

Handpicked: Stories from the Field

Season 3, Episode 4: “Farmer-led research helps us realize that we're really innovators”: Improving ecological farming practices and farm-to-farm knowledge sharing with the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario

Featuring Dr. Erin Nelson, Dr. Sarah Larsen, Heather Newman, Brent Preston

Transcript

Speakers

Amanda Di Battista: **AD**

Laine Young: **LY**

Erin Nelson: **EN**

Sarah Larsen: **SL**

Heather Newman: **HN**

Brent Preston: **BP**

{[Intro music]}

LY: Hello and welcome to another episode of *Handpicked: Stories from the Field*, a podcast from the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems.

I'm Laine Young ...

AD: And I'm Amanda Di Battista.

In this episode, we are talking to one of the people in that network Dr. Erin Nelson. Erin will tell us about the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, or EFAO, their farmer-led research program and lead us through a conversation with Sarah Larsen, the research director of the EFAO, and two farmer researchers—Heather Newman and Brent Preston.

You can find a direct link to a recent report about the EFAO's farmer-led research program in our show notes.

LY: Awesome. Let's hear your conversation with Erin.

{[Musical Interlude]}

AD: Hi, Erin!

EN: Hi Amanda!

AD: Thanks so much for being here with us today. Why don't you introduce yourself?

EN: So, my name is Erin Nelson. I am a Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Guelph, and my research broadly focuses on sustainable food systems and the link between agroecology and sustainability. Most of my work was in Latin America, but I've more recently been working in Ontario as well.

AD: Awesome. So you work with the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, yes ?

EN: Yes

AD: Can you tell us a little bit about that work?

EN: Sure. I've collaborated with the EFAO in a number of ways for many years. And in 2019, we got some funding from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs through the Ontario Agrifood Innovation Alliance to conduct an evaluation of the EFAO's farmer-led research program.

AD: Can you tell us a little bit about that research? Because that research forms the basis of all of our conversations in this episode.

EN: So, it involved working with the EFAO to come up with an evaluation strategy for their farmer-led research program. And we then conducted an online survey with EFAO members, a series of in-depth interviews with the EFAO members, and then a focus group with farmer-led researchers.

AD: Oh wow. That sounds really interesting. So, in our discussion that's coming up, we use the term agroecology quite a lot. Can you tell me what that term means?

EN: Sure. So, it's not a super easy term to define briefly, but it is more or less about thinking about agriculture in an ecological way. So, thinking about agriculture holistically. Thinking about the ecology of a whole farming system. Incorporating some social elements as well, some political elements in some cases, so just thinking about "what does our food system look like and are we thinking about it sustainably?"

AD: We know that food systems are a major driver of climate change. How does agroecology factor into dealing with climate change?

EN: So, if a farmer is using an agroecological approach, they're typically stewarding their natural resources in a way that really helps to mitigate climate change. They're really using far less carbon-intensive practices than a typical farmer might. And they're also stewarding the soil in a way that contributes to carbon storage.

There's also a really strong link between agroecology and climate change adaptation because farmers using an agricultural approach are much more resilient in the face of issues like drought and just climatic instability more generally.

{[Musical Interlude]}

AD: So, you sat down with some of the members of the EFAO to talk about their farmer-led research project, right?

EN: Yes, first I spoke with Sarah Larsen, take a listen.

SL: I'm Sarah Larsen, Research Director with the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, or EFAO.

The EFAO is a not-for-profit organization based in Ontario. We're a membership organization that supports farmers to build resilient ecological farms and grow a strong knowledge sharing community. And the goal is really to bring farmers together so that they can learn from each other to improve the health of their crops and livestock and the environment and their communities while running profitable farm businesses. And to do this the EFAO focuses on farmer-led research, farmer-led education and community building.

EN: I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about ecological farming practices. So in a nutshell, what are they and why are they important?

SL: At EFAO, we don't require that members do any specific practice. We support farmers anywhere they are on the spectrum of ecological, so that they can learn about the farming methods that are compatible with the land they farm and their values in their production systems.

