41%	33%	38%
Stayed Roughly the same	44%	44%	37%
Decreased	8%	13%	22%
Unsure	7%	10%	3%

Supporting farm financial viability will be a priority in EFAO's next Strategic Plan



EFAO has conducted 3 member surveys in the past 5 years. Over time, fewer members have reported an increase in farm financial viability, and the number of members reporting a decrease has doubled.

Membership

2024 Member Survey: Member Engagement

"EFAO supports farmers who are passionate about improving soil health, enhancing biodiversity, and using sustainable farming techniques. As members, we have access to a network of like-minded farmers, educational resources, and community support, which helps us continuously improve our organic and sustainable practices."



20%

of members had engaged in a farmer-led research trial, seed variety trial, seed mentorship program, or the small grains payment program

77%

of members participated in 1-3 EFAO events over the past year

Membership

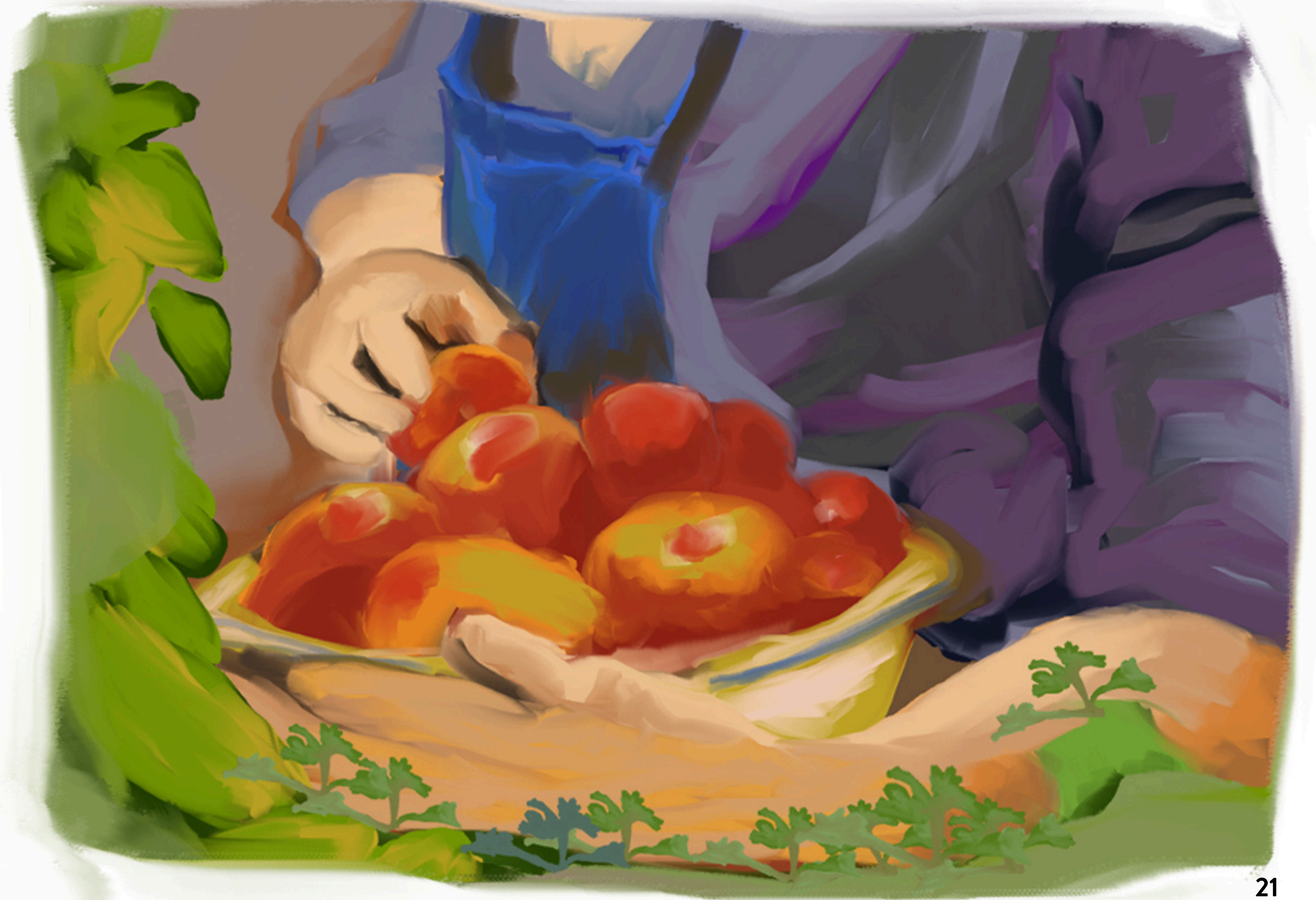
Supporting Members

"EFAO helps our "conventional" farming family to be curious about the possibilities of the future of farming in Ontario and Canada. It provides opportunities and insights into the potential of our farm's future. It helps us imagine and re-imagine what farming can look like especially in the "traditional" setting we are in as a family farm, looking at 2nd and 3rd generation farm stewardship. We appreciate having exposure to the various resources of knowledge and experience that EFAO membership offers."



Education, Outreach & Community

"I continue to learn more about ecological farming techniques through EFAO and it is always encouraging to be connected to others who prioritize farming in an ecological way."



Education, Outreach & Community

Farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing has been at the heart of EFAO's work for over 45 years and is woven into all areas of the organization's work. We love nothing more than creating opportunities to gather - whether online or in-person, on-farm or off-farm - where connections are made and learning opportunities are endless.

45+

years of field days,
workshops, webinars &
meet-ups



Education, Outreach & Community

Participants gather for a photo at Vintage Soil Farm.

Checking out grain at the Hulless Oat Huddle at Springfield Farm.



Participants gather at Carrick Seeds for a farm tour.



Orchard Hill Living Labs field day.

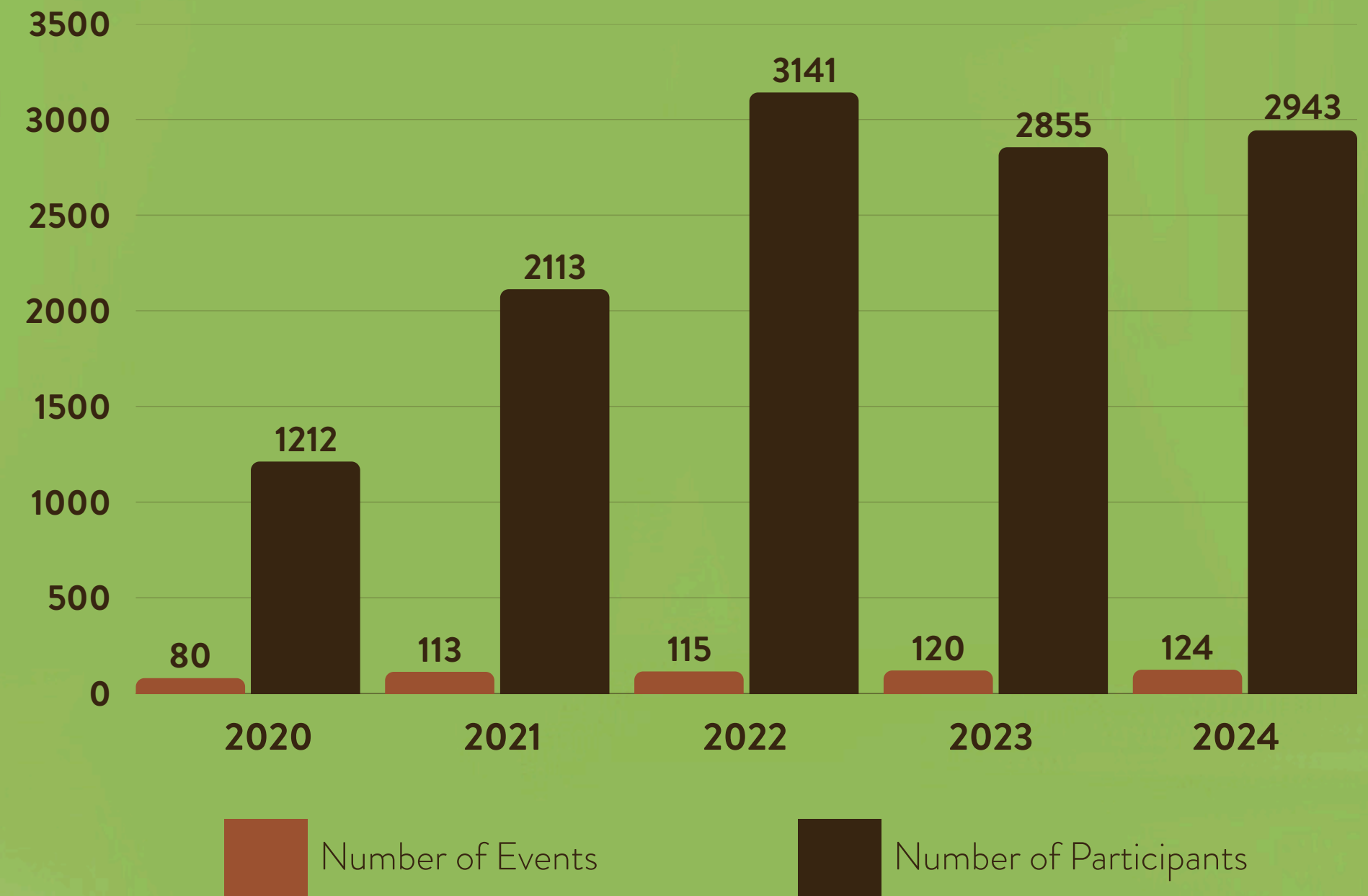


Farmers, gardeners and plant breeders gather at the Demonstration Gardens hosted by Fertile Ground Farm in St Agatha.



