



# WHO WILL FEED US?

NEW FARMER PERSPECTIVES ON  
AGRICULTURE FOR THE FUTURE

Copyright 2021 by the National Farmers Union (NFU).

## **Lead Authors**

Ayla Fenton, Stuart Oke, Jessie MacInnis

## **Contributors**

Dana Penrice, Alex Fletcher, Shannon Jones, Virginie LP, Julia Laforge, John Bonaparte, Peggy Bailie, Eric Blondin, Will Robbins, Cammie Harbottle, Sara Dent, Cathy Holtslander, Maddie Marmour

# CONTENTS

---

<b>Foreword</b> . . . . .	<b>4</b>
<b>About</b> . . . . .	<b>5</b>
<b>Where have all the farmers gone?</b> . . . . .	<b>6</b>
<b>Colonialism, capitalism, and agriculture</b> . . . . .	<b>7</b>
<b>What's at stake if we do nothing to change agriculture in Canada?</b> . . . . .	<b>9</b>
<b>Agroecology: A path forward</b> . . . . .	<b>11</b>
Principles of Agroecology . . . . .	12
<b>New Farmers: Up to the challenge</b> . . . . .	<b>13</b>
Who are the new farmers? . . . . .	14
Obstacles and Opportunities for New Farmers . . . . .	15
<b>Supporting the Transformation</b> . . . . .	<b>16</b>
La Via Campesina . . . . .	17
Young Agrarians . . . . .	18
Cammie Harbottle, Waldegrave Farm . . . . .	19
Will Robbins, Maida Vale Farms . . . . .	20
Broadfork Farm . . . . .	21
Three Forks Farm . . . . .	22
John Bonaparte, Bare Bones Farm . . . . .	23
<b>Building the Transformation</b> . . . . .	<b>24</b>
A Sustainable, Agroecological Future . . . . .	25
Keep Farmers On Farmland . . . . .	26
Fair Markets, Fair Incomes . . . . .	27
Managing The Climate Crisis . . . . .	28
Access To Financial Resources . . . . .	29
Knowledge & Community . . . . .	30
Infrastructure & Scale-Appropriate Regulation . . . . .	31
<b>Summary</b> . . . . .	<b>32</b>

---



## FOREWORD

---

This report has evolved over several years with the help of many young farmers. It is thanks to the tireless work and passion of these people that this report has evolved from an idea to its final form here. To those who researched, worked, advised and consulted on its concepts and messages: **thank you.**

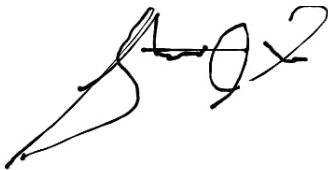
In many ways this report began in response to multiple intersecting crises. Crises of declining numbers of farmers and farms across the country, of an aging farmer population without new and young farmers to replace them, of deteriorating rural infrastructure, of cultural decay, of political division, and of inequity.

More recently, the gravity of the climate crisis has called to question the viability of the current farming system itself. Farming is already a difficult, unpredictable livelihood: the climate crisis is exacerbating these challenges, and the worst is yet to come.

As this report is published, we are well over a year into a global pandemic that has impacted every aspect of our society and highlighted the inequities within our food system. Canadians are quickly becoming acquainted with the problems inherent in a food system that treats food as a commodity, migrant farmworkers as expendable, and land as a resource from which wealth can be exploited.

Amidst these issues, it is clear to me and many of the young farmers seeking to produce food and build a just food system that a truly holistic approach to food systems transformation is needed. A grassroots approach, rooted in systemic change, and envisioned and enacted by diverse coalitions of people is the only way meaningful change will be achieved. It must be an approach that recognizes all people across the food system and meets them in the context in which they live, providing solutions which work for them. The following report lays out a road-map for such a system from the perspective of new farmers and how we begin building it together.

In Solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stuart Oke', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Stuart Oke**

Youth President

National Farmers Union

## ABOUT

---

The **National Farmers Union (NFU)** is a direct-membership organization made up of Canadian farm families, farming units, and farmer allies who share common goals. We work together to achieve agricultural policies which will ensure dignity and income security for farmers and their families while enhancing the land for future generations. We are committed to building food sovereignty: a food system that is economically viable, ecologically sound, socially just, locally rooted, and democratically controlled.

NFU Youth are NFU members under the age of 35. We are a network of young farmers concerned with the future of food and agriculture in Canada and around the world. This report is the result of work that began at our 2014 annual youth retreat, which brought together young farmers from across Canada. Recognizing the lack of research on new farmers more broadly, we undertook the work ourselves with the New Farmer Survey in 2015. We sought to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by new farmers, and the political and cultural changes required to support the shift to food sovereignty.

By new farmer, we refer to anyone who self-identifies as a new farmer; it is inclusive of all ages and diverse backgrounds.

As new farmers, we are at the heart of a nationwide resurgence of interest in agriculture. Our perspective is unique, as we experience the challenges and opportunities first-hand. We know that too many of us are struggling to start or sustain farms, and that many more attracted to farming are deterred by obstacles too often seen as insurmountable. While we work in pastures, greenhouses, fields, or urban gardens, we seek to support and network with one another. We learn that we face similar barriers and experience similar needs, and we talk about solutions. By building relationships and learning from one another, we begin to create a network of solidarity between new farmers whose circumstances vary widely. This solidarity is the foundation from which we will work towards food sovereignty.

---

*In this report, we bring forward perspectives, stories and ideas by new farmers, for new farmers. We acknowledge that this report has been developed by a group of majority white, settler farmers. We realize we are privileged to access land and resources that many cannot, and we recognize that we farm and live on First Nations and Métis treaty or unceded territories. We have much work to do to ensure that food system and agriculture transformation is equitable, inclusive, and just.*

---

# WHERE HAVE ALL THE FARMERS GONE?

Farmers play a vital role in the struggle for *food sovereignty* in this country. They influence Canada's ecological resources and natural systems, contribute significantly to domestic and international economies, and shape rural (and increasingly, urban) landscapes. We depend on farmers not only to feed us, but also to steward and regenerate the land for future generations.

For most of post-colonial Canadian history, the renewal of the farmer population was maintained through the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, assets and land on the family farm. Farm children learned alongside their parents to master the skills and knowledge of farming. However, this system is broken: the profitability of farming has declined and markets have become increasingly controlled by corporations, thus challenging the ability for small and medium-sized family farms to survive. This has led to a decline in farm-raised children taking over the family farm and has led to today's crisis in intergenerational transfer, recently the backbone of Canadian agriculture.

---

*FOOD SOVEREIGNTY is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations... it ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food.*

— Nyeleni declaration of La Via Campesina, 2007<sup>1</sup>

---

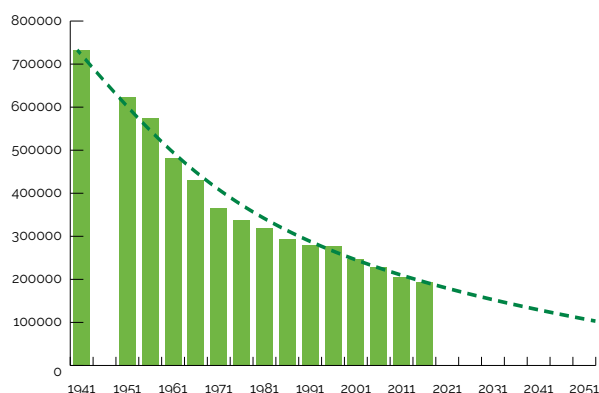
## Every citizen who eats has a stake in agriculture and farmer renewal.

In the 1930's, 1 in 3 Canadians were involved in farming. Today, farmers constitute 1.7% of the Canadian population and the number of farms and farmers has been declining for the past 70 years<sup>2</sup>.

