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KEY MESSAGES

• The McGuinty government recognizes that a strong rural Ontario is absolutely vital to our province’s economic prosperity. That is why we have listened to rural Ontario and developed a new program that will help agricultural landowners and rural municipalities.

• We are building stronger rural communities by investing $6 million in an Agricultural Drainage Infrastructure Program. Having a proper infrastructure in place helps improve crop production and reduces flooding and crop and property damage.

• Together, we are building better farms, a better economy, and a better Ontario.
Good morning everyone.

I am pleased to bring you greetings on behalf of Leona Dombrowsky, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Government of Ontario.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide you with an update on the Agricultural Drainage Infrastructure Program (ADIP).

Drainage engineers haven’t historically garnered a lot of attention from the public, because most people aren’t very aware of how important your work is.
But we can see that this perception is changing as people turn to your profession to prevent or solve drainage issues that threaten their communities. They want these issues resolved in an environmentally responsible manner.

We’re seeing more interest and appreciation for your profession as the media covers drainage issues on a grand scale, from New Orleans to Venice.

I believe that around the globe, society will have an ever-increasing dependence on your expertise in the future.
It will be interesting to hear what Heather (Auld) has to say to us later, about Canada’s changing climate and increasing vulnerability of our infrastructure.

This will undoubtedly have an impact on the design of drainage systems that have a health and safety component to them, such as the Holland Marsh.

Here at home, your role has always been important. That’s something that your provincial government recognizes and supports.

We understand the vital role that drainage plays in maintaining a productive agricultural land base in Ontario.
Only five per cent of Canada’s total land base is classified as prime agricultural land – and we are fortunate enough to have more than half of the country’s best soil right here in Ontario.

We need to preserve it. And proper drainage is integral to enhancing the productivity of that land.

The majority of Ontario farmers follow excellent stewardship practices – not only because they understand the environmental impacts - but also because they need to protect the productivity of their land.
An investment in drainage infrastructure is one of the most cost effective and significant investments that a farmer can make for their business operations.

As most of you know, last year, our government announced changes to the Tile Loan program which provided farmers with access to low cost loans for the installation of private tile drainage systems.

The program interest rate was reduced from eight per cent to six per cent, and the loan limit was increased from $20,000 to $50,000. Our government has allocated $12 million dollars toward the Tile Loan Program.
Because private tile drainage systems typically discharge into municipal drains - we recognize that these are an important infrastructure in rural Ontario. And we want to ensure that municipal drainage systems are properly managed.

To that end, in February of this year, our government announced a new $6 million dollar Drainage Act grant program, called the Agricultural Drainage Infrastructure Program or “ADIP.”

We are committed to providing public programs that are fiscally sustainable and accountable. That is why we worked extensively with stakeholders to develop clear funding policies for ADIP.
We asked for input from your Land Drainage Committee, the Drainage Superintendents Association of Ontario, and Land Improvement Contractors of Ontario.

We also talked to general farm organizations, the Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA), and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO).

(Carol’s comments/observations on her work during consultations?)

Our work culminated in the creation of new administrative policies which Minister Dombrowsky announced in September (at the International Plowing Match in Listowel).
The new policies clearly describe what is eligible for grants under the ADIP program.

We just wound up the last of ten information meetings that were held across the province since the announcement.

These were aimed at providing details of the ADIP program to municipalities, farmers and representatives of the drainage industry.

You can access the full details of the program on our ministry’s web site.
I accept that not everyone is entirely satisfied with the new drainage program as accessibility of the grant dollars is more restricted and focused toward sustaining agricultural activities.

But let me tell you about some of the highlights of this new program:

Similar to the former drainage program, the Agricultural Drainage Infrastructure Program provides grants to agricultural landowners for the eligible costs associated with the construction, improvement and maintenance of municipal drainage works constructed under the Drainage Act.
Municipalities are also eligible for grants for the costs of employing a municipal drainage superintendent.

Our government has committed to provide the new program with a $6 million dollar annual budget. I believe that this is very good news.

Over the last ten years, the drainage grant demand has fluctuated anywhere between $4 million dollars to $7 million dollars annually.

