

NATIONAL FARMERS INITIATIVE

ATLANTIC REGION REPORT

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Introduction

Like other regions in Canada, the Atlantic provinces are facing a timely and pressing need to train new entrants for agricultural production. As aging farmers approach retirement, there is a looming void in farm succession as family-farms dissolve and potential successors and/or new producers face hesitancy in committing to the common realities of life-long debt and on-going and demanding labour. One could suggest that these concerns are rooted in a deeper apprehension of the current economic viability of starting a farm, which, despite “buy local” campaigns and increasing consumer awareness of food politics, has not yet influenced an overall increase in living wage and ultimately, profit for those involved in agricultural production.¹

Compared to other regions in Canada, from subsidies supporting infrastructure and training costs to land access, there are many advantages to farming in the Atlantic region. However, and as this report will review, there are still plenty of hurdles facing new entrants that are affecting the success and sustainability of emerging farm operations.

The purpose of the New Farmer Initiative is to identify and examine challenges and opportunities facing new entrant farmers and to assess strategic agricultural policy and program initiatives in Canada that may successfully support new entrants and alleviate issues that are currently affecting the viability and sustainability of new farm enterprises.

Based on the findings that emerged from these initial consultations, this report will detail a basic overview of some of the most consistently noted existing agricultural services supporting new growers in Atlantic Canada, along with mention of the most consistently mentioned barriers that are affecting new farmers in the region. This is followed with description of the programs and areas of policy development that may have the most potential in minimizing challenges facing the next generation of farmers, with encouragement for the next phase of the New Farmer Initiative.

On behalf of the New Farmer Initiative, the author would like to extend her sincere thanks and appreciation for the valuable time and input of the stakeholders consulted for this project.

Background

For this project, with the assistance of Tegan Renner², information was collected throughout the Atlantic provinces by Lucia Stephen, co-founder and coordinator of the *Grow A Farmer* Apprenticeship and Mentorship programs.

Established in 2013, *Grow A Farmer* is a branch of the Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network, providing support and resource development for new and aspiring organic producers. This initiative provides a range of services to new entrants, including curriculum-guided farm apprenticeship programs; mentor-match-making assistance; and targeted events and workshops that aim to provide technical support and build community connections for beginning farmers.

As core funding is not accessible to support the administrative needs of the initiative, the efforts of *Grow A Farmer* are primarily managed off of funds-raised, with supplementary financial assistance sought for isolated training activities.

¹ This fact is particularly relevant for those managing small, diversified operations that exclusively serve direct-markets.

² Tegan Renner serves as the New Brunswick Coordinator for the Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network, a non-profit organization working to enhance the viability and growth of the Atlantic Canadian organic agricultural community through a unified regional network (www.acornorganic.org).

Overview of Consultations

With Ms. Renner's support, seventeen phone interviews and one in-person interview were conducted across sectors among the four Atlantic provinces between September-November 2014. While some conversations were under forty minutes, others stretched to nearly two hours, with an approximate average of one-hour per consultation. This included discussion with agricultural specialists; funders; farmers; representatives of agricultural organizations; and other stakeholders associated to new entrant start-up. To review a full list of interviewees, please see Appendix I.

Farmers ranged in experience and style of production, managing either large commodity oriented enterprises that catered to export, to smaller mixed operations that produced and direct marketed more specialty crops, such as organic products or products that were less commonly produced locally (i.e. mushrooms, culinary herbs). Government stakeholders were chosen based on their overall awareness of agricultural production within the given province, and also for their connections and work related to new entrants.

Out of the eighteen consultations, thirteen took place between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, with three in Prince Edward Island and two in Newfoundland.

While statistics are currently unavailable, this research suggests that the population of new farmers in each province tends to be largely split between those succeeding large conventional family-farm operations and a growing population of less-traditional, smaller-scale, mixed operations that cater to more specialty crops and direct market through participation in farmers markets or CSA programs.

Programs and Opportunities

From training to financial assistance, each Atlantic province has a different spectrum of programs and services available to specifically support new entrant producers, with varying benefits and challenges in accessibility for recipients. Generally, these services are mainly funded by the Growing Forward 2 initiative, with a much smaller percentage managed by private and/or non-profit ventures. It is worth noting that no land-linking programs exist in the Atlantic region, and existing training and financial opportunities are fairly limited in supporting all types of new entrants (i.e. some opportunities seem to cater more to larger conventional growers, while others target a niche, like organics. With the possible exception of the Dalhousie Faculty of Agriculture, no outlet for training or financial assistance appears to provide equivalent support and access for a diverse combination of new entrant farmers).