And so, for that reason, we define "ecological agriculture" very generally - regenerative, organic or other holistic practices that improve soil health, that protect resources such as water and biodiversity, and reduce synthetic inputs and prioritize renewable energy sources.

We also add a few layers to this. So, to us, ecological agriculture involves socially engaged practices that ensure that farming communities are diverse and vibrant and resilient while making healthy agricultural products accessible to the community. And then also forward-looking practices that are knowledge-intensive and regionally specific. And so, we embrace the potential benefits that innovation and technology provide while taking into account the environmental and social pieces that I mentioned.

EN: Could you provide a little bit more detail about how specifically the EFAO promotes ecological farming practices?

SL: Yeah, we're really based in helping the farmers, supporting the farmers, providing space for the farmers to teach each other and share with each other. And so, at the beginning, 40 years ago, this looked a lot like farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing at field days and events, and even farmer-led education courses on compost production, for example. And since then, we continue to do farmer-led education. We have an annual conference that moves around the province. We do field days- I'm going to one this afternoon. We do online workshops and in-person workshops.

And then in 2016, we branched out and started a farmer-led research program. And so, we also support farmers to adopt and improve their ecological agricultural practices through farmer-led research. So, this is answering the questions they have about ecological agriculture on their farms for themselves, using the scientific method and the structure of research. So those are the main tools we use to support the farmers. And then this creates a community of ecological farmers in the province, across the province. And actually, our membership spans the country, and we're actually looking at having some farmers in the farmer-led research program from the States participate in the program this year.

{[Musical Interlude]}

AD: So the EFAO uses the term ecological farming. Is that different than agroecology?

EN: It's a great question. Agroecology as a concept has been around for a really long time, but it's been more prevalent in places like Latin America and other areas of the Global South. And it's been more recent that agroecology is a term is being used in a North American context. So, there's a lot of overlap between what the EFAO is doing when they talk about ecological farming and what I might talk about when I talk about agroecology. It's just a question of what term people are most comfortable with or most used to.

AD: Oh, okay, that makes sense. What else did you and Sarah touch on in your conversation?

EN: I asked Sarah if she could tell us about the farmer-led research program that the EFAO runs. Listen to this.

I'm wondering if you could give us maybe a little bit more background on what farmer-led research is in general and then talk a little bit about how you've implemented it within the EFAO through your Farmer-led Research Program.

SL: Farmer-led research is on-farm research that puts farmers at the center of the research process and the scientific method. So, it's really research focused on the questions that farmers have about their farms, these questions that they have to answer, the challenges they're experiencing about farming and the curiosities they have on their farms. And so, this isn't about the questions that academics may find interesting or that industry may find relevant. It's about what farmers need to know to farm better, so, whatever that means to them.

And so, the farmers do the research. They, of course, are in contact with us all the time, troubleshooting and communicating how it's going. And then the research team at EFAO, we run statistics on the data, and we help write a report that's accessible, you know, not too jargony. We write a research report with the farmer and then publish that and share the findings of the report. And then we start all over again. And it's mostly a yearly cycle of farmer-led research with some longer-term trials as well.

AD: Wow, that sounds like a really innovative way of doing on-farm research. What does it look like on the ground, Erin?

EN: Great question. I asked Sarah the same thing. Here's what she had to say.

We are about to get into the discussion of impacts and outcomes of the program, but I wonder if first you could just provide a couple of examples of what an actual farmer-led research project might look like.

SL: Yeah. I can talk about a few going on this year, as an example.

Tillage is or using a lot of tillage can be, is destructive to the soil, and so it aerates the soil and it contributes to really fast breakdown of organic matter. And then, you know, that leads to a lot of loss of carbon to the atmosphere and also just a destruction of the soil habitat for the microbes. And so, it really also degrades soil health in a number of ways. And so, yeah, looking at different ways of mulching to control weeds instead, or covering the soil with fabrics or plastics is sort of the way that research is going in organic weed management to reduce tillage.

