



Agriculture

Introduction

COVID-19 has disrupted agriculture most visibly where serious outbreaks of the virus have caused mass illness or death. This was a major problem in large meatpacking plants, where conditions are close and there was not adequate protection for line workers, and on some farms that depend on temporary foreign workers.

Far too many of these workers paid for their employer's neglect with their lives, while many others were subjected to racist harassment by Canadian residents. Their deaths, serious illness, and mistreatment highlight the exploitation at the centre of our "normal" food system.

The rapid shift from restaurant and institutional meal service to at-home cooking, to comply with social distancing measures, disrupted the food supply. Processing capacity was overwhelmed as demand for quantities of foods and their packaging needs changed overnight. This led to shortages in grocery stores and income losses for producers alongside food wastage for those supplying the food and hospitality industries.

At the same time, local food sales increased suddenly. Direct-marketing farmers moved months' worth of supply in a few weeks. Social distancing rules closed some farmers' markets temporarily. This meant a complete loss of income for some farmers. Others quickly adopted online sales platforms and set up home delivery and pickup distribution systems while implementing new safe work routines. New demand is welcome, but without knowing if it will last, farmers face risks in ramping up production.

When international borders closed, virtually all of Canada's commercial horticultural, fruit, and honey production was jeopardized until seasonal temporary foreign workers were exempted and emergency federal assistance helped bring them in. Even so, fewer foreign workers

than normal were able to come. Many are pressured to do excess work, and experience serious gaps in health and safety protection, with no recourse.

Following the deaths in early June of two temporary farm workers in Ontario, Mexico stopped workers from coming to Canada until the federal government agreed to enforce existing safety rules. Meanwhile, farms without adequate labour are unable to complete their sowing and harvesting, resulting in financial losses and wasted food. In the face of labour uncertainty, some farmers planted corn and soy instead and may not return to vegetable production.

Outbreaks at meatpacking plants have also severely affected cattle and hog farmers. The beef sector is so highly concentrated that the two Cargill and JBS plants in Alberta fill 70% of Canada's federally inspected slaughter capacity. Backlogs mean that live cattle need to be held longer, increasing feed costs. Cargill and JBS also own or control much of the feeder cattle supply, enabling the multinational corporations to manipulate auction prices paid to independent beef producers. Cow-calf producers expect losses due to reduced demand and lower prices when they sell calves in the fall.

Hog production is more time-sensitive than beef. When processing plants are backlogged farmers feel there is little choice but to euthanize piglets. Canada's hog sector is highly export-oriented, so closures of U.S. plants affected Canadian producers, and hogs are selling well below the cost of production as a result.

Supply-managed sectors (dairy, broiler chickens, turkeys, eggs, and hatching eggs) were affected by the rapid change in demand. But since these sectors are distributed across Canada, have smaller processing facilities, do not rely on exports, and production levels are governed by the farmers themselves through quotas, impacts on individual farmers and the food system have been less severe than in beef and pork.

Local and regional abattoirs serving smaller-scale farmers were already stretched and are now booked up many months ahead. The need for more local and regional capacity is clear, as livestock producers are facing severe delays or simply cannot get their animals butchered.

COVID-19 may also have a significant impact on corn prices. A lot of corn is processed into fuel ethanol, and with less fuel being used during the economic shutdown, demand is lower. Corn is an important feed grain, so the slowdown in meatpacking also means less demand for feed. The impacts on other grains is still unknown, but the effect could be

serious if railway transportation or ports suffer COVID-19 outbreaks in a second wave.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) severely limited its 2020 field research season, which will set back public plant breeding and may result in reduced long-term research capacity. Organic commodity prices may fall if low incomes due to high unemployment cause demand to weaken as people to switch to lower-cost foods, as happened in the 2008-09 recession. Demand and prices for feed grains may also fall if lower consumer incomes translate into less meat consumption.

Regardless of the type of farm, farmers have had to adjust work routines to comply with public health measures. Supply chains for inputs, equipment, and services have been affected to varying degrees, adding extra costs and time, and in some cases restricting or limiting operations.

Toward a just recovery

Canadians care where their food comes from and how it is produced. They want to support Canadian farmers and are uncomfortable with highly concentrated ownership in the food system.

With policy rooted in principles of food sovereignty and agroecology, the AFB Recovery Plan will build a food system that will democratically provide sustainability, security, and stability in our food supply, and fair incomes for food providers and food consumers. In recognition that COVID-19 is not the first or last crisis we will face, our food system will no longer be designed to maximize extraction with “just in time” and “lean” approaches, but instead will build in buffers and reserves that provide resilience.

Using climate-friendly, low-emissions production, the post-pandemic agriculture sector will deliver a healthy and secure domestic food supply and provide sustainable livelihoods to a larger, younger, and more diverse population of farmers. This will allow Canadian agricultural producers to engage in fair international trading relationships in solidarity with the peoples of other countries.