In contrast to other regions in Canada, while all services can be noted in Appendix II, there are several opportunities worth noting that are providing unique and/or much needed assistance to new and aspiring producers in the Atlantic region.

In Nova Scotia, the Department of Agriculture has introduced **THINKFARM**, a facet of the province's government that is specifically devoted to supporting the success, growth and entrepreneurial capacity of new and transitioning producers in Nova Scotia through a variety of services and resources.

In addition, Nova Scotia is home to **Farm Works Investment Cooperative Ltd.**, a community economic development fund (CEDIF) that enables Nova Scotians to annually purchase common shares in a varied portfolio of NS-based food and farming businesses. In turn, these shares are cycled into loans that support the start-up and sustainability of new food and farming entrepreneurs. Contrary to the services provided by the NS Farm Loan Board, FarmWorks issues loans that are accompanied with ongoing business mentorship.

Perennia is a crown corporation outsourced by the Nova Scotia government to provide extension services and technical assistance to both new and experienced farmers. Out of the four Atlantic provinces, stakeholders within and outside of Nova Scotia noted the province as having exceptional extension services in the region, which range from providing on-farm research projects that assist in inspiring new channels of production and sales, to providing one-on-one consultations that can assist with more-technical and direct support for new operations of all types of production.

In New Brunswick, the Department of Agriculture offers the **Agriculture by Choice Program** that provides multi-faceted opportunities to enhance and increase new entrant skill development and assistance. It's worth noting that many other programs provide assistance to new entrants in New Brunswick as well, ranging from support for season extension infrastructure to subsidies for those pursuing organic certification, which can be a substantial and often inaccessible cost for a new entrant in their early stages of business development.

To support the preservation and inventory of available farmland, the province's **Conservation Easement Act** allows easements to be placed on agricultural (i.e. "working") land, which allows farmland to be protected from non-agricultural development. In addition, the province's **Farmland Identification Program (FLIP)** provides a voluntary program that defers provincial property taxes on eligible farmland and outbuildings to encourage the preservation of real property for ongoing farming use.

In Prince Edward Island, the provincial government's **Future Farmer Program** offers a five-year opportunity for new entrants to join and access seven different components of assistance, ranging from skills assessment and business planning consultation to interest rebates and (up to 75%) reimbursement for agricultural training events and courses.

Interviews suggested that there are currently no initiatives that are looking to preserve farmland on the Prince Edward Island, or ones that would help to make more farmland available to new entrants by offering rent-to-own or leasing arrangements (which was suggested by one interviewee as being a great path for newcomer).

Though Newfoundland faces major challenges in geographic location, affecting their access to resource and training services, the province still boasts highly praised initiatives that are supporting new entrants across the region. As the province owns approximately 90-95% of land the land in Newfoundland, the **Crown Land Act** was introduced to make "crown" (i.e. government-owned) land available to lease to new and aspiring farmers for 50-100 years, for as little as a couple hundred dollars per acre. This land is commonly woodland, which, upon access, must then be cleared and developed. While some would say this still becomes quite a costly endeavour, there is a supplementary program that many people seek to help offset the costs of their start-up.

The **Provincial Agrifoods Assistance Program** is Newfoundland's exclusive funding program that is 100% supported by provincial capital. It was developed to assist in supporting the areas that the Growing Forward framework was not covering—including costs of land clearing and development; construction or upgrade of fruit and vegetable storage facilities and equipment; tractor purchases and other infrastructure assistance; and secondary processing and diversification of products.

Regional Challenges

Based from the conversations conducted for the New Farmer Initiative project, access to training and capital were the most significant and consistently mentioned barriers affecting the progression of skills and establishment of new entrants to agriculture in Atlantic Canada.

To briefly digress, though an outsider perspective would suggest that land appears to be more accessible in the Atlantic region, research and ongoing dialogue with stakeholders has proved that the comparatively easier access to this sole component of farm-business development does not as easily pave the way for a farmer's success. While land costs tend to be lower—especially in comparison to prices facing growers in Ontario and British Columbia—there is compromised awareness of market opportunities, as well as concerns of market saturation for those exclusively relying on market-sales to support their farm operation. Therefore, land access is still a concern of many new entrants in the east, but simply in a slightly different context than one might understand the issue in other parts of Canada.