Anna and Patrick of Dream Small Farm chat with farm tour participants.

Education, Outreach & Community



Education, Outreach & Community

32%

of event speakers (2024) were Black, Indigenous or other people of colour (17% in 2023).

16%

of event participants (2024) were Black, Indigenous or other people of colour (12% in 2023).

39

bursaries to event participants and 35 conference participants (2024)



Education, Outreach & Community



"I've participated in field days, conference and webinars. The content/topics were well curated, including more advanced topics for experienced growers. I particularly appreciate the support in plant breeding (webinar), variety trials, seed growouts, farmer led research – this work is so valuable to the farmer ecosystem and support to coordinate research between farms to yield better data, share results etc. is precious now and for generations to come. Thank you!

Also, I think farmers just benefit so much from opportunities to be around other farmers. The sharing of knowledge, especially for in person events. I think you do a great job engaging young as well as more experienced farmers and fostering that community of cooperation."

Education, Outreach & Community

"I continue to learn more about ecological farming techniques through EFAO and it is always encouraging to be connected to others who prioritize farming in an ecological way."



"Learned more about disease management and orchard care to improve our practices for yield and plant health. We're also looking to diversify by expanding to beef or sheep production with which we have no experience but EFAO events have allowed to learn much about."

"I loved learning more about what other farmers were up to and filling in the gaps in my own knowledge. The field day I attended was a great way to meet other people who are passionate about ecological farming and it helped me see our role as part of the greater community of ecological farmers."

Partners & Collaborators

Apitipi Anicinapek Nation Leading Cloud Gardens
Black Food Sovereignty Toronto
Canadian Organic Growers
Everdale
Fair Finance Fund
Farmers for Climate Solutions
Ignatius Farm
Mno Aki Land Trust
National Farmers Union – Ontario
Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association
Ontario Soil Network
Ontario Woodlot Association
Organic Council of Ontario
Regeneration Canada
Seeds of Diversity
The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security

This list represents partners and collaborators in 2024.



EFAO Conference

The vision for the first conference in 2014 remains: in-depth learning, an opportunity to connect with old friends and new acquaintances, the chance to re-energize for the season ahead. And let's not forget about seed swaps, regional variety tastings, singing and dancing, and delicious, ecological, locally-sourced food!



1800

participants have
attended

5

annual
conferences

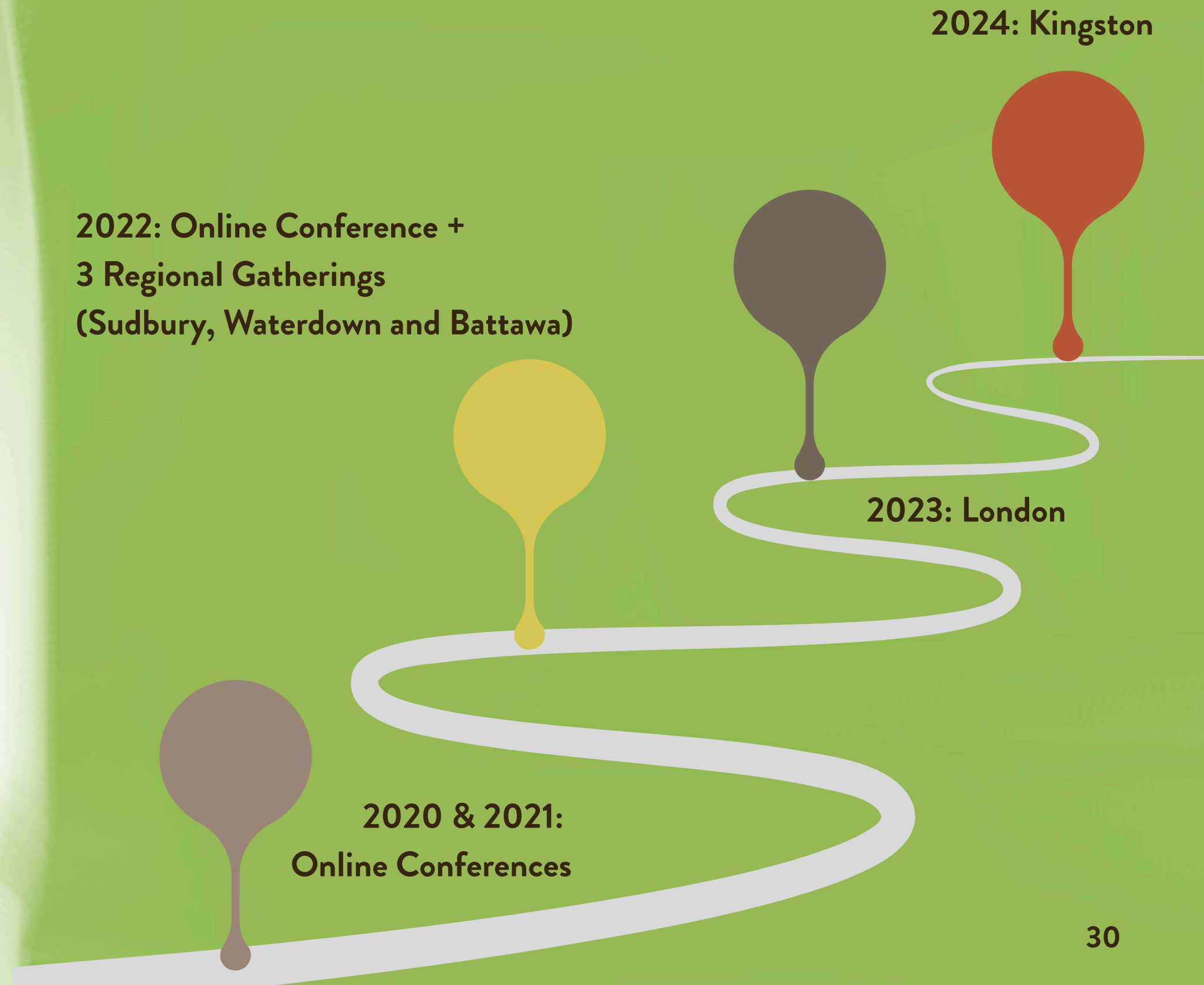
EFAO Conference

300 - 463 participants at each conference

65% of participants were EFAO members

75% report a high to very high change in knowledge (2024)

97% rate the quality as high to very high (2024)



EFAO Conference



"The yearly conference always impacts, inspires and motivates me. This chance to connect with other farmers and friends, and to talk shop is one of my favourite times of the year, and I always come away from it re-energized. I attended my first conference before I even became a farmer, and have continued to attend almost every year since then. It's possible that attending that first conference was the reason I finally made the jump to becoming a farmer."

Education, Outreach & Community

Farmers Network for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour

To connect growers, ranchers, and traditional land stewards, nurture solidarity, and collectively share resources and knowledge, in a warm, welcoming and supportive community.

190

members in the network

30+

meetups held in person and online in the past 5 yrs



"So amazing to be growing, learning and practicing food sovereignty in action with an amazing collective of ecological farmers!"

Advancing Anti-Racism, Equity & Belonging

A learning organization

Over the past 5 years other organizations, foundations and government agencies have reached out to EFAO to learn from our work to better support farmers, growers and land stewards who are Black, Indigenous and other people of colour.

A key priority identified by members of the BIPOC Network, is the urgent need to advocate for programs and policies that reduce the barriers for new farmers to enter and stay in farming.

Barriers new farmers face include access to land, capital, knowledge, and wrap-around supports like mental health, housing and labour. These barriers are increased for farmers facing systemic marginalization.



Communications & Engagement

Between 2020 - 2024:

Enews subscribers have increased by **121%**

2,877 subscribers in 2020

3,477 subscribers in 2024

10,480 copies of Ecological Farming in Ontario were mailed

Social media followers have increased by **139%**
(average across platforms)



Instagram followers increased by **231%**



New Farmer Programs

"Online workshops were a huge benefit to me as a new farmer. Just having access to talks and the insights of other farmers is huge."



New Farmer Programs

Ignatius Farm New Farmer Training Program

This largely online program was developed in 2020 through a collaboration between Ignatius Farm, Everdale, and EFAO. In 2022 the National Farmers Union - Ontario joined as a partner, helping to secure funding that enabled offering the program at no cost to participants.

"Meeting all of the presenters and having them talk about their journeys helps to portray the reality of how much work is needed to establish a successful farm enterprise."