Driven by wealth extraction by the corporatization of agriculture and the food system, generations of young people have had to leave Canadian farms to seek employment in cities. With rural depopulation and subsequent urbanization came a breakdown of the rural social fabric, and increasing societal pressures to “get a real job”, to consume, and to obtain advanced education, all of which created a stigma against staying on the farm.

Presently, the average age of farmers is 57. The number of farmers under the age of 35 has declined by 70% since 1990, and only 8.4% of farmers have someone lined up to take over their farm when they retire<sup>3</sup>. A small glimmer of hope: the 2016 census data showed the first small uptick (1.5%) in the number of young farmers.

FIGURE 1  
NUMBER OF FARMS IN CANADA OVER TIME



<sup>1</sup> La Via Campesina, *Nyeleni Declaration*, 2007. <https://bit.ly/3bbI0VO>.

<sup>2</sup> Government of Canada. *Census of Agriculture*, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3nekALx>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 2016.

# COLONIALISM, CAPITALISM, AND AGRICULTURE

---

It is impossible to examine the history of Canadian agriculture as practiced by settler farmers without exploring the colonization and systemic oppression of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC). Indigenous communities have sustainably managed land in North America for hundreds of generations, including through farming. Colonization brought new modes of agriculture and sought to eliminate Indigenous modes of relation to the land. Black people and other People of Colour historically experienced racism and blocked access to land beginning with the Black Loyalists and leading to the present day where we bear witness to an inequitable agriculture system where the vast majority of farmers are white.

Early European colonization was marked by a system of smallholder subsistence agriculture that attempted to mimic the diversified, low input, productive farmsteads of their home countries. Later, private property, Prairie settlement and the prairie grain economy was promoted to provide food for an urban workforce, a market for machinery produced in Canadian factories, and valuable export commodities—all of which depended on genocidal policies to remove the existing indigenous populations. Colonial policies actively excluded Indigenous nations from developing agricultural economies (see Carter, 1980/2019)<sup>4</sup>. When WWII came to a close, the corporations that had established themselves during the wars by manufacturing weapons turned their sights to the land: settler farmers were sold a promise of a high input, high output regime, while genocidal policies continued unchecked<sup>5</sup>.

The Canadian government followed the shift to high-input agriculture with aggressive export-oriented agricultural policies and urbanization policies that led to the consolidation and industrialization of agriculture.

---

*A cycle has emerged whereby government policies allow for increased corporate control of land and agricultural economies, giving those corporations more power and influence over future agricultural policies.*

---

Farmers in Canada and around the world have long resisted this consolidation of market power, notably by establishing collective marketing initiatives such as the Canadian Wheat Board (dismantled by the federal government in 2012) and systems of supply management

for farm products such as dairy, eggs and poultry. Nevertheless, the corporatization of agriculture and the increased prevalence of speculative land grabbing has empowered agribusiness to the detriment of small-scale diversified farms in Canada.

Similarly, Indigenous peoples have resisted colonial land theft and genocide to maintain their right to land and traditional food systems. The destruction of Indigenous foodlands and foodways by extractive industry and the militarized repression of Indigenous land defenders by the Canadian state are protracted crises.

Canadian agricultural policies continue to consolidate power in the hands of a few. The average farm size in Canada has increased steadily, and the total number of farmers has decreased. Cost of inputs and land have risen alongside total revenue, but net farm income remains stagnant and farm debt is rising, as corporations capture a growing share of the wealth. Most farmers rely on off-farm income, with farm income representing on average only 22% of household income. Interestingly, dairy, poultry & eggs are the only agricultural sectors which provide, on average, a primary source of income for farm families (more than 50% of total household income)<sup>6</sup>.