Consultations proved that many new entrants are facing difficulties accessing proper training and education to support their understanding of agricultural production and farm business management. Though both formal and in-formal opportunities exist locally, which includes the presence of the historic Dalhousie Faculty of Agriculture³, stakeholders noted a lack of direction about what is actually available and most useful in establishing a strong foundation of agricultural skill and education⁴. Outside of Nova Scotia, stakeholders repeatedly referenced a lack of available and formal agricultural experience or coursework, and though farm-experience and in-person mentorship are often heralded as being crucial for a new entrant's professional development, the lack of financial security often linked to unpaid or stipend-supported positions can be a deterrent for many in taking the leap. Thus, the financial impacts of these pathways was also noted as a significant barrier for new entrant success as they compromise the necessary savings and experience for new and aspiring farmers in the region.

Like other provinces, there are several available farmer-mentors across sectors and commodity-groups, and seemingly lots of aspiring farmers, but both groups face challenges in establishing or partaking in more formalized (i.e. curriculum-guided) apprenticeship programs. The commitments of (often) housing and feeding an apprentice and providing ongoing education on a volunteer basis, and without financial incentive, can compromise a farm's overall productivity and therefore, profit.

These issues facing both the new and experienced mentor create hesitancy for many in transitioning what would traditionally be an exchange of room and board for farm labour, to becoming more structured and effective apprenticeship/mentorship programs. With further development and efficiencies, these services could also provide additional impact in creating clearer linkages between senior and beginning farmers, and help to assist with farm succession and land access.

In addition, access to capital was also mentioned consistently, especially for younger farmers, who don't often have enough assets to secure farm loans. Purchasing inputs and equipment is still extremely expensive, compared to the outputs that are involved. Debt, though common for most farmers, is particularly easy to accumulate for new entrants, especially those succeeding larger-sized conventional operations, where the costs of infrastructure and/or quota can be extremely costly, and with little opportunity for financial assistance. Regardless, as one farmer mentioned, "You end up not thinking about the debt-you think about the profit, even when it's marginal."

Opportunities for Future Work

Though this project gathered a general assessment of opinions across a large and diverse agricultural region, these early consultations proved that ongoing dialogue would be valuable in deepening our understanding of current issues facing new entrants to farming in Atlantic Canada. In turn, these

³ Formerly known as the Nova Scotia Agricultural College.

⁴ ACORN's Grow A Farmer initiative sought to remedy this concern through the development of the 2013 Guide for Beginning Farmers, a 122-page manual, providing a "one-stop shop" of training, land and financial resources indexed for each Atlantic province.

advances would help to better identify clear directions for areas of policy, resource and program development.

Based on the numerous mentions of training concerns, at this stage, it appears that more financial incentives should be created for those pursuing farm-based experience and/or mentorship. The former Step Up Mentorship Program with Farm Management Canada—which used to offer up to \$2-4000K for farmer mentors— provides a great example of how financial incentive and basic structure of ongoing reporting can provide great assistance to the valuable time provided by mentor farmers and for the successful transfer of knowledge and wisdom to new generations of growers.

Other initiatives were mentioned and/or favourably encouraged to help address access to training and education: minimum-wage salary grants; extended self employment benefits programs (to access EI for forty weeks while starting an agricultural business, without having to have previously accessed EI to qualify for the service); and farm employment programs (available to youth as well – similar to the Canada Summer Jobs opportunity).

Regarding access to capital, the most commonly referenced support services were likened to Quebec's, FIRA program, offering flexible start-up grants and microloans to growers of all scales of production. One stakeholder admirably noted that Quebec's "culture of collaboration and positive recognition of the cooperative approach" increases success for new entrants as it challenges the conventional understanding of what farming involves and helps to engage community.

For land access, the concept of an Agricultural Gifts Program was regularly discussed as a potentially viable incentive to increase the preservation and renewal of farmland in the Atlantic provinces.

Evaluation of NFI Process

This nation-wide project proved to be undoubtedly useful in gathering an initial assessment of the country's diversity of services currently supporting new entrants to farming; identifying gaps in current offerings and noting potential pathways of future resource, policy and program development. However, compared to other Regional Leads, the difference of having one-Lead, with assistance, cover four very different provinces, rather than one, meant that the findings were more superficial than desired. With reflection, the input generated from these consultations should really be seen as a sampling of insights, deserving of more in-depth analysis and follow-up. These findings are thus not necessarily indicative of the collective and most-popular opinions of the provinces' young farmer communities.