Our commitment to a $6 million annual program budget has eliminated the uncertainty that used to exist over the program funding.
We also recognized that drainage activities are influenced by a variety of factors including weather and commodity prices.

These factors are the reason why the budget demand can vary dramatically year over year.

To help better manage our budget we have instituted a new grant application queue for new construction and major drainage improvement projects.

The queue will provide better information to our municipal partners by ensuring that they know when they can expect to receive a grant payment from the province.
We have committed to providing full funding toward municipal drain maintenance activities.

This commitment recognizes the significant public investment that has already been made toward our existing drainage infrastructure.

We have also introduced new administrative policies that provide greater clarity on what is eligible for grants.

Our goal with the policies was to ensure that Drainage Act grants go toward drainage activities on agricultural land.
To that end, we have provided clear criteria to take some of the guess work out of determining if lands qualify for grants as agricultural lands.

We have linked grant eligibility under the Drainage Act to lands that qualify for the Farm Property Tax Incentive program.

I acknowledge that not everyone is happy with this approach. But we think it helps ensure that grants are focused on agricultural lands.

We also had to make some difficult decisions with the new policies. For instance, we have set limits on the funding of drain enclosures and farm access allowances.
We consulted extensively with stakeholders about the new administrative policies.

The ministry will use these policies as the basis for making decisions on the payment of grants under the Drainage Act.

Our hope is that they will make your life easier, by providing you with clear, comprehensive information to use in your work.

I know that ministry staff are ready to help with the implementation of the new policies.
Ultimately, our goal as a government is to help agricultural landowners and rural municipalities thrive.

With the new ADIP program, funding criteria is better defined and taxpayer dollars are used in a transparent and accountable manner.

Most of us can bet that drainage infrastructure is not something our urban neighbours may necessarily think about when they drive through Ontario’s countryside and rural townships.

But without it, our province’s concession roads and crops could literally be washed away.
I know that everyone in this room appreciates that drainage infrastructure is crucial in rural Ontario to help improve crop production and reduce flooding and crop and property damage.

It provides environmental benefits by reducing both soil erosion and sediment transport to water bodies, and improves weed control and crop productivity.

Farmers and drainage practitioners are becoming ever more aware of the environmental implications of drainage activity and are adopting more sustainable practices.
Projects such as the Wetland Drain Restoration in Norfolk, Elgin and Oxford counties, for instance, use the Drainage Act as a legislative vehicle to enhance or recreate wetlands.

These are exciting projects and I challenge drainage engineers and superintendents to look for similar opportunities to use the Drainage Act to achieve environmental benefits in a cost effective manner.

Staff at OMAFRA also carries out annual training and liaison activities to help drainage practitioners, municipal staff and others gain a better understanding and awareness of environmental issues related to drainage activities.
I’m pleased to tell you that, through the ministry, our government paid grants on 227 drain construction/improvement projects – and more than 17-hundred (1,728) maintenance projects over this past fiscal year.

This provincial funding has improved drainage on thousands of agricultural properties.

Our government clearly values the contribution that agricultural and rural communities throughout Ontario make to the vitality of this province.

We want to see our rural communities thrive. That is why we launched Ontario’s Rural Plan.
This plan sets out several key priorities: Strong People, Strong Economy; Better Health; and Success for Students. It is a plan that we are already setting to work.

Ultimately, our goal is to ensure that the people who live in rural Ontario have the solid infrastructure and services they need in order to make a decent living for their families.

We want the residents of our rural communities and our small towns to prosper right along with their counterparts in our urban centres.
I am proud to participate in our government’s efforts to help Ontario build a better quality of life for all of its citizens -- a quality of life that is second to none.

We appreciate your interest and assistance as we work to strengthen the infrastructure and prosperity of Ontario’s agricultural and rural communities.

We have always believed it is important for Ontarians to have a say in where and how their hard earned dollars are spent.

That is why we have worked with farmers and rural municipalities to provide new solutions for enhancing rural infrastructure.
You are key in helping to deliver these solutions.

Thank you for your contributions and your support as we roll-out the new ADIP program.

On behalf of the Government of Ontario, I wish you all the best for a successful 37th conference.

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