



## National Food Policy Briefing Note: New Farmers

### Summary of the issue:

A sustainable food system includes sustainable livelihoods for those who produce our food. Canada, however, is experiencing a farm renewal crisis: since 1991, we have lost more than a quarter of our farms, just over 12,000 since 2011. The average age of Canada's farmers is 55, and many will soon be looking to pass on their operations to a new generation of farmers. Seventy-five percent of farmers, however, do not have someone lined up to take over their farm. As the number of farms drop, increasing input costs and high farm debt threaten the overall profitability of farming.

The good news is that Canadians are increasingly interested in pursuing agriculture as a career, and many new farmers are succeeding in developing successful farm businesses. Yet new farmers face significant challenges in terms of access to land, capital, training and labour, and current agricultural policy does not sufficiently address these issues. This is particularly true for new farmers operating in non-conventional sectors (organic and/or agro-ecological, direct-marketing, small-scale) and those who do not come from an established farming background in Canada. This diversity of new entrants requires targeted policy interventions to support and enable their long-term success. Now, more than ever, we need more diversity in agriculture, and we need more new farmers to assume existing farm assets and create new farm businesses in order to supply Canada with sustainable and local food.

### Vital Stats:

- The average age of Canada's farmers is 55.
- Only one in 12 farm operators has a formal succession plan for how to transfer their farm operation to the next generation.
- Almost half of all farm operators report that they engage in off-farm work, with 30% of operators working at least 30 hours per week off-farm.
- For the first time since 1991, the number of new farmers under 35 increased slightly, from 24,120 in 2011 to 24,850 in 2016. The number of women farmers is also slightly on the rise, up from 27.4% in 2011 to 28.7% in 2016.
- One in eight farm operations used direct marketing to Canadian consumers in 2015.

### What needs to be done:

The Canadian government needs to take proactive steps to encourage new entrants and viable farm succession, as well as to help new farmers succeed over the long term. Supporting farm renewal is not just about farmers: it will have ripple effects by increasing local and regional economic development and strengthening the social fabric of both rural and urban communities. Without a significant investment in encouraging and supporting new farmers, the future of Canadian agriculture remains uncertain, and with it the overall sustainability of Canada's food system.

We envision an agricultural sector that is environmentally sustainable, economically viable and focused on producing healthy, safe, nutritious food for all Canadians. A Food Policy for Canada affords us the opportunity to broaden our focus beyond export-oriented, large-scale, monocrop agriculture, and include diverse, ecological farmers as key players in building a more sustainable and resilient food system.

## National Food Policy Action

- Work with provincial/territorial, municipal and Indigenous governments and other stakeholders to improve farm start-up conditions (land access and start-up funding), succession planning and knowledge transfer.
- Establish a National Farmland Protection Strategy to conserve prime agricultural lands.
- Expand the definition of “beginning and young farmer” in agri-food policy to encompass all new entrants, including those not from farming backgrounds, second careerists, Indigenous Peoples and new Canadians.
- Ensure programs are inclusive of a diversity of farmers (type and scale of farming, in both commodity and non-commodity sectors, domestic and export markets, and in emerging, non-traditional farming sectors)
- Encourage the shift to more agro-ecological farming practices, including organic.
- Support the development of local and regional foods systems.
- Provide increased support and incentives to enable farmers to create more meaningful on-farm employment opportunities and improve the retention rate of skilled labour.

## Key Resources for Further Reading

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (2009) [Dialogue Tour on Young Farmers and Farm Transfers](#).

New Farmers Initiative - Food Secure Canada (2016). [Towards Farm Renewal, Business Development and Labour Pillar](#).

National Farmers Union (2015). [Losing Our Grip 2015 Update: How Corporate Farmland Buy-up, Rising Farm Debt, and Agribusiness Financing of Inputs Threaten Family Farms and Food Sovereignty](#).

National Farmers Union (2012). [Farmers, the Food Chain and Agriculture Policies in Canada in Relation to the Right to Food](#). Submission to the Special Rapporteur On The Right To Food.

National Farmers Union - Youth Caucus (2016). [New Farmers in Canada: A Baseline Report](#).

Statistics Canada (2016). [2016 Census of Agriculture](#).