Regardless, the New Farmer Initiative is serving to more effectively support new entrants by uniting the dynamic and important work of farmer trainers across the Canada, which will help to share resources; minimize duplication of efforts (and thus wasted funds), and streamline regional offerings to bolster the successful use and awareness of helpful tools.

This project established new communications, increased awareness of important issues and resources, and helped to foster strong and vibrant, cross-sector, regional networks of new entrant assistance. As this project moves forward, these communications should be continued and expanded on, encompassing other stakeholders, to help diversify and deepen our understanding of current matters affecting the future of agriculture in Canada.

Furthermore, with such a notable lack of available quantitative data to support this report, it seems necessary that the next phase of the New Farmer Initiative involve development of a national survey that would capture relevant and nuanced information regarding new entrants to agriculture.

Though the sheer amount of information dissemination and presentations limited in-formal (and valuable) conversation among attendees at the 2014 New Farmer Roundtable, the day still proved to be successful in providing a rare opportunity to gather a diverse mix of new farmers stakeholders to learn from one another and strategize for effective solutions. The author encourages more opportunities to gather these stakeholders, either regionally or nationally, in a facilitated but less-structured setting that allows for more time and opportunity to meet with different attendees and to share inspiration and tangible ideas about ways to move these issues forward.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this report reflects the opinions of nearly twenty Atlantic-based new farmers stakeholders in assessing the primary challenges and benefits supporting future agricultural producers in the Atlantic provinces. These insights will be contrasted with other regional reports in determining the scope of a national dialogue and possible areas of future policy and program development. These new and developing partnerships—within each region and across the country—are very promising for the future success of the New Farmer Initiative as we move forward in strengthening these ties and create a more unified network of support for all beneficiaries.

Appendix I – List of Individuals Consulted

Nova Scotia

Av Singh, PhD, Perennia, Just Us! Centre for Small Farms
Becky Sooksom, Agriculture Officer for the NS Department of Agriculture
Deborah Stiles, Professor, Former Director of Rural Research Centre, Dalhousie Faculty of Agriculture
Jaclyn Biggs, THINKFARM Coordinator
Linda Best, FarmWorks Investment Cooperative
Phillip Keddy, NS Young Farmers, Large-Scale Conventional Grower
Shannon Jones, Broadfork Farm, Cumberland Food Action Network,

New Brunswick

Cedric Macleod, NB Young Farmers, Large Conventional Grower
Chris Michaud, Board member of Agriculture Alliance, Farmer
Claude Bertheleme, Crop Specialist, NB Department of Agriculture
Eva Rehak, Director of the National Farmers Union NB
Rod English, NB Department of Agriculture
Vanessa Allain, Farmer; NB Department of Agriculture
Zach Melanson, NB Community Land Trust, Community Forests International

Prince Edward Island

Mark and Sally Bernard, Barnyard Organics, product of family-farm succession
Ryan Weeks, PEI Dairy Farmer
Sandra MacKinnon, Future Farmer Program Coordinator, PEI Department of Agriculture

Newfoundland

Ian Richardson, NFLD Dairy Farmer, moved from PEI family farm; former President of Canadian Young Farmers Forum
Sarah Crocker, Farmer, Seed to Spoon Cooperative, NL Food Security Network

Appendix II – Services/Resources Mentioned in Consultations

Nova Scotia

Annapolis Valley Farmland Trust
Dalhousie Faculty of Agriculture
FarmNext Program
FarmWorks Investment Cooperative Ltd.
Horticulture NS
Just Us! Centre for Small Farmers
NS Farm Loan Board
NS Federation of Agriculture
NS Young Farmers
Perennia
THINKFARM

New Brunswick

Agricultural Alliance/Ferme NB
NB Agriculture Development Board – Department of Agriculture
NB New Land Lease Program - Department of Agriculture
Really Local Harvest Coop

Prince Edward Island

Holland College
PEI Adapt Council
PEI Business Development Program – Department of Agriculture
PEI Certified Organic Producers Co-op
PEI Future Farmer Program - Department of Agriculture
PEI Farm Technician Program
PEI Federation of Agriculture
PEI Young Farmers

Newfoundland

Crown Land Act
Provincial Agrifoods Assistance Program
NL Future Farmer Initiative
NL Young Farmers