---

*The relationship between settler farmers and the struggles of Indigenous peoples and racialized workers and communities are interconnected in complex, often violent ways. This report does not intend to cover up or make light of these histories and present realities.*

---

With this broad context in mind, we must acknowledge again that this report is largely informed by settler farmer perspectives. The histories and experiences of farmers are discussed without very much specific reference to the problems and demands of Black, Indigenous, or farmers, hunters, gatherers and land stewards of colour. We recognize that in order to change direction and support new farmers, it is absolutely crucial to delve deeper into and focus on questions related to Indigenous rights and jurisdiction, how land and agriculture policies can support Indigenous farmers and land stewards and how BIPOC food producers face structural racism atop the barriers to farming we all experience. Further multidisciplinary research is needed to address these crucial questions.

---

<sup>4</sup> Carter, 1980/2019

<sup>5</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, 2015. <https://nctr.ca/records/reports/>

<sup>6</sup> Government of Canada. Census of Agriculture, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3nekALx>

## The Farm Squeeze

Figure 2 shows the difference between gross farm revenue (black line) and realized net farm income (green line). The area between the two lines represents farmers' expenses: the amounts they pay to input manufacturers (Bayer, Deere, Shell, etc.) and service providers (banks, accountants, etc.). The difference is staggering, and is demonstrative of a failing market-based agriculture system.

Despite farmer's attempts to maintain market power, over the past three decades, agribusiness corporations have captured 97% of farmers' revenues—nearly \$1.5 trillion dollars<sup>7</sup>.

Transnational corporations have made themselves the primary beneficiaries of the vast food wealth produced on Canadian farms. These companies have extracted almost all the value in the “value chain”, leaving Canadian taxpayers to backfill farm incomes: approximately \$100 billion has been transferred to farmers since 1985<sup>8</sup>. Farmers are forced to borrow the rest—farm debt is now at a record high of \$115 billion—and rely on off-farm income to make ends meet<sup>9</sup>.

---

*The massive extraction of wealth by powerful corporations from the agriculture system is a root cause of the ongoing farm income crisis.*

