

FARMLAND

A Prerequisite for Farmers, Food – and Agri-food Policy

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POLICY BRIEF

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SUMMARY

- Canada's agriculture, agri-food, and agri-based products sector is a cornerstone of the Canadian economy¹ and food security – and farmland is its foundation.
- Current federal policy does not refer to the importance of protecting Canada's agricultural land base as a resource for the sector. This omission is a critical gap in current federal policy.
- In spite of forty years of efforts by provincial and municipal governments, Canada is losing farmland, especially some of its most productive farmland.
- The current assortment of provincial policies and approaches, many of which are moderate to weak, is not enough.
- National leadership and provincial collaboration are needed to better protect farmland as an indispensable resource for the sustainable development of the agricultural sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Through established legislative, regulatory, and Cabinet processes, AAFC should make a clear, direct statement of policy to protect Canada's farmland as a national interest.
 - In collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, AAFC should ensure that protecting farmland is a foundation of the next federal-provincial-territorial agricultural policy framework.
 - In collaboration with other federal ministries (e.g., Health Canada), AAFC should ensure that protecting farmland is a foundation of a national food policy.
- The Privy Council should build provincial collaborations around the federal statement of interest to protect farmland.
- AAFC should establish a national land use monitoring program in order to track the changed uses and loss of agricultural lands.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors are members of a national research project to study principles and beneficial practices of agricultural land use planning in Canada. The aim of the project is to formulate policy recommendations that will protect farmland and promote farming as the highest and best use of these lands. The project started in 2013 and will be completed in 2017. For more information about the project please visit the project website at www.unbc.ca/agplanning, or contact Dr. David J. Connell, Project Lead (250-960-5835 or david.connell@unbc.ca). Funding for the project was provided by a SSHRC Insight Grant (#435-2013-1726).

INTRODUCTION

Our main message is that AAFC must recognize and affirm that protecting farmland is a prerequisite of sound agriculture and food policy.

Farmland is an indispensable resource as Canada adapts to shifting domestic and global drivers, including market volatility, urbanization, climatic disruptions to global food supplies, and growing demand for local food and farmland amenities.

Yet, neither of the past Growing Forward frameworks mentions the need to protect Canada's agricultural land base as the foundation for federal-provincial-territorial agricultural policy, nor does the Calgary Statement for the Next Policy Framework.

► **The omission to protect farmland as an indispensable resource represents a critical gap in current federal policy.**

Impacts on farmland are plain to see. Agricultural land has been lost to residential, commercial, and industrial developments and used for country residential estates, golf courses, gravel pits, wind turbines, oil and gas well sites, and solar 'farms,' among other uses.

► **The loss and changed use of farmland is often invisible to policy for lack of timely, accurate, and reliable data.**

At best, the available data present only a partial picture of farmland loss in Canada. The last comprehensive national review of agricultural land was reported in 2005², but based on Census data with significant limitations. The most recent estimates (from 2013) of land use changes at a national scale are based on a special tabulation using satellite imagery to measure ecosystem goods and services^{3,4}.

KEY FACTS ABOUT LOSS OF FARMLAND IN CANADA

- Only 7% of Canada's land base is used for agriculture⁶
- Only 5% of its most productive land is free from severe constraints to crop production⁷.
- By 2001, about one-half of Canada's urbanized land use was located on dependable* agricultural land⁸
- From 2000 to 2011⁹, the settled area on dependable agricultural land increased by 19%
- From 2001 to 2011¹⁰, the farm area located on dependable agricultural land has declined by 969,802 hectares

*“Despite Canada's size,
dependable agricultural land
is a scarce resource in this country”*

Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin, 2005.⁵

FARMLAND PROTECTION IN CANADA

The loss of farmland became a prominent concern of land use planning in the late 1960s and early 1970s during the rapid expansion of suburbs into rural areas. Related issues include the presence of non-farms uses, fragmentation of the land base, and concurrent farm uses such as energy developments. All of these issues affect the availability of farmland and increase pressures on farmland prices.

