

2.3 Agriculture and Food Security

It is not simple nostalgia to imagine sustainable local agriculture economies. There is immense possibility to create a vibrant rural Canada where small-scale producers and distributors can make decent livings and create healthy communities. Viable alternatives exist.

Since the 1950s, two-thirds of the families active in Canadian farming have left their profession. Large corporations isolated from local economies and the needs of people living within agricultural areas thrive, while families and communities disintegrate slowly. Roots are lost, and important knowledge of ecologically beneficial agriculture is discarded under the pressure to use expensive fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically modified seeds.

The big corporations involved in agriculture are bustling: the agri-business giants that provide farmers with fertilizers, machinery, and other inputs; the transport companies; the firms that process the food; and the wholesale and retail stores — all have increased their revenues, dividing the profits from high food prices among them. Two meat-packing companies control nearly 90% of Canada's beef industry; five transnational organizations control 80% of the Ca-

nadian grain trade. The profits from these immense businesses benefit few.

Within these corporate endeavours, small-scale producers struggle to meet their basic needs. Despite consolidation and increased production, farmers have slightly lower average incomes than the general Canadian population. There is minimal support for local food-based infrastructure or co-operative initiatives that allow farmers the opportunity to bargain equally, or grow crops that contribute to ecological diversity. Farming communities near urban areas are increasingly swathed in concrete as it becomes more profitable to sell limited agricultural land for development than continue to farm.

Current federal and provincial food-standard policies favour large agricultural producers, and isolate farmers working within local economies. For example, in many parts of the country new meat regulations designed for large factory establishments have been mandated for all producers. Small-scale operations have to build high-cost processing plants to specifications they will not recover in their economic cycle. Across the board, farmers now spend nearly a dollar in operating expenses for every dollar they make from

their agricultural products. As a consequence of this cost-price squeeze, many are leaving the industry, damaging local economies to a point almost beyond repair.

As older farmers migrate to the cities, few young agricultural specialists are available to fill their place. Our ability to provide food for our families from domestic soil is about to diminish permanently. To state it simply, young farmers cannot afford to farm. The average age of Canadian farmers is 50. As they retire, there will be few people left to grow food. In a period of climate change it is foolish to depend on Mexico and China for the majority of our food needs. We need supports to allow young people to grow the food we all depend on.

To cope with these and other adverse conditions, farmers have relied on cooperatives to process and sell their grain, milk, animals, eggs, and poultry and bargain with the railroads. But this cooperative strategy is opposed by private agri-business and conservative-minded governments, who denounce it as interference with “market freedom.”

The Canadian Wheat Board — one of the last bastions of farmer co-operation — was targeted specifically during 2007. As the Minister of Agriculture announced the federal government would continue efforts to strip the Canadian Wheat Board of its exclusive marketing authority for barley, the future of Canadian producers was put into question. The farmer-controlled Board provides Western barley growers with a marketing advantage worth \$60 million a year — money that flows into their pockets rather than into shareholder returns for multinational grain companies who might otherwise market the crop.

Simultaneously, the government has tabled legislation that will undermine the regulatory powers of the Canadian Grain Commission. The new legislation will leave family grain farmers vulnerable to multinationals, reversing completely the protective intent of the original legislation. These purposeful removals of market

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Agriculture policies that support large agri-business and undermine family farms have a negative impact on women who are often part of the family work unit.

Federal policies that undermine farm marketing boards and regulations protecting family farms reduce the viability of these farms and the livelihoods of many farming women.

In 2001, the University of Regina reported that approximately 40% of farm women work more than 13 hours a day. They do 80% of the household work, 75% of the bookkeeping, 21% of the field operations, and 17% of equipment repairs. More than half (54%) of women were involved in off-farm work, and only 25% felt their farm operations could continue without supplementing it with off-farm income.¹

leverage for family farmers benefits only their large-scale corporate competitors.