40+

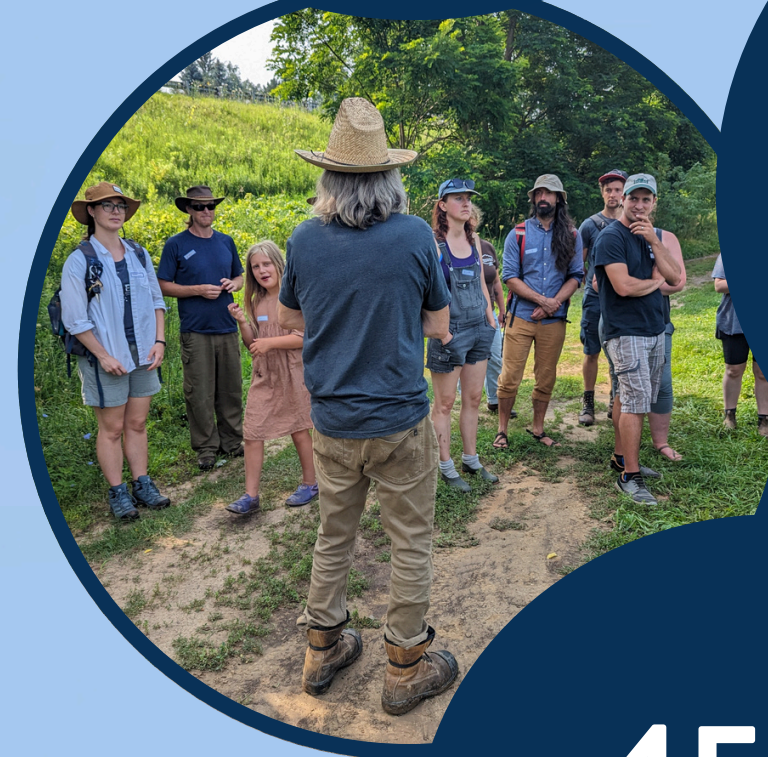
online and in-person field days between April - November each year, from production to business planning.

90%

experienced a moderate to large change in knowledge as a result of the program (2024).

4500

program registrants over 5 years



New Farmer Programs

Online Farm Planning Course

Offered in collaboration by EFAO and Everdale, this 10 week course helped new and aspiring farmers write a detailed plan for their farm. Each week featured a pre-recorded webinar, an online farmer-to-farmer session, worksheets, templates, resource links and farm case studies.

"Gives me the tools to think about farming not only as a lifestyle, but as a business that requires business planning and smarts. You can't just do what you like and hope the money works out – it takes planning!"

182

total participants
2021 - 2024



82%

of participants said the
course helped them write a
plan for their farm

Indigenous Outreach & Engagement



Indigenous Outreach & Engagement

In 2023, EFAO received funding from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food & Agribusiness (OMAFRA) to collaborate with Indigenous communities, groups and organizations on knowledge-sharing events, and to support mentorship and soil testing.

EFAO is proud to work in collaboration with First Nation communities, Indigenous groups and individuals on knowledge-sharing and community-building events that support Indigenous food sovereignty and food security.



Steering Committee

Beginning in 2023, EFAO's Indigenous Outreach & Engagement Steering Committee has been meeting regularly to provide input and advice around the delivery of EFAO's Indigenous outreach work. The goal of the Committee is to facilitate concrete beneficial outcomes for Indigenous food sovereignty, Indigenous-led agriculture, seed stewardship and protection, land empowerment and protection, and to ensure that this work is Indigenous-led.

Members of the committee include:



**Tiffany Traverse,
Secwépemc Nation**



**Denise Miller,
Six Nations of
the Grand River**



**Annette Peltier-Flamand,
Wiikwemkoong
Unceded Territory**



**Becky Big Canoe,
Chippewas of Georgina
Island First Nation**

Indigenous Outreach & Engagement

In 2024...

171

event participants identified as Indigenous (doubled since 2023)

30

members identified as Indigenous (up from 5 in 2020)

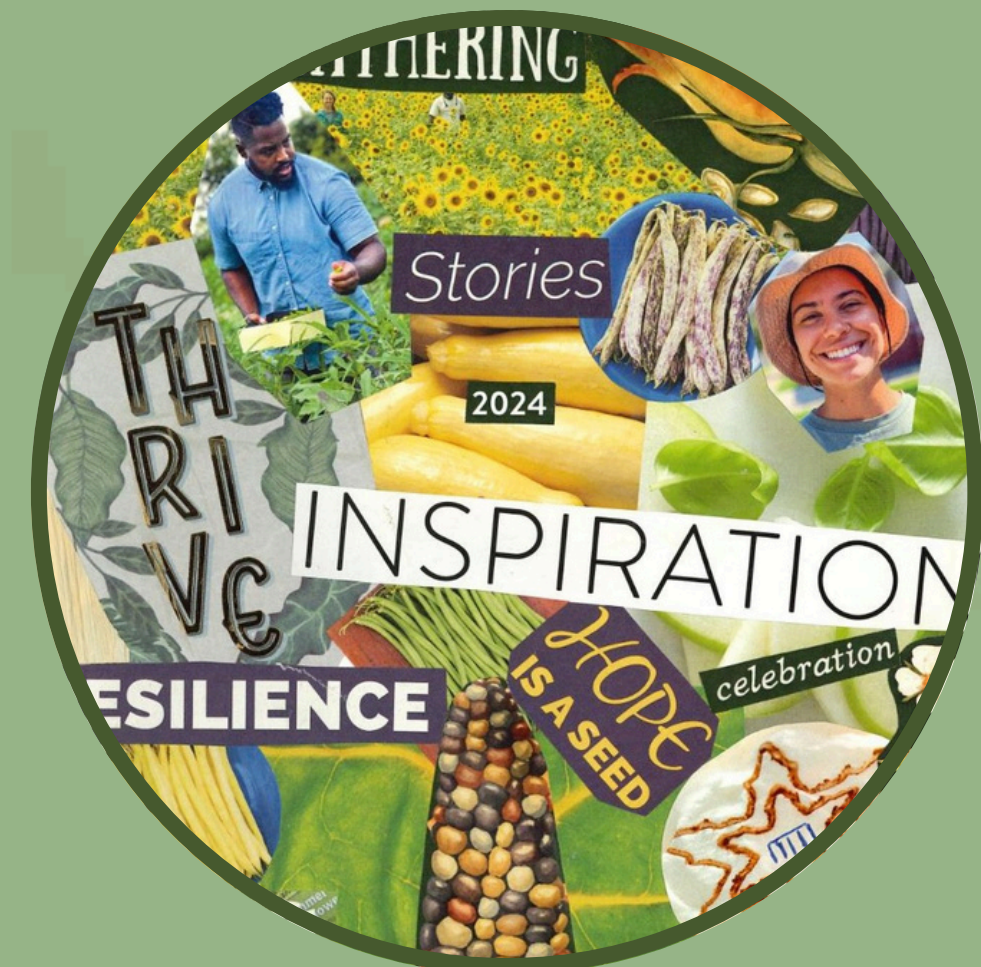
17

event presenters (14%) were Indigenous

\$105,488

of project funding to Indigenous communities and individuals

"EFAO has been freaking amazing in supporting me as an individual first nations woman and as a first nations community gardener. The support, the mentorship, the webinars, the conference – they've all helped shape my vision for food security in the community."



Earth & Sky Indigenous Growers Gathering

"The slow and deliberate way in which this event opened set a tone that has carried beautifully. Skill sharing, immediate actions and knowledge to pass back."

43 of the 93 participants were Indigenous

8 incredible Indigenous presenters

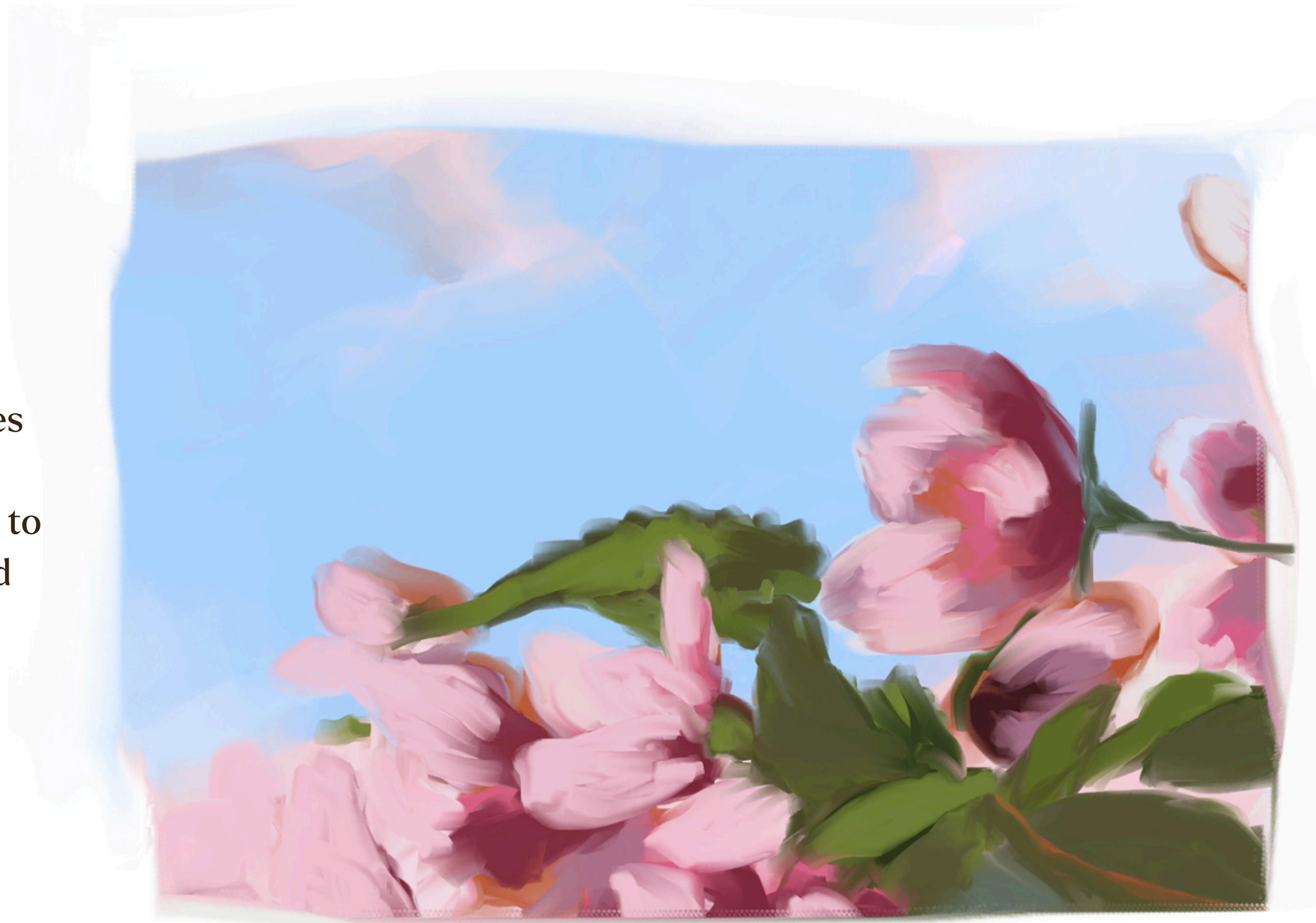
The day included social songs, dancing and collective arts activities, plus an incredible lunch highlighting food from local Indigenous growers.



