

Grape Growers of Ontario Announces 2026–27 Board of Directors and Growers' Committee

ST. CATHARINES, ON — April 9, 2026 — Debbie Zimmerman, CEO of the Grape Growers of Ontario (GGO), is pleased to announce the election of its 2026–27 Board of Directors and 23-member Growers' Committee. During the meeting on Wednesday, April 8, 2026, the Board of Directors elected Kevin Watson as Chair and Jeff Duc as Vice Chair.

Kevin Watson, Chair, has been involved in Ontario's grape and wine industry since 1978 and currently farms approximately 100 acres of certified sustainable vineyards with his family. Kevin previously served on the Growers' Committee from 1999 to 2003, including one year as a Director. He was named Grape King in 2007 and subsequently served on both the Growers' Committee and Board of Directors until his election as Vice Chair in 2022. Kevin represents GGO on the Canadian Grapevine Certification Network (CGCN) and the Ontario Wine Appellation Authority (VQA) Board of Directors and serves on GGO's Advisory Committee. In addition to the vineyard, Kevin, his wife Cathy, and their two children also operate an on-site home winemaking and barrel business, Watson's Barrels & Winemaking Supplies.



Jeff Duc, Vice Chair, is a third-generation grape grower in Niagara-on-the-Lake, managing Forrer Farms alongside his father, Ray Duc, a former Chair of the GGO Board. The family operates approximately 250 acres of vineyards. Jeff served on the Growers' Committee from 2020 to 2024, was elected to the Board of Directors in 2024, and was named Grape King later that year. He represents GGO on F.A.R.M.S. and serves on the Board of Directors of the Niagara Peninsula Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association.

The 2026–27 Board of Directors includes representation from across Ontario:

- Niagara-on-the-Lake: Steve Pohorly, Dan Lambert
- St. Catharines: Will George, Joe Schenck
- Winona: Brock Puddicombe
- Prince Edward County: Robert Peck

"At the Grape Growers of Ontario, the Next Generation Committee was established in 2019 with a clear purpose: to nurture, mentor, and build a strong foundation for the future of Ontario's grape growers. It is incredibly rewarding to see that vision in action, as several members of the Next Gen Committee are now serving in leadership roles at the Board level, including Brock Puddicombe, Jeff Duc, Aaron Oppenlander, Dan Lambert, Andrew Wilson and Will George. This is a strong reflection of the committee's impact in developing the next generation of leadership for our industry," says Debbie Zimmerman.



GGO welcomes Jordan Hernder and the following members to the 2026–27 Growers' Committee:

District 1 – Niagara-on-the-Lake and Niagara Falls

Jeff Duc, Ben Froese, Jordan Hernder, Dan Lambert, Mark Lepp, Aaron Oppenlaender, Steve Pohorly, Pia Seeger, Rick Smith, Chris Van de Laar, Kevin Watson

District 2 – St. Catharines, Lincoln, West Lincoln, Hamilton, Wellington, Dufferin, Peel, Halton

Doug Funk Jr., Will George, Chris Mullet-Koop, Brock Puddicombe, Joe Schenck, Craig Schmidt, Benjamin Whitty, Philip Wiley

District 3 – Southwestern Ontario, Waterloo, Perth, Huron, Grey, Bruce

Andrew Wilson, Mat Vaughan

District 4 – Eastern and Northern Ontario

Robert Peck, Keith Tyers

GGO extends its sincere appreciation to Matthias Oppenlaender for his leadership and service during his term as Chair of the Board. His steady guidance and commitment have played an important role in supporting our organization and industry.

The organization also acknowledges Murray Wilson, who concludes five years of service as a Director representing District 3. Murray brought valuable insight, business perspective, and a strong voice for growers to the Board, and his contributions are greatly appreciated.

With the election of its 2026–27 leadership, Grape Growers of Ontario continues its commitment to supporting a strong, sustainable, and competitive grape and wine sector across the province.

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