LAND USE PLANNING for AGRICULTURE

As a matter of policy, protecting Canada's farmland is primarily a concern of land use planning, for which responsibility is distributed among federal, provincial, and municipal governments. While provinces retain jurisdiction to establish provincial land use policy and to assert provincial interests, such as farmland protection, they confer most land use planning responsibilities to municipalities for them to manage the orderly development of their areas, including agricultural lands.

In addition to agricultural land use planning, other legislative mechanisms, such as right-to-farm legislation and preferential tax policies, are also used to support farmers and maintain the farmland base.

- ▶ **Canada's farmland is highly exposed to more conversion and non-farm uses.**

Over the past forty years, provinces have adopted different approaches for agricultural land use planning. The primary legislative mechanisms include an agricultural zone with restricted non-farm uses, a land commission to manage agricultural lands, a statement of provincial interest (SPI) in agricultural land, and a provincial land use policy (PLUP) for agricultural land. However, most provinces do not use all of the mechanisms available to them (see Tables 2 and 3 in the appendix).

- ▶ **Most of Canada's provinces have only moderate to weak legislative frameworks^a. Only Québec, British Columbia, and Ontario have very strong legislative frameworks to protect farmland^b.**

- ▶ **Many provinces have chosen not to protect its agricultural land base to the extent that they can through the mechanisms available to them.**

Even for provinces that have enacted Statements of Provincial Interest (SPI) to protect farmland, this commitment is undermined by not integrating public priorities with lower jurisdictions or failing to minimise uncertainty by using ambiguous language or having inconsistent policies.

^a At the time of the analysis, New Brunswick and PEI were developing new legislation that, if approved, would improve the strength of their framework. Nova Scotia is also reviewing its provincial agricultural land use policy.

^b Note that we recognize differences within British Columbia and Ontario. In 2014, BC divided its Agricultural Land Reserve into two zones, which introduced two sets of rules for governing agricultural lands in the province. In Ontario, the province is covered by the Provincial Policy Statements (PPS); some regions are also covered by more restrictive policies (e.g., Greenbelt Act, Growth Plan).

RECOMMENDATIONS

► RECOMMENDATION 1

Through established legislative, regulatory, and Cabinet processes, AAFC should make a clear, direct statement of policy to protect Canada's farmland as a national interest.

The relative importance of the farmland base is best understood from a national perspective rather than from provincial or municipal perspectives. Although local governments have the greatest level of responsibility for land use planning, it is widely acknowledged that they must contend directly with competing interests. Their high dependence on the municipal tax base leads to decisions that often favour urban development over preserving agricultural land. This structural constraint can be countered by a provincial interest to protect farmland. A strong provincial framework ensures that local policies are set within the context of broader public priorities. By extension, a national statement of interest in protecting the agricultural land base will help to align provincial policies with national public priorities.

A federal commitment to protect farmland must be integrated in current policy development. Therefore,

- In collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, AAFC should ensure that protecting farmland is a foundation of the next federal-provincial-territorial agricultural policy framework;
- In collaboration with other federal ministries (e.g., Health Canada), AAFC should ensure that protecting farmland is a foundation of a national food policy.

► RECOMMENDATION 2

Privy Council to build provincial collaborations around the federal statement of interest.

Although land use planning is a concern of all levels of government, responsibility for land use planning is the primary responsibility of municipal governments. The legislative frameworks of provincial governments both enable and constrain what municipal governments can do. In addition, national leadership to build provincial collaborations is needed to better protect farmland as an indispensable resource for the sustainable growth of the agricultural sector.

► RECOMMENDATION 3

AAFC should invest in a national land use monitoring program in order to track the changed uses and loss of agricultural lands.

No effort to protect farmland – at any level of government – can be done effectively without a national land use monitoring program. Thus, we recommend that AAFC invest in special data collection and analysis, ideally using remote sensing, in order to monitor changed uses and losses of agricultural lands. The lack of current, accurate, and reliable data is evident in this policy brief. As noted, the last account of agricultural lands in Canada was published in 2005. Although this is the best account available, even this measure has recognized limitations.