Research

"My hunches about which varieties would perform better were incorrect. Paying closer attention to the plants during the trial I started to observe which varieties were performing better and the data confirmed those observations."

David Alexander



Farmer-led Research

Between 2020 - 2024:

163 research trials supported, including 14 multi-farm trials

193 members funded

107 unique participants

Visit EFAO's Research Library to read research reports at efao.ca/research-library.



By supporting farmer-led research, EFAO helps farmers combine their curiosity with scientific rigour to answer their most challenging on-farm questions in a way that is compatible with their farm systems and goals.

Farmer-led Research

2020-2024 Research Trials

* indicates multi-farm trials

Alternative livestock feed

- Performance of Chantecler chickens on a reduced protein grower ration

Cover crops

- Plant available nitrogen network 2024 *
- Chicken available nitrogen from cover crops

Disease & pest control

- Grafting methods for stonefruit
- Beetle banks for market gardens
- Efficacy of mycorrhizal inoculants on vegetable transplants
- White fabric and shade cloth for summer lettuce

Pasture regeneration

- Cool vs warm season diverse pasture mixes
- Examining potential soil drivers of alfalfa persistence

Soil health

- No-till potatoes with mulch 2024 *
- Alternative N fertilization for field corn
- No-till potatoes with wood chips and mulches *
- Alternatives to traditional peat moss starter mixes
- Organic soybeans and roller crimped rye
- Reduced tillage for fall brassicas
- Regenerating degraded soil
- Shallow vs deep tillage in raised beds for onion
- Organic tree/woody shrub nutrition
- No-till sunflowers in northern Ontario
- No-till tomatoes
- Soil health and pasture age
- Direct seeding in mulch
- Interplanting cauliflower and onions
- Amendments for rooftop substrate



Visit EFAO's Research Library to read research reports at
efao.ca/research-library



Farmer-led Research

2020-2024 Research Trials


* indicates multi-farm trials

Seed selection, production & breeding

- Watermelon landrace breeding *
- Okra variety trial and breeding for southern Ontario *
- Quinoa screening trial, variety trials, and selection *
- Eggplant trial
- Red carrot variety trial
- Easy to pick bush beans
- Season extension variety trial for northern Ontario *
- No-till potatoes variety trial
- Fava bean variety trial *
- Growing Lablab bean in southern Ontario
- Amaranth variety trial *
- Pepper variety trial *

- Iceberg lettuce variety trial *
- Hulless squash
- Summer green lettuce variety trial *
- Oat variety trial
- Field corn screening trial
- Isolation distance for cut flowers
- Summer lettuce variety trial *
- Fall lettuce variety trial *
- Reduced tillage for fall broccoli continuation
- Cold-tolerant, productive, tasty spinach for northern Ontario
- Southern Ontario Pepper Breeding Project
- Sweet potato variety trial
- Rootstocks for grafted tomatoes for greenhouse production

Weed control

- Spacing for basket willow production
 - Leaves as mulch
 - Seeding/transplant methods for ezleaf type lettuce
 - Beet row spacing
 - Liquid amendments to hasten spring cereals
- 

Visit EFAO's Research Library to read research reports at
efao.ca/research-library

Farmer-led Research

Thank you and congratulations to the farmer-researchers from 2020 to 2024!

Aarathi Edward-Paiva	Dean Orr	Isabelle Spence-Legault	Laurie Ahrens	Phil Mount	Tarrah Young
Aaron Halcovitch	Della Campbell	Janine Stanic	Leslie Moskovits	Rae Denison	Theo Wiederkehr
Adam Kramer	Derick Greenly	Janna van Blyderveen	Lise-Anne Léveillé	Rashel Tremblay	Tony McQuail
Alberto Suarez Esteban	Dianne Kretschmar	Jason Hayes	Luke Sheldrick	Rav Singh	Victor Klassen
Alia Wurdemann-Stam	Dillon Muldoon	Jeff Boesch	Manish Kushwaha	Rebecca Ivanoff	Zack Muma
Andre Houle	Ekow Stone	Jeremy Stojan	Markus Ticknovich	Rebecca Martinez	
Andrea Matrosovs	Eleanor McGrath	Jesse Way	Martina Schaefer	Rick Cornelissen	
Andy Macdonald	Eric Barnhorst	Jessica Tong	Matt Jones	Rob MacKay	
Angie Koch	Erin Richan	Jon Segeren	Matthew Brearley	Rob Read	
Ann Samuels	Evalisa McIlffaterick	Jon Gagnon	Meghan Brandenburg	Roger Rivest	
Ann Slater	Fianna Dirks	Jon Hustis	Michael Oeggerli	Roger Thiessen	
Anne Dockendorff	Gillian Murphy	Jordan Lees	Micheline Lalonde	Romina Bortoluzzi	
Annie Richard	Glen Young	Karlo Bobinac	Michelle Dang	Ronaldo Eleazar Lec Ajcot	
Becky Porlier	Greta Kryger	Kate Garvie	Mike Smith	Ryan Spence	
Brett Israel	Hailey Mayfield	Kathy Rothermel	Mira Melien	Sarah Judd	
Catherine June Wallenburg	Hans Ning	Ken Laing	Nathan Klassen	Sharene Shafie	
Corey Ahrens	Harold Saunders	Kim Delaney	Nikola Barsoum	Shiying Lu	
Dale Hamilton	Heather Newman	Kristine Hammel	Norm Lamothe	Siri van Gruen	
David Alexander	Hilary Moore	Kyle Tonkens	Orlando Lopez	Steph Goodyear	
David Catzel	Ines Lacarne	Larry Dyck	Patti Charbonneau	Tara Ramkhelawan	

Farmer-led Research

On the process of farmer-led research,
2024 participants shared...

95% were satisfied that the trial
addressed their curiosities

79% changed farm practices
as a result

79% listed increased
profitability, viability
and/or resilience as a result

74% were surprised by
their results!



"EFAO's Farmer Led Research Program continues to play an essential role for both knowledge creation and knowledge transfer. I will continue to apply these learnings in the future by staying involved in the FLRP, continuing to listen and learn from others and try to share our own learning when and where possible."

– Jesse Way

Research Stories

Regeneration of fallow fields for vegetable production (2020 - 2022)

Eric compared five methods of preparing fallow land for vegetable production with respect to soil regeneration and cost to implement.



In a nutshell:

- Cover crops with micronutrient amendments increased active carbon, a sensitive indicator of soil health and soil regeneration potential
- Micronutrient amendment alone did not increase active carbon; and Eric saw no added benefit with respect to soil health of adding chicken manure or woody compost with cover crops.
- Balancing cost and soil health benefits, Eric will focus on micronutrient application and full season cover crops in areas that require regeneration.

Read the full report in the [Research Library](#).

Research Stories

Performance of Chantecler chickens on a reduced protein grower ration (2019 - 2020)

Heather compared a standard protein ration with 16% protein to a reduced protein ration with 13% protein to see how her heritage Chantecler chickens responded during the grow-out period.



In a nutshell:

- In 2019, Heather tracked the weight of three cohorts of chickens, taking more than 1,000 weight measurements of individual chickens
- There were no consistent differences in the weight of chickens on the two protein rations throughout the grow-out period
- There was also no detectable effect of reduced protein on finished live weight or dressed weight. Heather is continuing with the reduced protein ration

Read the full report in the [Research Library](#).

Research Stories

Okra Variety Trial for Southern Ontario & Southern Quebec

Led by Rav Singh in 2022 and 2023, this multi-farm, replicated trial aimed to identify the best okra varieties for ecological farms in southern Ontario and southern Quebec. While high variability among sites made it hard to single out “best” or “worst” varieties, Emerald Green stood out for strong germination, yield, and overall grower preference.

Read the full report in the [Research Library](#).

The project was motivated by rising demand for locally grown niche crops like okra in urban centres, and a lack of regional data to support growers. Growers noted the value of multi-year trials to account for climate variability, and the importance of world crops like okra in engaging diverse communities around food and climate issues.