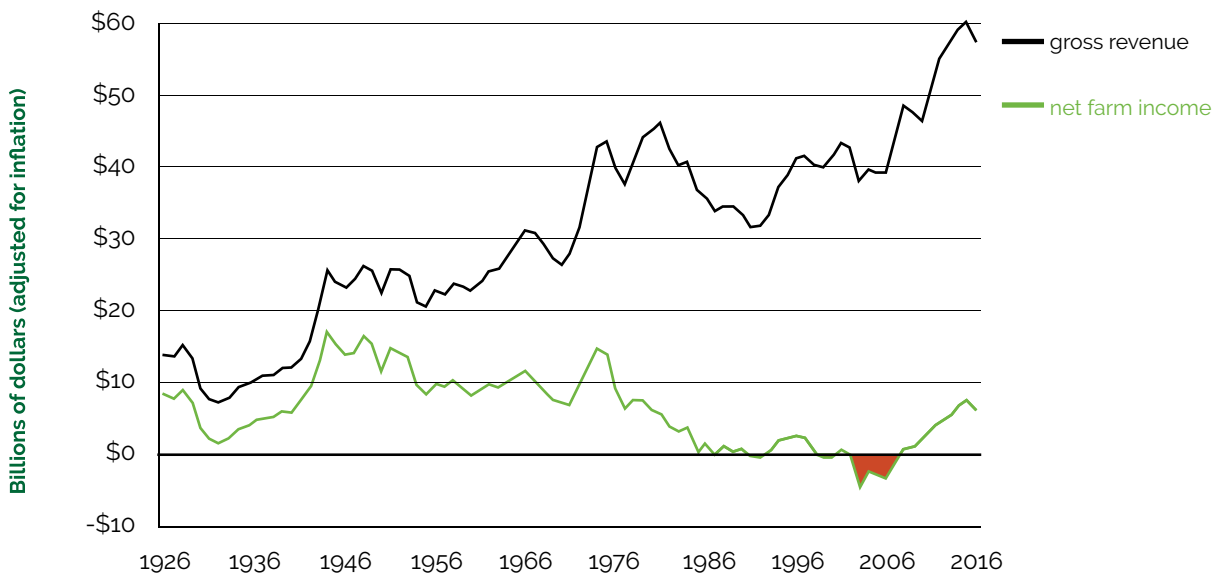
---

The consolidation of farms, reduction in the number of farmers, and extraction of wealth by corporations has been explicitly supported by Canadian agricultural policy over the past several decades. Our current policy framework focuses on gross farm receipts rather than net farm income and promotes export commodities rather than food for Canadians. The corporate-dominated food system puts profit first, externalizing everything else.

Is it any surprise that the sector has struggled to attract young people over the past several decades?

Supporting farmer livelihoods and rights is key to a food system rooted in food sovereignty.

FIGURE 2  
CANADIAN NET FARM INCOME AND GROSS REVENUE



<sup>7</sup> Qualman, D. “Agribusiness takes all: 90 years of Canadian net farm income”. (2017). <https://www.darrinqualman.com/canadian-net-farm-income/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid



# WHAT'S AT STAKE IF WE DO NOTHING TO CHANGE AGRICULTURE IN CANADA?

---

Our current food system is NOT feeding the country: it exploits people and the planet for the sake of profit.

## Human Health

Over 4 million Canadians are now affected by food insecurity, including one in six children, and these numbers are on the rise<sup>10</sup>. Obesity and diet-related diseases are now the leading cause of premature death and disability, and the annual economic cost of unhealthy eating has been estimated at \$6.3 billion, with direct healthcare costs of \$1.8 billion<sup>11</sup>. Much of this is a direct result of the industrialized food system marketing cheap, universal access to processed foods high in sodium, sugar and trans fats. These “convenience” foods are no replacement for whole, healthy foods, yet economic injustice and the promotion of processed food continue to jeopardize human health.

## Economic Justice

The profits from food production are increasingly concentrated amongst the corporate elite, rather than cycled through local economies and communities. In Canada, one in eight jobs is provided by the agriculture and agri-food system, yet the industry has been consistently criticized for poorly compensating workers and exploiting vulnerable populations<sup>12</sup>. This exploitation includes an immense reliance on migrant labour in agriculture, food processing and the service industry whose rights are perpetually violated.

## Climate Change and the Environment

About 30% of greenhouse gas emissions globally are attributed to the food system<sup>13</sup>. In Canada, 12% of emissions are directly attributable to agricultural practices, at least three-quarters of which result from the production and use of nitrogen fertilizers and enteric fermentation derived from livestock<sup>14</sup>. In the North American food system, it is estimated that for every calorie of food energy that reaches our mouths, we consume 13.3 calories of (mostly fossil fuel) energy, making this food system the least efficient in history<sup>15</sup>. Industrialized methods of crop production have ignored many facets of ecology that are essential to sustainable systems. The capitalist drive for profit and the subsequent lack of good management practices, education and collective involvement decision-making have in many cases lowered biodiversity, stimulated deforestation and/or desertification, and contaminated waterways. To learn more about agricultural emissions and climate-friendly agricultural practices, see “Tackling the Farm Crisis & Climate Crisis” by Darrin Qualman and the National Farmers Union<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> PROOF: Food Insecurity Policy Research. University of Toronto, <https://proof.utoronto.ca/>.

<sup>11</sup> MacAmmond, D., et al. “Food and Nutrition Surveillance in Canada, An Environmental Scan”. (Health Canada: 2000). <https://bit.ly/35bHXQ2>.

<sup>12</sup> Government of Canada, “An Overview of the Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food System 2015”. (2015). <https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/canadas-agriculture-sectors/overview-canadian-agriculture-and-agri-food-system-2015>.

<sup>13</sup> Arnuth, A., Barbosa, H., et al. “Climate Change and Land”. (IPCC: 2019). <https://bit.ly/3rYNfYD>.