We've had one member who's done a few trials with us already. So, an experienced farmer researcher. And he has a lot of questions about how to reduce tillage for organic potato production. So, he proposed a randomized replicated trial looking at all these treatments this year. And what we did is we put a callout to our network to say, is anyone else interested in replicating what Matt's doing on his farm, on your farm? So, we actually have six growers now across the province who are doing randomized replicated trials of these systems that Matt's developed for no-till potatoes.

And they communicate together, they coordinated getting potatoes seed together, share results in real time throughout the season. And then we'll be able to see how these systems perform on individual farms and then across the province as well. So slightly, maybe slightly different systems, right. Folks have slightly different woodchip composition or some aren't using hay because they couldn't get it. You know, some differences. But we should be able to get a pretty good handle on whether these systems are worthy of exploring further in the program, and it's a real puzzle and it's a really fun piece for the staff to figure out how we can make a trial robust and rigorous and get the farmer the data they need while still making it practical for their operation.

EN: It's a great example. I could sit and listen to you tell stories of the different projects all day. I'm wondering if you could give from your bird's eye view a sense of what the main impacts have been of the program so far.

SL: What was really surprising to see or exciting to see, I should say, is even within one cycle of farmer-led research, so a farmer engaging in the process in one year, they, across the board, farmers said how it just gave them this new tool on the farm for decision making. They feel more confident in how to make observations and in their observations and in how to, in some cases, have a common language to talk to their colleagues about on the farm. So, they might, say, have some conflict around where to what direction to go with the management technique. And now they have a tool to use to make a decision together.

And then they also just spoke of the community, that they felt really supported by the process and having other farmer researchers. And I think from the research that we did, Erin, the main impacts were... community decision making and pride really came up as beneficial impacts of farmer-led research as well as the data that they generated, and the communication- they now have data that they can communicate and share about the benefits of ecological agriculture.

Another piece of feedback that we've heard consistently is that engaging in the farmer-led research program made the farmers accountable to themselves and to the program for this question that they had. So, in many cases, the farmer had wanted to answer this question or had tried to answer this question in previous years, and it had just fallen off in the busy-ness, the incredible busy-ness of a farm season. It just was no longer a priority. By engaging in the program and thinking through the steps and committing, committing to the question in this way, the farmers get the answer that they had, or at least answer the question that they had, and actually are able to commit to that.

So I think that that was also a huge piece, that commitment that farmers have and then they have the community to support them and the pride that they feel by participating in the program and contributing, they're contributing to a growing body of knowledge that's telling the world about the benefits of ecological agriculture, and that's a real motivator for them. And so, I absolutely believe that the observation of a farmer is really powerful; farmers are keen observers, they're in many ways natural researchers, but it gives them that pride that they did this rigorously, the can

trust this result. And even if it's not the result they want, they can still have confidence in that. And a 'no, this system *isn't* good for me' is just as valuable, if not more valuable in some cases, than a 'yes, this system is valuable, does work for me'.

{[Musical Interlude]}

AD: Farmer-led research sounds like it has a ton of benefits for the farmers themselves, but also for agriculture at a larger scale. Does this lead to any macro-level changes to the system?

EN: Yeah, there were actually quite a few policy recommendations that came out of the research we did. Sarah tells us a little bit about them.

If you could talk a little bit about some of the policy recommendations that came out of the research and what you'd like to see maybe in terms of policy related to farmer-led research or ecological farming more generally.

SL: Yeah. We came up with four main policy recommendations. I think there probably could be more, but we felt like these were concrete and solid.

The first one was to invest more in multi-year funding for farmer-led researchers and specifically EFAO's farmer-led research program. Most of our trials are single year, but especially with all of the variability we see in the climate and just the changes that we're seeing that farmers are having to deal with, which are growing, multi-year trials are so important. You might have a system that works really well in a dry year and not so well in a wet year, for example. And then also unique to our program is we support breeding trials and those don't happen in one year, so multi-year funding is key.

