

Home Grown Crisis – Growing our farmer population

Agriculture and the food sector employs one in 8 Canadians, supplies more than 8% of our GDP and contributes multiple benefits, from environmental protection and landscape protection, to healthy local food. Yet we are facing multiple, unprecedented crises in agriculture in Canada. Despite the strong interest in local food, the long-established trends of fewer operators, fewer young operators and fewer farms show no signs of reversing. Farm debt keeps rising, as does the cost of getting into and maintaining a farm. Climate change is bringing weather extremes, from drought to floods that add significant production challenges and have already cost billions in lost crops and revenue. Farmland loss across the country continues unabated, and corporate concentration at all links in the food chain continues to limit financial viability and rural resilience.¹

Agriculture in Canada is facing a crisis of succession, with more than half of the Canadian population over 55, and 80% looking to retire in the next 10 years. This pending retirement of more than half of our farmers could mean the disintegration of rural communities and stewardship of the land as well as a significant turnover in farm assets in the near future. More than ever, we need more new farmers to assume those assets and build new ones.

Yet new farmers face particular barriers to entry and challenges to getting established. Some new farmers are part of a generational succession and take over large, commodity-oriented enterprises. But many come from outside the farming community and start out small, maintaining mixed production that is delivered through numerous direct market channels. Almost all of them start with significant debt to be serviced by whatever income they can derive from farming.

Agricultural policy in Canada has long been dominated by a focus on export markets and larger and larger farms to the detriment of smaller, ecological, owner-operated farms and of the rural communities of which they are a part. Targeted policies are urgently needed if we are to maintain and rebuild Canada's farm population. We need policies and programs that will have a transformative impact on the future of farms and food systems in Canada.

Vital Facts:

- Between 1991 and 2011:
 - Canadian farmers 55 years or older have increased from 37.7% to 50%.²
 - the number of farmers under the age of 40 years old declined almost 75% from 74,159 to 20,229;
 - farm size has increased at an unprecedented rate of 130%; and
 - we lost 26.5% of the farms across the country.³

¹ <http://www.farmaid.org/issues/industrial-agriculture/corporate-concentration-in-ag/>

² Statca.gc.ca, "Demographic Changes in Canadian Agriculture". Martin S. Beaulieu, 2015. Retrieved May 5, 2015: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/96-325-x/2014001/article/11905-eng.htm>



- In the last two decades, outstanding farm debt has increased steadily and speedily from \$23.4 billion in 1993 to \$77.9 billion in 2013 - an increase of 332.9%.⁴
- 75% of the soon-to-retire farmers do not have a family member to take over the farm.⁵

What needs to be done:

We are calling on the government to undertake an overhaul of Growing Forward 2, the Agricultural Policy Framework, within the first year of a new government, to ensure that its programs are accessible to and adequately serve the needs of new farmers. This is to be complemented by programs to reduce land, capital and training barriers for new farmers (details below).

A renewed agricultural policy framework will:

- Reorient agriculture policy towards multi-functionality, highlighting the multiple benefits for society & the environment;
- Fund consulting and extension services for farmers; and
- Fund affordable training, mentoring, and apprenticeship programs that recognize the importance of farmer-to-farmer knowledge transfer.

Access to land programs will:

- Develop joint federal-provincial/territorial legislation to prohibit foreign ownership of land, limit land acquisitions by private investment funds; and
- Remove incentives and put in barriers for speculative and absentee land ownership.

Access to capital programs will:

- Expand Farm Credit Canada's envelope in order to develop low interest loan and small character-based establishment grant programs and make available to aspiring and new farmers who meet the minimum criteria.

These programs will be supported by robust Statistical Information:

- Maintain and improve the detailed Census of Agriculture by Statistics Canada (every 5 years) by adding, more specific questions pertaining to understanding the realities and barriers new farmers face and the impact of the revamped agricultural policy framework (Growing Forward 2).

Additional reading:

³ Beaulieu, Martin, S. 2015. Demographic Changes in Canadian Agriculture. Statcan.gc.ca. Retrieved May 5, 2015: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/96-325-x/2014001/article/11905-eng.htm>

⁴<http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&retrLang=eng&id=0020008&paSer=&pattern=&stByVal=1&p1=1&p2=-1&tabMode=dataTable&csid=>

⁵ Robicheau, Sarah. 2012. Helping Good Things Grow. In *Health and Sustainability in the Canadian Food System*. Eds Rod MacRae & Elisabeth Abergel. Vancouver : UBC Press. p.245-270



Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. 2010. *Young Farmers: The Future of Agriculture*. http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2010/parl/XC12-403-1-1-02-eng.pdf

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