Farmer-led Research

Farmer knowledge as formal knowledge: A case study of farmer-led research in Ontario, Canada (2020 - 2022)

by Dr. Erin Nelson, Dr. Sarah Larsen,
Dillon Muldoon

A published academic paper highlighting the impact of farmer-led research (FLR) for EFAO member-farmers! This report concludes that EFAO's FLR program enables farmers to feel more knowledgeable, confident, motivated, and inspired to adopt and/or improve ecological practices on their farms, in part by supporting them in building robust social networks that align with their farming values and priorities. [Find it on the blog.](#)



Living Lab-Ontario

In 2018, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada launched the Living Labs initiative to accelerate the development and adoption of sustainable practices and technologies by Canadian farmers.

EFAO partnered on two research projects (2020 - 2022):

- Reduced tillage for organic vegetable systems with Ken Laing in Elgin County
- Reduced tillage for organic field crop systems with Brett Israel in Wellington County



Living Lab-Ontario

In 2021, the Agricultural Climate Solutions introduced a 10-year initiative supporting 14 Living Labs across the country to focus on carbon sequestration, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and other environmental co-benefits.

EFAO is supporting three projects (2023 - 2027):

- Collaboration with Leading Cloud Gardens at Apitipi Anicinapek Nation
- Plant available nitrogen from cover crops
- No-till potatoes and squash with mulches



Living Lab Stories

Leading Cloud Gardens is a community-led food sovereignty initiative based in Apitipi Anicinapek Nation, rooted in traditional knowledge and cultural restoration. Their gardens, greenhouse, and food programs aim to grow healthy food, engage youth, and reconnect their people with the land.



In 2024, as a partner in Living Labs, activities and learning included:

- Baseline soil testing across greenhouse beds, outdoor plots, and future food forest site
- Partnership with DocTerre to design a composting system that will use local organic matter, garden waste, and food scraps to create a closed-loop nutrient cycle
- Preparing to trial cover cropping in the next growing season to assist with nitrogen fixation, organic matter improvement, and erosion prevention.

Read the full report in the [Research Library](#).

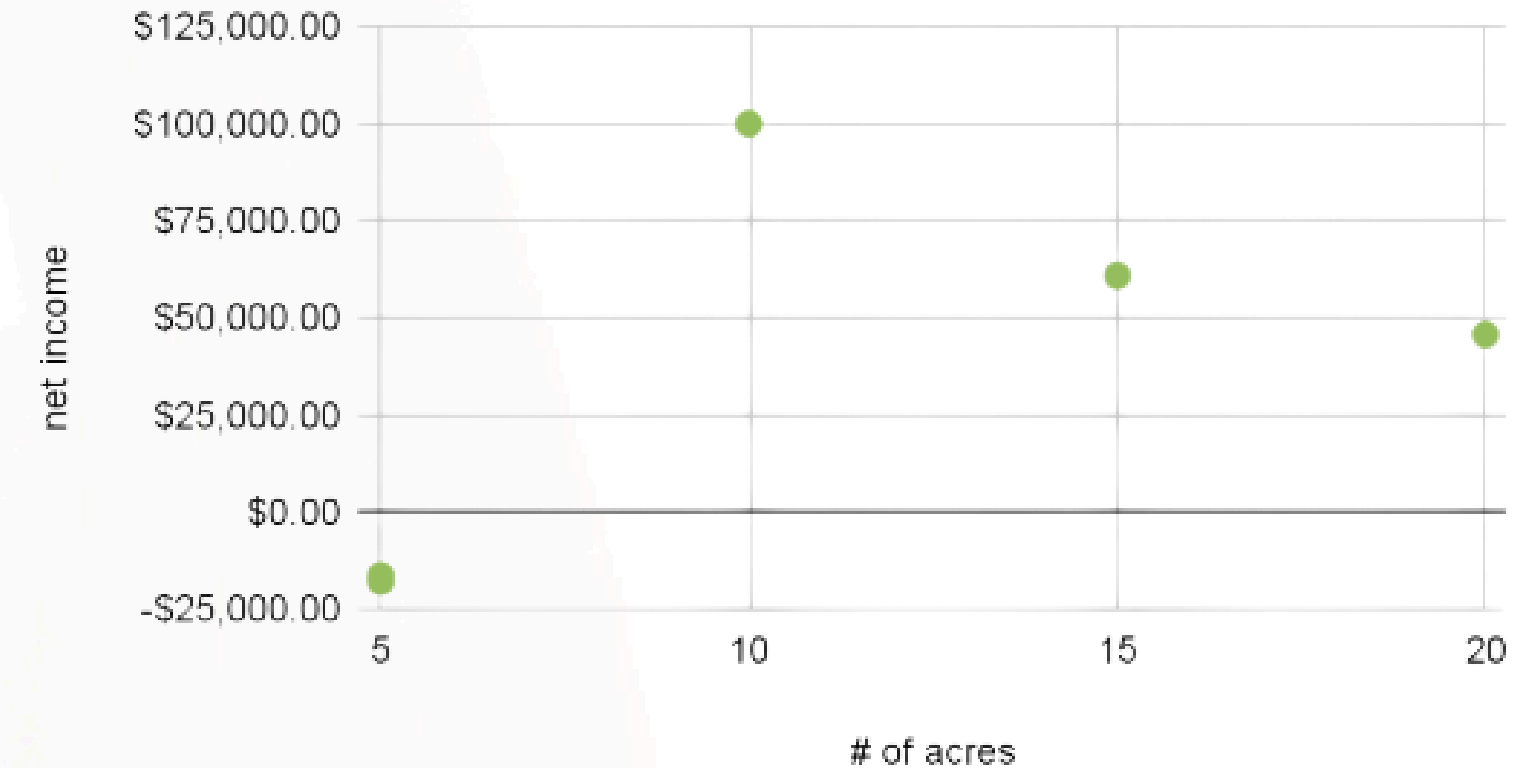
Vegetable Financial Benchmark Pilot (2024)

Objective: To better understand the financial factors affecting ecological vegetable producers by way of a multi-year benchmarking study.

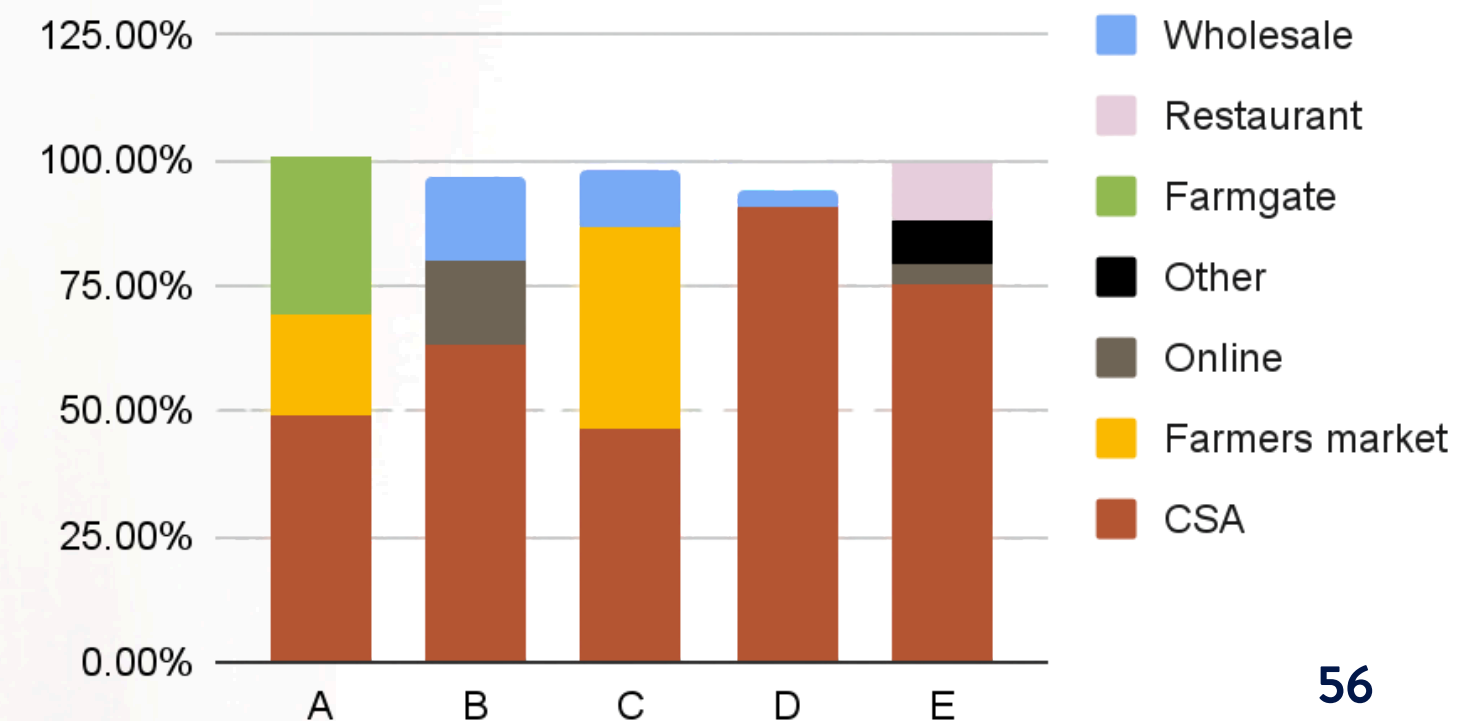
This year's pilot tested the process and design with 5 EFAO members.

We hope to expand this study to a larger number of farms over the coming years!