We also really have learned through the last few years of doing the program that the more flexible the funding, the better, because we can't go to a funder and say, and predict what a farmer's going to want to study, right? We need to really have funding that's open to support the process of farmer led research, but not so much constrained to specific questions the farmer may ask. And so flexible funding that works with a timeline of the farmer innovator cycle, which is really brainstorm in the winter, conduct the trial in the growing season, quickly analyze and iterate again. So, we need a funding cycle that's compatible with that yearly cycle is important.

And then I would love to see a network of networks. So EFAO has this unique special program and we're certainly an open book. I talk to other organizations that want to conduct farmer-led research. We support those organizations in exploring that option. We were mentored so much from Practical Farmers of Iowa. And I feel so grateful for that. They were such an open book for us and so supportive of us. And it feels like the more farmer-led research programs we can have, then we can all be learning from each other. And the program, on an administrative level, can also be supporting. We can be supporting each other.

And then in general, just continuing to invest in farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing and mentorship, because really at the base, this is what this is. It's farmers generating their own knowledge, sharing that knowledge and mentoring each other through the process of becoming better ecological farmers.

{[Musical Interlude]}

AD: Let me make sure that I've got this straight. The four main policy recommendations generated by this work are: there's a need to support multi-year funding, we need to ensure that funding is flexible, we need to create a network of networks and we need to continue to invest in knowledge sharing for farmers.

EN: That sounds right. For more detail about those recommendations and also the broader results of the project, people can check out the full report, which is available on the EFAO's website.

{[Musical Interlude]}

AD: We've talked about the EFAO, ecological farming in general, farmer-led research, and some of the policy recommendations that came out of this process. Erin, you also sat down with some of the farmers that actually participated in farmer-led research processes within the EFAO right?

EN: Yes, I did. I spoke with both Heather and Brent, who have been very involved in farmer-led research with the EFAO. I'll let them each introduce themselves.

HM: My name is Heather Newman. I run a farm and food product business in Southwestern Ontario between Kincardine and Ripley. My farm grows poultry, garlic, herbs and hot peppers, and we focus on heritage breeds grown regeneratively and organically and we also seal all of our flavor into hot sauces and seasonings and many other preserves.

BP: Hi, I'm Brent Preston. I farm with my wife, Gillian, near Creemore, Ontario. We grow primarily cut salads and cucumbers for wholesale markets. And I'm the President of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario and a past participant in the farmer-led research project.

EN: So, Brent and Heather, could you just tell us a little bit about how you're connected to EFAO, what your involvement looks like, and also specifically how you're connected to the farmer-led research program?

HM: So, I'm primarily a farmer member. I'm also a farmer-researcher. And now I sit on the farmer-led research selection committee.

BP: I've been a member of the EFAO for more than ten years and have been on the Board of Directors for a number of years and have spent the last three years as President of the Board of Directors and our farm participated in farmer-led research trial over two years. A couple of years ago, looking at ways to reduce tillage in our vegetable production.

EN: Thanks. Brent, I'll ask you this first and then go back to you, Heather. But do you want to just expand a little bit on explaining what your farmer-led research project looked like and what some of the outcomes were?

BP: Sure. So, our farmer-led research project came about because we were tilling too much. Our main crop on our farm is cut salads and they have a really short growing period. So, in the

middle of the season, we're planting our greens and then harvesting them three weeks later. And then our practice was to till the stubble left over after we cut, to wait a week or so, till again and then to plant more greens. And in some parts of our farm we would do that three or four times in a season. So we were, you know, experiencing sometimes ten or more tillage events in a particular piece of land per season, which we realized after a while was totally unsustainable. We were destroying the structure of our soil and really seeing that the water retention ability of the soil was declining year after year.