Finally, most of the traditional methods to encourage and support local food producers fall within prohibited or restricted trade measure categories. One means of supporting local food production and distribution is to enable local farms to compete with larger corporate producers by providing subsidies. Domestic support subsidies are, for the most part, prohibited or reduced by the *WTO Agreements on Agriculture* (1995). This makes regional initiatives difficult, if not impossible, to support.

Yet, while problems loom, there are effective, well-researched solutions. By supporting local economies through the following measures, farmers can begin to re-claim a fair share of the wealth they produce, and agriculture will once again be a financially viable option for all Canadians.

The *Alternative Federal Budget* will:

- build rural and local food systems by funding infrastructure for direct marketing of local products, and providing low-interest loans for initial start-up-

capital for local processing, distribution, and direct retailing;

- invest particularly in locally controlled atmosphere storage, freezing, and cooling facilities so that producers can increase yield, reducing dependence on food from thousands of kilometres away;
- encourage a mandatory 30% procurement of domestic and locally produced products for federal, provincial, and municipal food-based contracts; and
- support initiatives that promote institutional buying from local dairies, vegetable farmers, community-supported agriculture, mills, regional seed co-operatives, and farmer-driven food-box programs.

Besides providing ecological and economic benefits, mandatory procurement will eliminate trade redundancies where many food-producing regions have unnecessary cost by importing equal amounts of exported food products.

The AFB will expand local food systems by creating initial core funding for local branding and geographic indicator initiatives that create a market for specialty products. This encourages growers to maintain heritage varieties and systemic diversity, and creates new markets for domestic products.

In order to enable support for domestic procurement, this initiative will also work to challenge restrictive trade barriers — such as the WTO Green and Blue Box quotas — that make it impossible for domestic farmers to grow and market their goods within local economies.

All attempts to destroy or weaken the Canadian Wheat Board or Milk Marketing Board, and other cooperative agricultural market mechanisms, will be stopped. Instead, these agencies will be strengthened and democratized further so farmers' interests are fully protected.

The funding base and regulatory powers of the Canadian Grain Commission will be strengthened so that it can truly support agricultural initiatives. The Grain Commission runs a current annual deficit around \$10 million. This deficit equals approximately 43 cents per tonne. This is just one penny per bushel. Increased federal funding or slightly raised user fees will create a strong and effective Grain Commission that can advocate for and with all farmers.

Cooperative approaches to agriculture will be created through financial support for capacity building for new and emerging cooperatives, and by creating long-term opportunities for technical assistance, feasibility studies, leadership, and practical skill training, and implementing advisory services for agricultural networks and federations.

The AFB will commit \$50 million annually to establish these important programs.

Sustainable methods of food production will be supported by implementing tax benefits for farmers engaged in organic farming methods, bonuses for converting to organic agriculture, and providing financial support or bursaries for farmers who require training in ecologically-sustainable techniques of food production.

The AFB will allocate \$200 million per year to support the transition to sustainable and organic agriculture practices.

The current seed and fertilizer supply will be reformed by: a) banning the privatization of seed stocks; b) eliminating terminator seeds, and adding compulsory labels to products that have been genetically modified; and c) promoting seed saving initiatives.

Economically viable futures for young farmers will be assured by providing opportunities for technical assistance and financial incentives for young farmers wishing to access land, training, and start-up capital.

Our current food system is not designed with any regard for resilience, surge capacity, robust response to crisis, or ecological security.

Instead of ensuring that all Canadians can access a healthy and ecologically sustainable food supply, it benefits mainly large trans-national corporations.

As most food travels approximately 2,500 kilometres from its place of production to market, place-based approaches to agriculture are more cost-effective and ecologically sustainable.

These measures will make farming in Canada a financially viable industry that supports rural and urban economies. By developing vibrant local economies, farmers will no longer

need to leave the land, and those struggling to survive will work independent of massive government subsidies.

The long-term benefits and savings for farmers, consumers, taxpayers, and our own communities make these initiatives imperative. It is time to stop the nostalgia, implement alternatives, and bring the farm crisis to an end.

Notes

¹ <http://www.nfu.ca/faire.htm>