Net Vegetable Income vs. Number of Acres

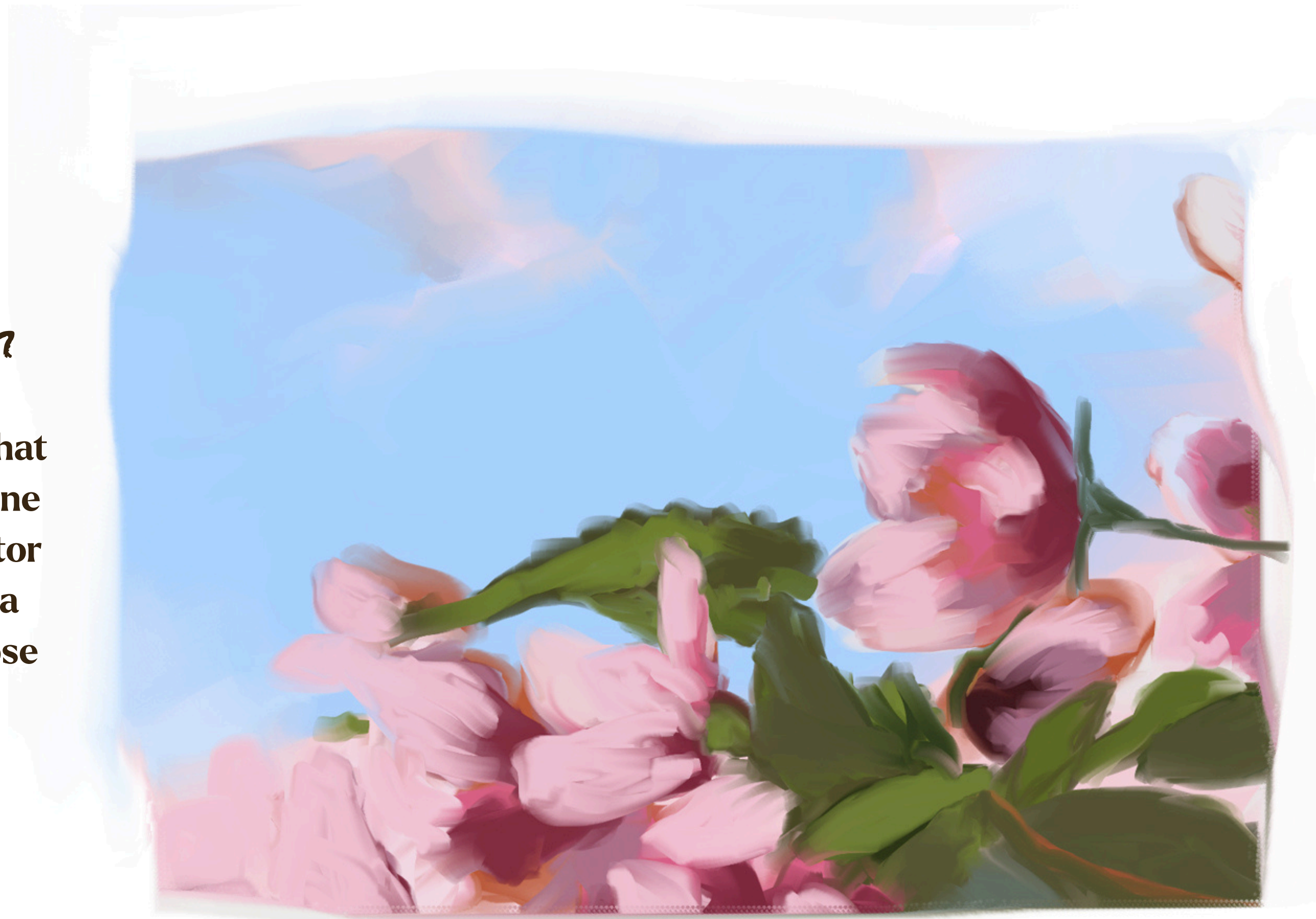


Percentage of Income by Marketing Channel



Seed Program

"I am very grateful for the work that the Bauta Family Initiative has done for the ecological agriculture sector over the past decade. It has been a real investment in the future whose true impact is impossible to measure."



Seed Program

EFAO's Seed Program works to increase the quality, quantity, and diversity of ecologically grown, regionally adapted seed. As the regional hub for The Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security, a program of SeedChange, this program provides training, supports farmer-led research, and fosters community to strengthen seed stewardship across Ontario. These efforts help farmers adapt to the challenges of climate change by conserving, adapting, and breeding new crops that thrive under local ecological conditions.



Seed Program

5,500 event participants (across Ontario and Canada)

142 seed events including meet-ups, webinars, field days and conference sessions

15 seed mentorships, connecting aspiring seed growers with experienced mentors

46% of farmer-led research trials were about seeds (variety trials, breeding, and selection)

25% of all participants in seed-related trials were BIPOC



Seed Program

In the 2023 Bauta Family Initiative survey, Ontario seed program participants shared:

97% rated the quality of events as high to very high

99% experienced an increase in knowledge

78% said the event helped them improve practices or adopt new ones

25% identified as BIPOC

28% were urban or suburban farmers



Seed Program Stories

Fertile Ground Seed Demonstration Site

From 2022 to 2024, EFAO partnered with Angie Koch at Fertile Ground Farm in St. Agatha to host a vegetable seed demonstration site, part of a broader initiative to increase the use and awareness of organic, ecological, regional seed.

At Fertile Ground, over 40 vegetable varieties were featured, including okra, heat-tolerant lettuce, and carrots, with support from Seeds of Diversity on crop variety conservation. The site also welcomed visitors for garden tours and variety tastings, contributing to a growing network of regional seed knowledge and practice.

Read the full report [here](#).



Seed Program Stories

Ironwood Organics Grain Demonstration Site

In 2022 and 2023, EFAO supported Chris Wooding, whose ongoing efforts to conserve and promote heritage grains and landraces are nationally recognized, in his participatory plant breeding work. Chris' work emphasizes the development of resilient, regionally adapted grain varieties, rooted in both traditional knowledge and contemporary practices.

Grain field days at Ironwood Organics featured hands-on learning and were enriched through a partnership with baker Anthony Vierra, who demonstrated how regionally adapted grains can be used in ways that differ from conventional store-bought flours.



Funding for Farmers

"I really appreciate the opportunity and without it, good chance I wouldn't be able to have grown the cover crop especially at a beneficial seeding rate."



Small Grains Program

The Small Grains Program encourages adoption of diversified rotations with small grains and cover crops and is building a network of farmers to support outreach, education, and training.

Working in partnership with Dr. Tongzhe Li from the University of Guelph to explore reverse auctions as an incentive funding mechanism.

This program is funded by the Weston Family Foundation since its inception in 2020.



Small Grains Program

Between 2020 - 2024:

189 farmers supported

11,816 acres of small grains and cover crops planted

\$597,374 of funding granted

82% said they will continue to grow small grains and cover crops in their rotation