So, we were really intrigued with using tarps, big sheets of plastic or fabric to kill solid stubble instead of tillage. And so our farmer-led research project the first year was basically does tarping work? We did a controlled study where we would tarp some areas after we had cut the salad and till other areas. And we determined that it definitely did work, that we could really reduce the amount of tillage we had to do. And then the second year we did some more research on what's the best material to use for tarping and also what was happening underneath those tarps. So, we use these really cool temperature probes to record soil temperature under tarps and in tilled ground. So, we could get an idea if the tarping was actually doing damage to soil organic life or, you know, what was actually happening under there, what was the mechanism.

And now three or four years later, our whole farm, we have almost no in-season tillage because we're using our tarps to kill solid stubble in between successions. And we don't need to till at all. We can plant straight into the untilled ground after retarping.

By using tarps instead of tilling and by reducing the amount of tillage we have on our farm. First of all, the soil is healthier. We're disturbing the soil less. We've seen just in a couple of years a real increase in its water-holding, water retention ability. So, we've cut down on the amount of irrigation we do, which cuts down on a lot of labour. The greens that we grow in undisturbed soil have far, far fewer weeds, so we've saved a lot of money on labor in terms of weeding. It's freed up our staff so that we can actually produce more. So, the end result is that we've been able to reduce labour requirements, increase our production and increase our profitability. And I really don't think we would have been able to do that without the farmer-led research project because it gave us the rigour to really be confident to change our whole farming system over, and know that it was going to work.

EN: Heather, do you want to tell us in a little bit more depth about your involvement with the farmer-led research program and what it's looked like?

HM: Well, our project specifically was on feed for heritage poultry. Today, poultry feed is really specifically formulated for the top production of commercial hybrid chickens, and it's also one of the largest expenses on our poultry production. So, we grow a heritage breed of chickens, which is much slower growing, and so my assumption was that their feed requirements would be different. I'd spent a long time trying to find information about this and so that our feed could be more specifically designed for our birds, but there wasn't a lot of information that I could find out there. So, when I proposed doing the research project, Sarah helped to connect me with a poultry feed researcher who confirmed that there is a lack of information on this subject and really helped us to set up good protocols for our study.

So, our research project, they helped to prepare our trial for the summer. We divided our birds into two groups and we fed different feeds to each group and ran monthly weights on our birds. And then the EFAO or the farmer-led research project analyzed the data for us and published the

study. So that was our specific study. But I have to say that involvement with the farmer-led research started long before that. I first became interested when I realized how many other people there were out there asking the same types of questions about ecological farming that we were on our own farm.

We could be very isolated, especially if you're not in a mainstream farming method and replications are minimal. You can only do oftentimes only one per year because of the growing season. So the farmer-led research solves a ton of these problems. So just being out to see other people do things allowed me to speed up the types of trials that I was running on my farm, helps me think better in how I'm designing and looking at the analysis of those problems, it reduces isolation, increases replication, and is really great for solving creatively some of these problems that we're all facing.

BP: Just to build on something that Heather said, I think that this I think isolation is a big issue for farmers in all aspects of our business and our life, and especially for farmers who are really focused on practicing ecological agriculture, are really concerned about the environmental impacts of their farming, because often we don't have neighbours who are farming in the same way that we are. So, farmer-led research has been super important on our farm in terms of helping us develop practices that specifically work on our farm, that are really, really effective with all of our very specific growing conditions and soil type and everything else. But it's also helped build those connections with other farmers.

So, every year, the farmer-led research program gets together for a symposium where farmers present the results of their research and we get to talk to other farmer researchers. And it just does so much to build that sense of community and that knowledge sharing where we can learn from our peers and pass on information to our peers.

And to me, there's a lot of pride involved in it as well. When we all get together at the symposium, you can tell that farmers are really proud of what they've done. It sort of professionalizes our work in some ways, like we really see the rigour that other farmers are bringing to their work, and it's inspires me to be more rigorous on how I operate my farm. And I think, there's a tendency, I think sometimes for farmers who are working at a small scale, using ecological practices to feel like they're not part of the sort of technological, intellectual, mainstream of agriculture and farmer-led research helps us realize that we really are, that we're really innovators and doing something that's important.