<sup>14</sup> Qualman, D. “Tackling the Farm Crisis and Climate Crisis”. (National Farmers Union: 2019). <https://bit.ly/3hLatNf>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Qualman, D. “Tackling the Farm Crisis and Climate Crisis”. (National Farmers Union: 2019). <https://bit.ly/3hLatNf>.

## Gender and Unpaid Work

Globally, women produce more than half of the food, yet control less than 15% of the land<sup>17</sup>. In Canada, women now make up 28% of farm operators, a 3% increase since 1996, but are still much more likely than male operators to lease rather than own land<sup>18</sup>. Historically, women's contributions to Canadian farms have been grossly underestimated and undervalued economically, effectively "invisible" due to gendered division of labour, control of farm land, and household labour<sup>19</sup>.

## Racism and Colonialism

Canada is a settler-colonial nation. It is a contemporary reality that relations between Canadians, including farmers, with Indigenous peoples continue to be deeply unequal and exploitative. Agricultural policy has historically been used to promote a productivist, capitalist framework of food production and erode Indigenous food sovereignty. Canadian agriculture also increasingly relies on deeply unjust migrant labour programs, which result in the exploitation of racialized migrants. Further, the agriculture system itself has been built by and for white farmers, to the exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and communities of colour. The future of food and agriculture in Canada cannot be white-settler led if it is to move towards food sovereignty for all. For more information, check out [indigenousfoodsystems.org](http://indigenousfoodsystems.org) and [migrantrights.ca](http://migrantrights.ca)

---

*We can begin to address these problems by shifting to equitable food systems that promote direct, localized markets. In localized, agroecological food systems there are strong relationships between farmers and eaters, agroecological education and the ability to start a farm is accessible for all, and farmers are incentivized to implement agroecological practices. This is the path to food sovereignty.*

---

<sup>17</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization. "The gender gap in land rights". (2018). <http://www.fao.org/3/i8796EN/i8796en.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Government of Canada. Census of Agriculture, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3nekALx>.

<sup>19</sup> Corman, J., & Kubik, W. "Canada - Who's counting... on the farm?" *Women and sustainable business: Women in agriculture worldwide: key issues and practical approaches*, edited by Amber J. Fletcher (Routledge: 2017).