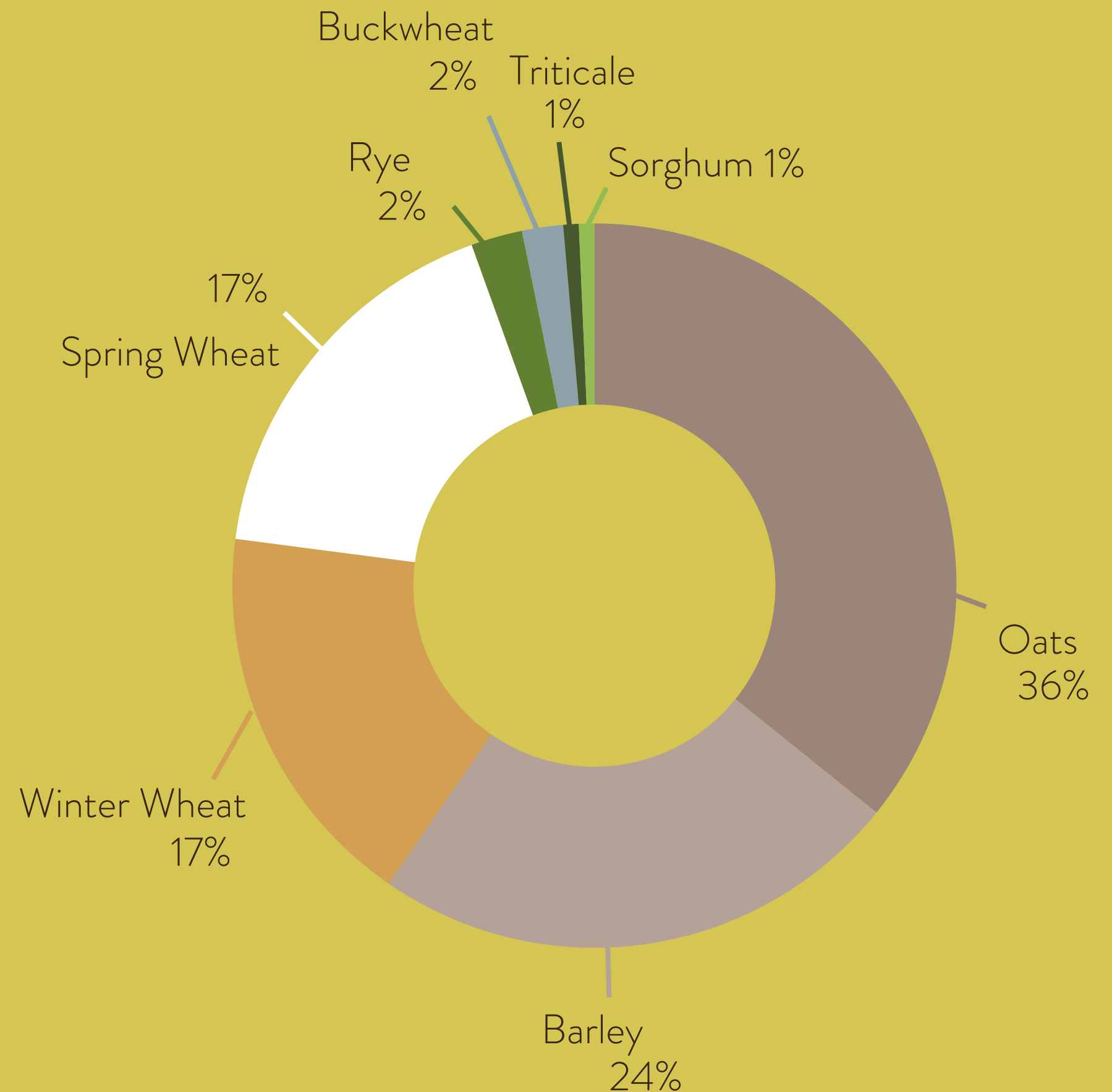
Small Grains Program

Types of Small Grains Grown

19% of participating growers are new to small grains

81% of participating growers are expanding or returning to small grains

"Growing small grains has reduced the need for purchased grain, improved nitrogen levels in the soil, and improved crop rotation."



Small Grains Program

Marketing

27 sold at the elevator to commodity markets

14 fed their grain to their own livestock

4 sold directly to a processor or retailer

3 sold their grain to another farmer for livestock feed

1 stores and mills their own flour for sale

6 listed other types of marketing

*Data from 2024 program participants



"Growing small grains has reduced the need for purchased grain, improved nitrogen levels in the soil, and improved crop rotation."

"Increased knowledge from this opportunity has been the difference. Being able to gain experience of ideas read or thought of without severe repercussions of failure has inspired me to learn and continue experimenting with various forms of cropping not practiced in our area."

Small Grains Program

Challenges and Suggestions

"We believe that access to more targeted research on disease management, particularly for *Fusarium*, and resources for alternative marketing strategies would have significantly supported our efforts in growing and marketing small grains."

"Possibly creating a pool of established farmers in geographical regions that would be willing to be hired or assist those that are new, like a mentorship program. It is a steep endeavor into grains if you do not have the equipment, funding, and knowledge; and I know that if I didn't have the support of neighbouring farmers, I wouldn't have been able to participate."



Northern Start-up Grants

In 2022 EFAO provided start-up grants and mentorship to new farmers in northern Ontario.

"This funding allowed us to invest in critical infrastructure and tools that we need to get our farm started. Starting a farm from scratch is extremely expensive and so every bit that can go into the necessary tools puts us one more huge step ahead. Having a caterpillar tunnel as well as a heating system for our nursery greenhouse is absolutely critical in order to make a living growing food in a zone 2b."



12

new farmers

100%

said the grant increased their farm's productivity

\$74,442

in funding awarded

88%

said the grants increased their farm's financial viability

50+

mentorship meetings

52%

BIPOC participants

Wellness Micro Grants

In 2023 and 2024 EFAO was able to provide Wellness Micro-Grants to members of the BIPOC Farmers Network. While all farmers face challenges, EFAO recognizes that Black, Indigenous and farmers of colour face substantial additional hurdles that impact their everyday wellness and livelihood. The disproportionate impacts of systemic racism include increased barriers in access to land, education and capital.

Funding went towards eyeglasses, childcare, prenatal RMT care, rent, dental care, foot care, visiting family, utility bills, meals for the farm team, gas money to go help another farmer who was struggling.

40 farmers received \$400 grants for a total of \$16,000 distributed

"I used the funds to help me access a dental appointment while working as a farm worker with no benefits and low wage, without jeopardizing my living costs."

"Thank you very much for this grant, it is very much appreciated and it helped us to obtain 2 pairs of good quality work boots. Less back and foot pain!"

"Bought a nice prepared lunch for the folks that volunteer on my farm, then I helped out another farmer remotely situated by offsetting the high price of gas."

Policy

"With new federal budget measures to support agricultural initiatives that address climate concerns, I would like to see EFAO helping to shape programs that support wider-ranging and "more radical" regenerative innovation in farming practices (e.g. organic no-till, integrated and biodiverse farm systems, smaller scale and community-oriented approaches, BIPOC access to land, silvopasture)... encouraging the development of innovation beyond just bringing BMPs to large scale farms."



Policy

Farmers for Climate Solutions

The majority of EFAO's policy and advocacy work to date has been through Farmers for Climate Solutions (FCS). In 2019, EFAO became a founding member of the FCS coalition, which now brings together 28 organizations from across Canada to advocate for and scale up climate solutions in agriculture.

Since its inception, FCS has grown significantly as an organization; assembled numerous farmer-led task forces to develop policy recommendations; significantly influenced federal policies and programs; and developed extensive educational programming.

To date, FCS' advocacy contributed to the generation of over \$1.5 billion in new investment in climate action in agriculture

EFAO has been instrumental to FCS' work over the past five years. EFAO board and staff have participated in FCS's Board of Directors and on various working groups. Since 2022 EFAO has also been a delivery partner for the FaRM Resilience Mentorship Program, offering a wide range of educational opportunities to help farmers with cover cropping, advanced nitrogen management and rotational grazing systems.



Policy

The Land Access Coalition was founded by EFAO in 2021 to help break down silos between organizations across the agriculture and agriculture-adjacent, food justice, farmland conservation, and social finance sectors to support land access efforts. A guiding focus has been on equitable, long-term land access, especially for new entrants, young farmers, and equity-deserving farmers.

The coalition helps organizations collaborate, seek input from the sector, develop cross-sector policy recommendations and undertake advocacy.

Jointly led by EFAO and the NFU-O since 2023, the Coalition has identified the following priority areas for land access policy advocacy:

- Cost of farmland
- Long term farmland protection
- Access to capital
- Farm income
- Farm dwellings and zoning
- Lease equity