A viable agricultural sector must also be supported by strategic planning at all levels in order to maximize benefits to society from the multiple ecological and cultural values of agriculture. Corresponding programs are required to secure the financial viability of farming for large, medium, and small operators, as well as support sustainable agriculture and food systems. For example, economic reform of development charges, infrastructure investments, property tax reform, agri-food economic development and incentives for farmland protection are also needed.

Comments from forum participants

“The information learned, the people met, and the materials gathered, are most welcome and will be of great assistance in the development of New Brunswick’s agricultural land policy and related action plan.”

R. English, Senior Project Analyst, Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, NB

“...brought an unprecedented wealth of knowledge and experience together to explore this important national topic.”

B. Gourlie, Provincial Environmental Engineer Livestock, Ministry of Agriculture, SK

“...provided a complete overview on agricultural land planning in each of the Canadian provinces.”

P. Quesnel, Conseiller en aménagement et développement rural. Ministère de l’Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l’Alimentation, QC

NATIONAL FORUM

June 20-21, 2016
Ottawa, Ontario

An unprecedented event took place in Ottawa this year. For the first time, land use planners representing all of Canada’s provinces came together at a national forum to discuss provincial policies for protecting farmland. The purpose of the forum was to critically assess current policy and practices and to discuss what needs to be done to better protect Canada’s agricultural land base. New gaps and opportunities to collaborate emerged from the meeting.

Building capacity for agricultural land use planning

Working together begins with being together. Prior to the forum, most of the participants did not know each other or had never met. Thus, convening the forum was a significant accomplishment on its own. It set a foundation for a national network of provincial-level agricultural land use planners and future collaboration.

Beneficial practices

A critical area addressed was practices that support agricultural land use planning. To be effective, a provincial legislative framework for farmland protection must be implemented rigorously and consistently.

Participants identified the following as areas of practice that must be addressed to support land use planning policies:

- Interdepartmental collaboration and communication at provincial level
- Capacity for land use planning at municipal level
- Provincial-local government relations
- Provincial assistance and support to local governments
- Support for farming operations to complement farmland protection
- Use of additional tools to support legislative framework
- Measurement, evaluation, and availability of data
- Presence/absence of political influence
- Level of public support
- Taxation

The forum was organized as part of the national research project on farmland protection. A summary of the forum’s proceedings is available on the project website at <http://blogs.unbc.ca/agplanning/national-forum/>

NOTES

1. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada [AAFC] 2016. Calgary Statement – Towards the Next Policy Framework. Government of Canada. On-line: http://www.agr.gc.ca/resources/prod/doc/pdf/calgary_statement_declaration_calgary_jul_2016-eng.pdf
2. Hoffman, N., G. Filoso, and M. Schofield, 2005. *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin* Vol. 6, No. 1. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 21-006-XIE. On-line: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/21-006-x/21-006-x2005001-eng.pdf>
3. Statistics Canada, 2013. Human Activity and the Environment Measuring ecosystem goods and services in Canada. Environment Accounts and Statistics Division. Catalogue no. 16-201-X. On-line: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/16-201-x/16-201-x2013000-eng.pdf>
4. Statistics Canada, 2014. Human Activity and the Environment: Agriculture in Canada. Environment, Energy and Transportation Statistics Division. Catalogue no. 16-201-X. On-line: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/16-201-x/16-201-x2014000-eng.pdf>
5. Hoffman, et al., 2005, p. 4.
6. Statistics Canada, 2014, p. 19.
7. Hoffman, et al., 2005, p. 4.
8. Ibid, p. 1.
9. Statistics Canada, 2013, p. 9.
10. Statistics Canada, 2014, p. 26.
11. Hofmann, N. 2001. “Urban Consumption of Agricultural Land.” *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin* Vol. 3, No. 2. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 21-006-XIE. On-line: <http://publications.gc.ca/Collection/Statcan/21-006-X/21-006-XIE2001002.pdf>
12. Hoffman, et al., 2005.
13. Smith, B. (1998). *Planning for Agriculture*. Victoria, BC: Agricultural Planning Commission.