EN: Thanks, Brent. Heather, did you have something you wanted to jump in there with?

HM: Just like Brent said about professionalizing, it legitimizes what you have to say, in two ways. It's easier because the way things are published, it's clear and allows me to assess what was done on that farm and whether it's replicable in our conditions, so there's that legitimacy. And secondly, it allows me to speak to other people about what we're doing within our local community, which, again, there's not many people farming the way that I am in my neighbourhood. And even among people who are like, I don't know how many people who grow heritage breeds I've been able to point in the direction of the work that we did, and hopefully somebody will be able to carry on with that and kind of expand that knowledge base because obviously there isn't much out there.

{[Musical Interlude]}

AD: It's been really interesting to hear two very different examples of farmer-led research. Brent and Heather really highlight how that research impacts their farming experiences.

EN: And they also speak to the importance of having research results available that are relevant for smaller and medium scale, ecologically-oriented farmers. Because so much of the data that's out there is focused on larger-scale conventional farmers, and it's just not applicable to people who are wanting to do things in a more sustainable way.

AD: Okay, let's hear from them.

EN: We're going to shift a little bit into talking about policy. So, the farmer-led research program has received a fair amount of positive attention, and I know the research that we just did showed a lot of really positive impacts. I'm wondering if you see opportunities for that kind of positive attention and demonstration of positive impact to feed into any policy changes that might facilitate increased impact of the program.

BP: In the sixties and seventies, most provincial ministries of agriculture had extension agents, they had agricultural professionals whose job it was to go out and meet with farmers and talk to them and answer their questions and let them know about new technologies and new practices. A lot of that was also linked with agricultural colleges and universities in Canada. I think, primarily in the eighties and nineties that was in most places dismantled. Now in some places it still exists in some form, but in most parts of Canada it was just de-funded.

The easiest way to get information from an agriculture professional is to talk to an input company. So, most farmers are working with agronomists or certified crop advisors who are employed by input companies. So, the farmer doesn't actually pay for that advice. Those people are also salespeople for agricultural inputs. So, you know, there's a pretty inherent conflict of interest in that relationship.

The Ontario government had one person who was an organic specialist when we started farming and we used to contact him all the time to get information. He was an amazing source of information and knowledge. He retired five or six years ago and was not replaced. And then the University of Guelph had one person, one professor who was in charge of their organic teaching, and it was also a great source of information and very generous. And he retired I think two years ago and was not replaced. So, the trend is continuing in the wrong direction. And especially folks who know about ecological or organic agriculture are becoming less common rather than more common in our public system.

And I think farmer-led research is part of the antidote to that situation and at Farmers for Climate Solutions, we're undertaking a major program to create a farm mentorship program across the country, where farmers can learn formally from other farmers about climate-friendly farming practices. And I think farmer-led research is part of that push that we need to make to rebuild capacity for farmer-to-farmer information sharing and to create an avenue for the flow of information that bypasses the input companies. So, you know, farmer-led research is now being used as a model for farmer-led extension. And I think that it's all part of an effort that I think is really important to regain control of the agriculture system by farmers for farmers.

HN: I would just reiterate that I think the program amplifies the voices of ecological farmers and legitimizes a lot of the work that we do. And then it breaks down barriers between farming styles.

{[Musical Interlude]}

HM: So, I grew up on a small family farm, and it's kind of a dying breed at that time. As the margins for profitability in farming have gotten smaller and smaller, farmers are taking a smaller piece of every food dollar all the time. There's been a real push for efficiency. And, you know, a lot of that is kind of a top-down decision-making process because the food system itself has gone in that direction, right, so you have larger companies making the decisions about where things are bought and sold and all that type of thing.