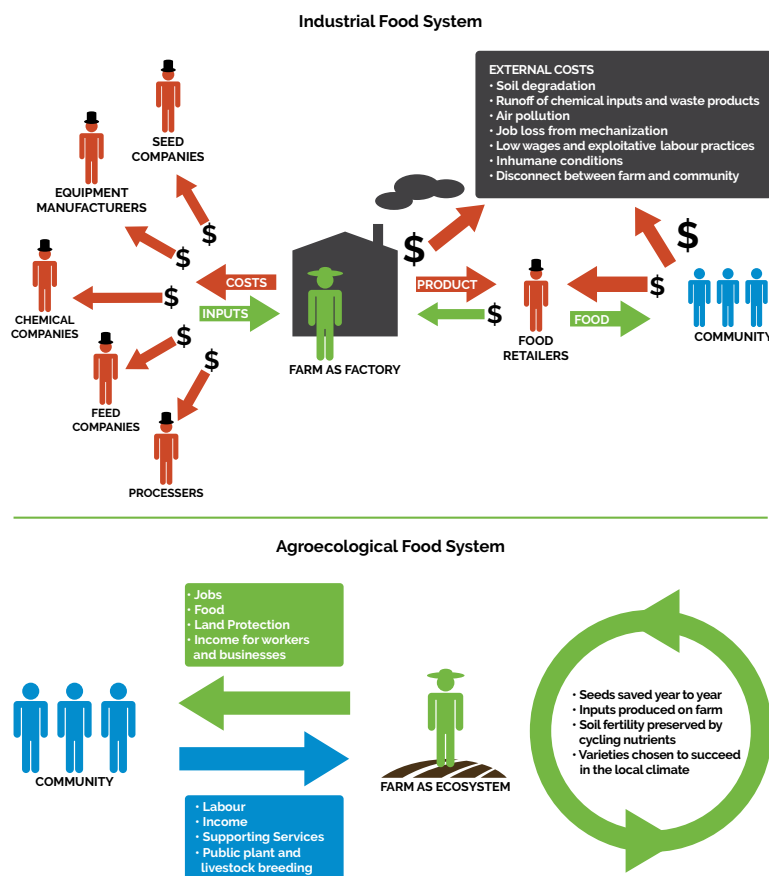
# AGROECOLOGY: A PATH FORWARD

Agroecology is a holistic approach to food production that uses—and creates—social, cultural, economic and environmental knowledge to promote food sovereignty, social justice, economic sustainability, and healthy agricultural systems. Agroecology is not only a set of farming technologies, but rather an integrated approach to food system transformation that requires a structural shift in societal power and economic relations: it puts the theories of food sovereignty into practice. It represents a solution to the multiple crises outlined in the first section of this report.

In the capitalist-industrial food system, transnational energy and agribusiness corporations seek to maximize their profits by selling inputs to farmers, then buying farmers' products at low prices to resell to eaters at higher prices. In contrast, agroecological systems are low-input and low-energy; they seek to shorten the distribution chain so farmers can earn fair incomes and invest in regenerating their land, while allowing eaters access to healthy, safe food.

Agroecology is the road-map to food sovereignty.

FIGURE 3  
**INPUTS AND OUTPUTS IN INDUSTRIAL VS AGROECOLOGICAL FOOD SYSTEMS**  
(SOURCE: NATIONAL FARMERS UNION)



## Principles of Agroecology

### AS DEFINED BY LA VIA CAMPESINA

1. Agroecology is a way of life, not just a set of technologies or production practices, and must be adapted to local contexts.
2. Production practices should be based on ecological principles and an understanding that life cannot be commodified.
3. Reduction of externally purchased inputs, and increased farm and community self-sufficiency will allow for greater farmer autonomy and strengthened rural economies.
4. Peoples and communities who feed the world need their collective rights protected in order to secure their access and control over the commons (seeds, land, waters, knowledge, and culture).
5. Knowledge sharing for food producers must be horizontal, peer-to-peer and intergenerational.
6. Direct, fair distribution chains, transparent relationships, and solidarity between producers and consumers are needed to displace corporate control of global markets and generate self-governance by communities.
7. Agroecology is political and requires us to transform the structures of power in society.
8. Youth and women are the principal social bases for the evolution of agroecology. Territorial and social dynamics must allow for leadership and control of land and resources by women and youth.

---

*The pillars of agroecology represent a vision for a food system that can support both farmers and eaters as they work to build food sovereignty.*

---

## Agroecology in Canada

Agroecology is often described as a science, movement and practice. As noted previously, agroecology is NOT a prescriptive set of production or marketing practices. The “common principles of agroecology” as defined by La Via Campesina are intentionally written as general principles, rather than rules, because the movement recognizes that they need to be adapted to local geographical and cultural contexts. What works for a market gardener in central Ontario will not work for a grain farmer in southern Saskatchewan, and what works for an urban farmer in Toronto will not reflect the needs of a First Nations farmer in northern Manitoba. Agroecology has been mostly explored in the context of re-localizing food systems, especially in the global south—but what does it look like in a country like Canada, with diverse physical geographies, very low population density and an enormous capacity for food production? This is for us, as farmers and eaters, to decide. For some farmers, it may look like producing for local markets, but agroecology and export agriculture are not mutually exclusive—by increasing cooperation amongst farmers, we can increase farmers’ market power, develop more fair trade practices, shorten supply chains and make healthy food available to Canadians and the world.

The precursor to implementing agroecology is social cooperation.