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APPENDIX

The information in Table 1 is adapted from two *Rural and Small Town Analysis Bulletins* published by Statistics Canada in 2001 and 2005^{11,12}. Although dated, the information provides a snapshot of the amount and distribution of the most productive agricultural lands in each province and territory. The data in these tables are based on Census data, which have recognized limitations that affect accuracy, reliability, and timeliness.

Table 1. Amount of Dependable Agricultural Land (km²), Canada and Provinces

Province/Territory	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Dependable Agricultural Land	Total Land Area of Province	Dependable Agricultural Land	
						...as Percent of Total Land within each Province	...as Percent of Canada's Total Agricultural Land
Newfoundland Labrador	-	-	67	67	405,720	0.0	0.0
Prince Edward Island	-	2,626	1,422	4,048	5,660	71.5	0.8
Nova Scotia	-	1,700	10,219	11,919	55,490	21.5	2.4
New Brunswick	-	2,056	13,823	15,879	73,440	21.6	3.2
Quebec	223	10,713	13,625	24,561	1,540,680	1.6	5.0
Ontario	27,635	23,335	25,567	76,537	1,068,580	7.2	15.5
Manitoba	2,111	29,617	24,499	56,227	649,950	8.7	11.4
Saskatchewan	12,282	73,341	104,482	190,105	652,330	29.1	38.6
Alberta	6,719	38,701	61,039	106,459	661,190	16.1	21.6
British Columbia	78	1,574	5,270	6,922	947,800	0.7	1.4
Yukon	-	-	-	-	483,450	0.0	0.0
Northwest Territories	-	-	-	-	3,426,320	0.0	0.0
Canada	49,048	183,663	260,013	492,724	9,997,610	4.9	100.0

Land area is measured in square kilometres

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Table 2. Provincial Legislative Frameworks: Overall Strength and Components

	Overall Strength	Agric. Zone	Agric. land commission	Provincial statement of interest	Provincial land use policy	Most direct statement	Required integration
QC	Very strong	✓	CPTAQ	LPTAA	<i>Orientations</i>	“secure a lasting territorial basis”	“to be consistent with”
BC (Zone 1)	Very strong	✓	ALC	ALC Act		“To preserve agric. land”	“must be consistent with”
ON (PPS+)	Very strong				PPS+	“Prime agric. areas shall be protected”	“shall be consistent with”
BC (Zone 2)	Very strong	✓	ALC	ALC Act		“To preserve agric. land”	“must be consistent with”
ON (PPS)	Strong				PPS	“Prime agric. areas shall be protected”	“shall be consistent with”
MN	Moderate			SPI	PLUP	“To protect agric. land”	“must be generally consistent with”
SK	Moderate			SPI		“optimizes the use of agric. land”	“shall be consistent with”
NL	Moderate	✓ (ADA)				“development shall not be carried out”	“if they are contrary to...”
NS	Moderate to Weak			SPI		“To protect agric. land”	“shall be reasonably consistent with”
AB	Weak				PLUP	“To contribute to... agric. industry”	“it is expected”
NB	Weak						“shall conform with”
PEI	Weak						“shall be consistent with”

Source: National research project, Agricultural Land Use Planning in Canada.

Table 3. Provincial Legislative Frameworks: Assessment of Strength by Land Use Planning Principles

	Overall Strength	Maximize stability	Integrate across jurisdictions	Minimize uncertainty	Accommodate flexibility
QC	Very strong	*****	*****	****	***
BC (Zone 1)	Very strong	*****	****	***	****
ON (PPS+)	Very strong	****	*****	****	***
BC (Zone 2)	Very strong	*****	****	**	***
ON (PPS)	Strong	****	***	***	***
MN	Moderate	****	***	**	**
SK	Moderate	**	*****	***	**
NL	Moderate	**	***	**	***
NS	Moderate to Weak	***	**	**	**
AB	Weak	**	**	*	*
NB	Weak	*	**	*	**
PEI	Weak	*	*		

Source: National research project, Agricultural Land Use Planning in Canada. See website (blogs.unbc.ca/agplanning) for details.