Policy

Land Access Coalition

18

member organizations have met 3-4 times per year since 2021



Financial Report



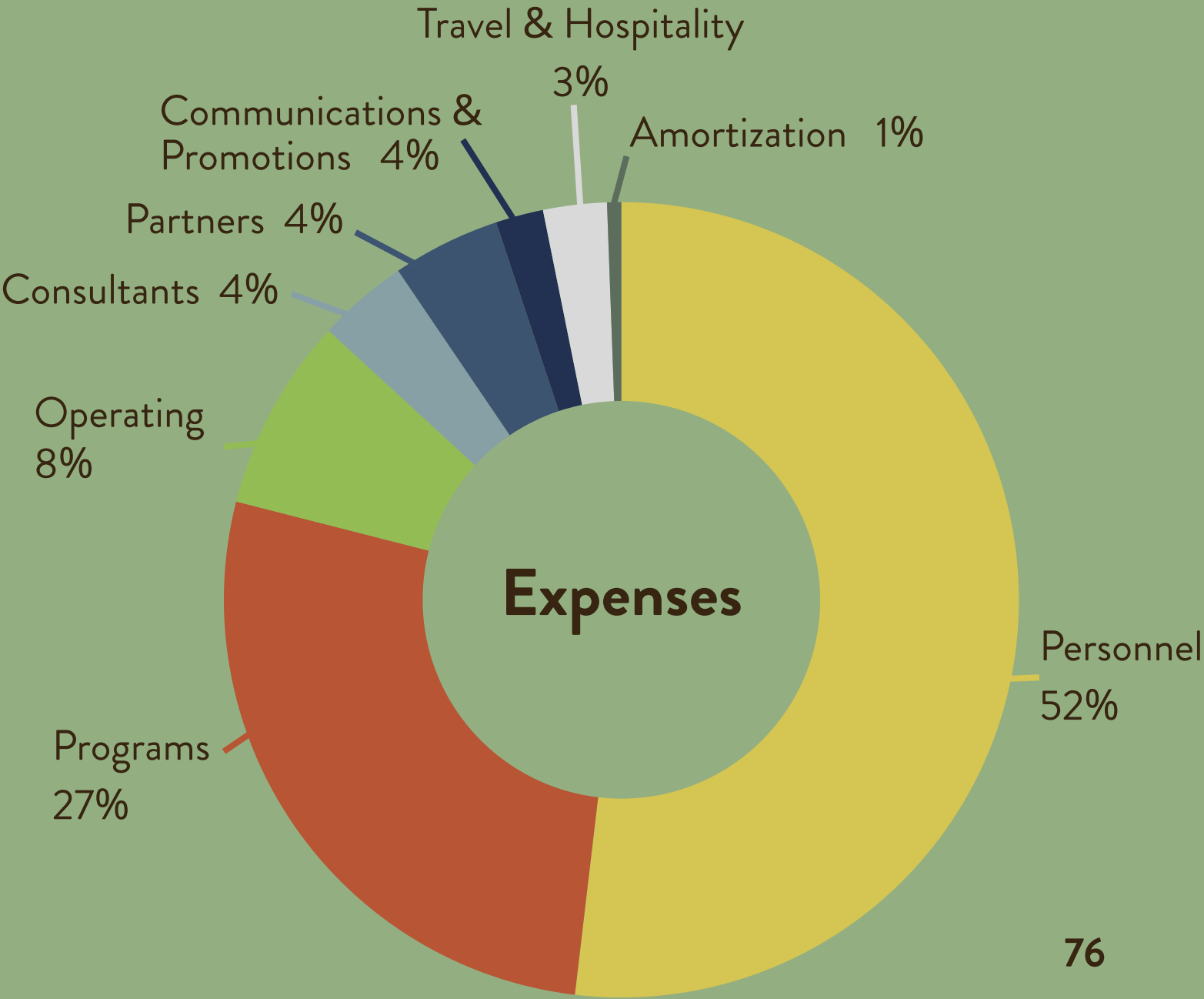
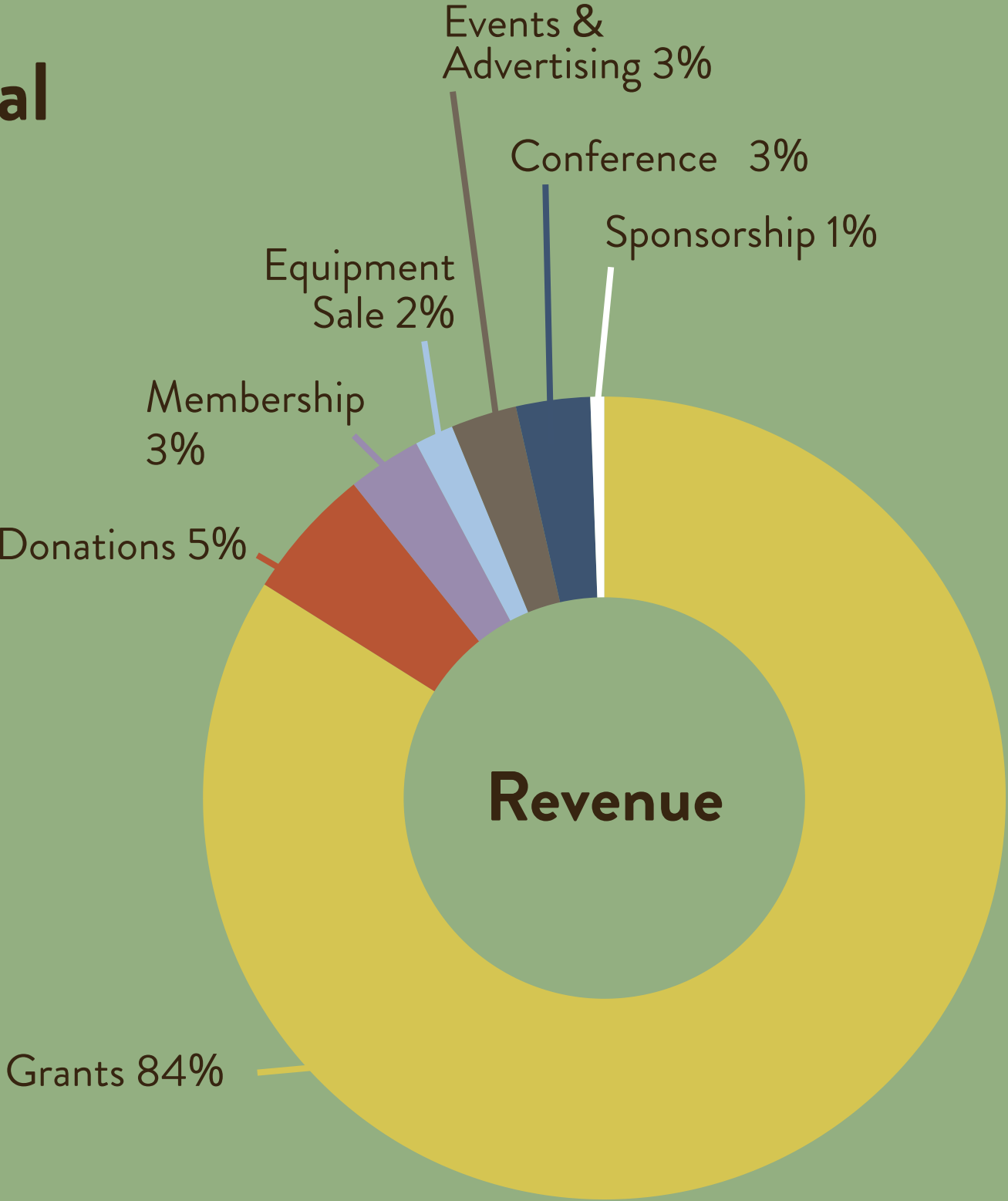
Financial Report

Audited Financial Statements (2024)

Total Revenue: \$1,470,853

Total Expenses: \$1,415,235

Net Revenue: \$55,618



Financial Report

Audited Financial Statements (2024) Payments to Farmers

\$173,980 for small grains + cover crop payments

\$72,209 for speaker fees and committees

\$42,768 for farmer-led research fees and expenses

\$8,000 for other grants

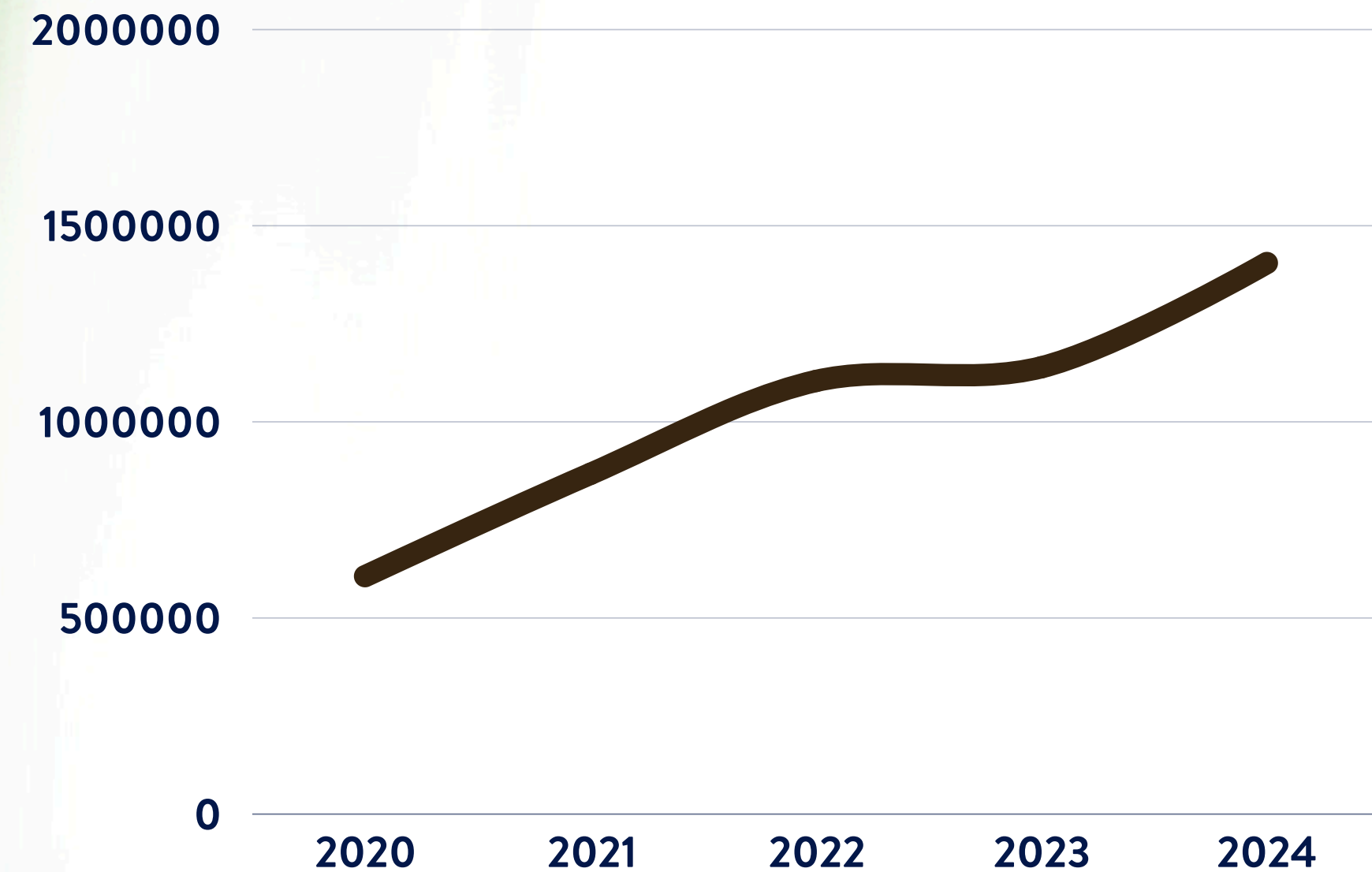
Total Payments to Farmers in 2024: **\$296,957**



Financial Report

Organizational Growth 2020 - 2024

Budget (expenses) increased **132%**
\$606,522 to \$1,404,919



Financial Report

Grants & Donors

Zita and Mark Bernstein
Family Foundation

Britton Smith Foundation
Emerald Foundation



Possibility grows here.



Brian + Joannah
Lawson Family
Foundation



the
McLean
Foundation



Ministry of
Agriculture, Food &
Rural Affairs

Robert and Moira Sansom
Ideas Foundation

A fund within the



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Thank You!

For all the ways you contribute to EFAO - through membership, attending and presenting at events, conducting research trials, connecting with the community, contributing to magazine articles, donating, and partnering with us - we are deeply grateful.