Farmers are the foundation of the food system. They should have the security of land tenure, seed sovereignty, control of animal breeding stock, and effective market power within the economy. To support a vibrant ethos of agriculture—to nourish the larger community, culturally as well as physically—farmers will pass knowledge from generation to

generation, both within farm families and to new farmers from non-farm backgrounds.

Our new food system will broaden the foundation of rural prosperity by embodying gender equity, antiracism, and decolonization. Our post-pandemic food system will honour the treaties, traditional territories, and inherent rights of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous food sovereignty, food lands, and food ways will have priority.

Farmers and farm workers will earn equitable incomes, realizing the full value of their products, as Canada leaves behind its cheap food policy and reduces socioeconomic inequality so that all can afford high-quality, balanced diets.

COVID-19 short-term response phase

The AFB Recovery Plan will:

- Shut down the Industry Strategy Table, the federal government's advisory panel for a corporate-led COVID-19 recovery, and disband the Agri-Food Table, the committee of agribusiness executives appointed by Finance Minister Bill Morneau to develop policy for intensifying extractive, export-oriented agriculture through digitization, deregulation, and automation.
- Reform the Temporary Foreign Worker Program to ensure workers are guaranteed safe working and living conditions, as well as the ability to change employers and speak up without fear of deportation. The reforms will also ensure that they are granted permanent resident status on arrival (see Immigration chapter).
- Reduce dependence on large export-oriented meat plants by increasing the number and capacity of local and regional abattoirs. This can be done through transition funds to owners and prospective owners, expediting scale-appropriate food safety regulations, training more butchers and inspectors, fast-tracking the relicensing of recently closed abattoirs, and encouraging multi-species facilities that will facilitate diversity of livestock production.

- Expand the capacity of local food institutions such as food hubs and farmers' markets to provide aggregated processing, storage, and distribution facilities for smaller-scale producers.
- Develop programs and policies by 2021 that promote increased domestic food production, incentivize climate-friendly agriculture, and defund subsidies for extractive agriculture.
- Establish a Canadian Farm Resilience Administration, modelled after the former Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, to provide research, extension, and funding support for climate-friendly, low-input production. Reducing farmers' overreliance on petroleum-intensive fertilizers, chemicals, and other inputs can simultaneously reduce emissions and raise incomes. Low-input agriculture is a climate change adaptation and mitigation measure, and it can be a farm income solution.

COVID-19 medium-term recovery phase

The AFB Recovery Plan will:

- Ban lobbying by agribusinesses and their associations.
- Develop, revitalize, and support institutions for democratic control of the food system, such as supply management; single-desk marketing agencies; producer, consumer, worker, and multi-stakeholder co-operatives; land trusts; strategic reserves; public research institutions; and community food hubs, farmers' markets, and CSAs.
- Revise the mandate of the Farm Credit Corporation to provide credit to farms and food businesses implementing climate-friendly production systems and strategies.
- Incentivize and support the development of domestic food production and processing, to provide Canadian residents with a balanced, seasonal diet, reducing our dependence on imports, retaining more food dollars within Canada, and limiting exposure to the volatility of foreign markets.
- Redesign the business risk management programs under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership (CAP) to provide relevant

and equitable safety nets for farmers of all sizes and types. The programs should promote climate mitigation and adaptation, and support a food system oriented toward farmer livelihoods, consumer health, environmental sustainability, rural prosperity, and food sector employment. By fixing the farm income problem and reducing farm debt, farmers will become much less vulnerable to climate impacts, pandemics, and other crises.

COVID-19 long-term rebuilding phase

The AFB Recovery Plan will:

- Withdraw from trade agreements and negotiate international solidarity agreements that impel a virtuous circle that enhances justice, equity, diversity, and resilience among trading partners.
- Make Canada's major agricultural sectors more locally accountable by re-establishing and expanding the Canadian Wheat Board; outlawing captive supply of cattle; reducing the scale of farm hog production by returning to family farm production and single-desk marketing; reinstating domestic market share taken, via trade deals, from Canada's supply-managed sectors; and requiring imported fruits and vegetable production to meet all Canadian labour and pesticide standards.
- Establish trusts for farmland and supply-management commodity quota to reduce farmland-related debt and promote intergenerational transfer with dignity.
- Create agroecological farm educational programs in every province to help non-farm youth establish successful farms.
- Orient agricultural policy toward stability, resilience, self-reliance, and democratic governance by reducing integration with the U.S. economy and its regulatory framework.
- Implement a regulatory system that effectively enforces the precautionary principle to safeguard the air, water, biodiversity, and lands, and which protects farmers and consumers against hazards, balances power in the marketplace, and prevents decision-makers from being insulated from the impacts of their policies.