So, what's been pushed out of the farm itself with that efficiency is the time and the space and the money to prioritize things that are important to the farmer beyond money. Because obviously every farm needs to have a profitable business. They need to be able to feed their family and all of those sorts of things. Because farmers care about money, but they also care about soil protection and about healthy production of culturally-relevant foods and sustainable food systems and all of those things. And what farmer-led research is helping to do is to give some of that time and power and structure back so that there's time to invest into those other things, which really are a value to all of us, as an eater, right? So, I think it's helping to buffer some of that need for efficiency that has been really heavily moved in that direction in the last two generations of farming.

EN: That's great. Thanks, Heather, I just want to again come back to that idea of policy and ask again, sort of beyond just supporting farmer-led research, if there are any policy shifts that you think are important for addressing some of the structural barriers against ecological farming.

HN: I don't think I can really speak to policy that well, but I think that's what the farmer-led research project is doing to help ecological farming, is that it's allowing people to do their job as ecological farmers better and hopefully have more profitable business, which is good for them, but is also good for anybody else who's looking to get into ecological farming. It needs to be a successful business as well as you need to be able to accomplish, you know, growing healthy food in the way that you want to, and that is going to help reduce barriers towards ecological farmers.

EN: Now that you've raised this subject of just ecological farming practices and their importance, I'm wondering if you could just briefly again for the listeners, explain why you think it's important. Why does it matter that we're pushing these ecological farm practices or valuing what ecological farmers are doing?

HN: Farmers are the stewards of the land that's around us, like the vast majority of it. And so, preserving that land is obviously of importance to all of us. And whether that is our waterways, our soil, our pollinators, our bird species, all of those things. Much of that land is going to fall into the hands of farmers. And farmers want that land to be there and to be productive.

And the more ecological our practices are like, the healthier the food is that's coming off of that land. So, you've got environmental protection, you have the health of the food and the sustainability of the food system. Obviously, we've seen in the last two years that that can be shaken when there's only one way that things are done. And, you know, a prime example of that is in our local food system, our local butcher shops, which are also kind of being pushed out of business, they didn't shut their doors ever. We always had access on a small scale to those

products, and none of our local farms were unable to continue farming. And that stability of those systems is also important to us, and a lot of those things fall into ecological farming mindsets and practices. And so they really could make a huge change in our environment and our communities.

AD: What a great way to end this episode.

EN: I know! Heather, Brent and Sarah all do phenomenal work and they've left us with a lot of things to think about.

AD: Amazing. Well, thanks so much, Erin, for co-hosting this episode with us and for sharing your research and bringing in the perspectives of the EFAO. We really appreciate it.

EN: It's been a pleasure, thank you.

{[Musical Interlude]}

LY: Wow that conversation had a lot of levels! I really appreciated hearing the perspectives from different stakeholders.

AD: Yeah, it was really interesting wasn't it?

LY: I think this episode provides such a critical look into the importance of the EFAO and the participants in the farmer-led research program.

AD: Yeah it really does. It's really clear that farmer-led research has a huge role to play in shaping farming practice and farmer-to-farmer learning in Canada.

{[Outro Music Starts]}

LY: Thanks so much for tuning in for this episode of *Handpicked: Stories from the Field*.

Special thanks to Guest host Dr. Erin Nelson for working with us on this incredible episode, and to Sarah Larsen, Heather Newman and Brent Preston for sharing their insight. A special shout out to the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario.

This episode was hosted and produced by us: Laine Young [**AD:** and Amanda Di Battista], produced by Charlie Spring, and edited by Narayan Subramoniam.

This episode also features music from Keenan Reimer-Watts.

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LY: Please check out our show notes for a bibliography, teaching tools, and links to other relevant information that we used to produce this episode. Make sure you check out our website for other ways to engage with us.

AD: This episode of *Handpicked* was produced on the lands of the Neutral, Anishaanabe and Haudenosaunee people. We encourage you all to check the land acknowledgement link in the show notes to learn more. As always, I'm Amanda Di Battista.

LY: and I'm Laine Young, and this has been an episode of the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems' podcast, *Handpicked*.

AD: Make sure to tune in next time, for more freshly picked stories from the field.

{[Music Increases]}