



Opinion

Canada is falling behind when it could be an agri-superpower

If we are all to live on this hot and crowded planet, our food and farming systems need to protect biodiversity and be carbon neutral, writes Evan Fraser of the University of Guelph.

BY EVAN FRASER

We all know that global population growth and climate change are challenging the world's leaders to find ways of protecting the food security of future generations. It's a daunting task. At the same time, Canada faces a huge opportunity since our farms and food system will become even more important globally over time. The question we must ask is how can we position ourselves to seize the moment?

COVID complicates next steps, and new challenges seem to have been revealed with every passing day of the pandemic. When meat packers tested positive for the virus, many beef processors had to significantly wind down their operations, and we became aware how our hyper-concentrated supply chains are vulnerable. As travel bans kicked in, we understood that our dependence on temporary foreign workers isn't sustainable. And, with concerns that other countries may limit food exports in the months to come, the assumption that our sustenance relies on goods and labour moving freely seems naive.



Agriculture Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau, pictured at a press conference. Canada would do well to put its agri-food system at the forefront of the post-pandemic recovery. Even before the pandemic, Ottawa's Advisory Council for Economic Growth recommended that investing in the agri-food sector was strategic. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Thus far, the industry has adapted well, and there have been remarkably few disruptions for most consumers. Nevertheless, farmers and workers are suffering, food banks have never been busier, and we have had to confront the fact that the people we rely on most for food security—those who stock the grocery stores, pick strawberries, and run abattoirs—are among the poorest paid and most precariously employed.

Even before COVID-19, a range of governments, including the B.C. premier's task force on food security and the federal Advisory Council for Economic Growth, recommended that investing in the agri-food sector was strategic.

Canada would do well to put its agri-food system at the forefront of the post-pandemic recovery. We should do this by investing in core principles that will ensure we become stronger and more robust.

The first principle is that to be safe, we must rebuild domestic production and processing capacity. The second is that, if we are all to live on this hot and crowded planet, our food and farming systems need to protect biodiversity and be carbon neutral. The third is that our food must be the safest, the tastiest, and the most nutritious in the world. Delivering on these goals will require the concerted effort of government, industry and consumers. But, if we work together, the rewards will be huge.

Government must set up programs to help build agri-food skills and training programs, support the regional infrastructure we need to produce and process food domestically, and create financial incentives that reward farmers who become greenhouse gas sinks. Consumers must support agri-entrepreneurs who are trying to do things differently. Industry must

marshal capital to invest in this vital sector.

From companies that offer zero-waste home delivery using e-commerce platforms, to aquaponic operations that integrate fish and vegetable production in indoor "vertical farms," the future of food has never been more diverse or more exciting. Traditional models such as community-supported agriculture and farmers' markets will play a role. We should expand these initiatives wherever possible. We must also nurture innovation in digital technologies that allow smart start-ups to produce food in controlled, indoor, environments. Both high and low-tech approaches are vital pieces of the puzzle.

Thanks to the work by the federal government, and groups such as B.C.'s food security task force, the vision for ag-food is in motion, but implementation is lacking. We are behind the Netherlands on many ag-food metrics. Countries like Singapore and Israel—not Canada—are recognized as loci of agri-innovation. Compared with these, Canada is something of a laggard, and this is a shame. We have the technological infrastructure, discriminating consumers, a stable regulatory environment, and sophisticated farmers and food processors. We should be a leader in the club of global agri-food innovators.

The work to make Canada an agri-food superpower will help ensure that our food system becomes more resilient and will mean that Canadians can enjoy the best quality food in the world, no matter what the 21st century throws at us. We can, and should, become a global leader, not only for producing the best food in the world, but also because we are the place that fosters the know-how on how to produce it.

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