## NEW FARMERS: UP TO THE CHALLENGE

Our current agricultural and social policies have failed to create conditions conducive to food security for eaters or livelihood security for farmers. We must determine how governments, institutions and individuals can better support new farmers—both multi-generational farm families and first generation farmers. There are many across the country who come from non-farm backgrounds that want to begin farming, and many more who do not even consider farming a viable livelihood option due to the popular narrative emphasizing this notion. However, many young farmers are attracted to the farm livelihood and lifestyle for myriad reasons: self-employment, the concept of food sovereignty and contributions to local food systems change, ecological stewardship, and meaningful connection to the land, to name a few.

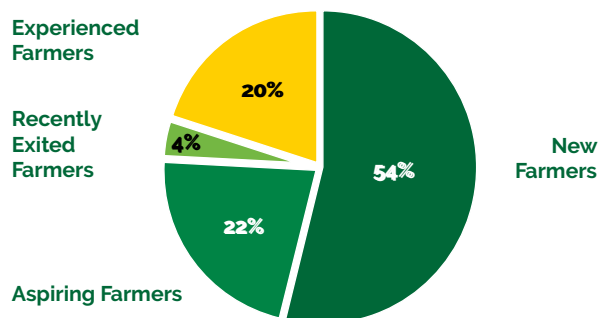
*In order to achieve food sovereignty and land regeneration, young people from diverse backgrounds must be supported when entering agriculture. This will require a major shift in government policy, but also in our cultural understanding of food systems.*

With increasing public awareness and mobilization around issues of food and agriculture and rising demand for local food, there is reason to be optimistic that we can transform our cultural ecology toward a regenerative, resourceful, resilient path forward for farming based on the principles of agroecology. With the energy of a new generation of farmers and encouragement of the generations of farmers that have come before them, farming can be part of a creative solution to the most profound challenges we face today.

Despite this, surprisingly little is known about new farmers in Canada. The NFU Youth set out to find out who new farmers are, what opportunities and challenges they are facing, and how our governments, organizations and citizens can better support them. In early 2015, in partnership with Dr. Julia Laforge, at Lakehead University, we conducted a national New Farmer Survey, which was widely disseminated through producer associations, food and agriculture organizations, community initiatives, and new farmer social media platforms.

In total, we gathered 1326 responses in English and French. We accepted responses from new (54% of respondents), aspiring (22%), recently exited (4%), and experienced farmers (20%), including farm operators, farm employees, and apprentices<sup>20</sup>. The results of this survey are presented throughout this report.

FIGURE 4  
RESPONDENTS' FARMING STATUS



The New Farmer Survey was a non-probability survey, meaning we cannot draw statistical conclusions from this data or extrapolate its results onto the larger farm population. Since the population of new farmers is not known in Canada (it is not tracked in any formal capacity) convenience sampling was used. The results we present here are consistent with information about new farmers that have been collected in various provinces from other research. Our New Farmer Survey fills a gap in the research by providing the first nationally-distributed survey of new farmers.

See *New farmers and food policies in Canada* in the journal *Canadian Food Studies* for a more detailed reporting of our methodology and results from the New Farmer Survey.

<sup>20</sup> Laforge, J., et al. "New farmers and food policies in Canada". (Canadian Food Studies: 2018). <https://bit.ly/2XeM4q6>.

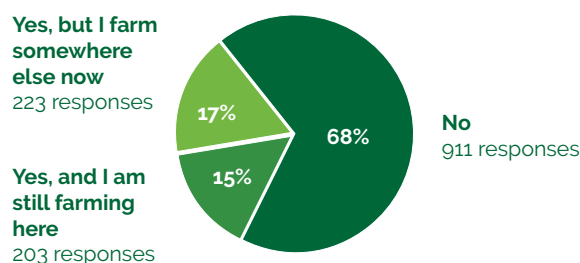


# WHO ARE THE NEW FARMERS?

## RESULTS FROM THE NEW FARMER SURVEY

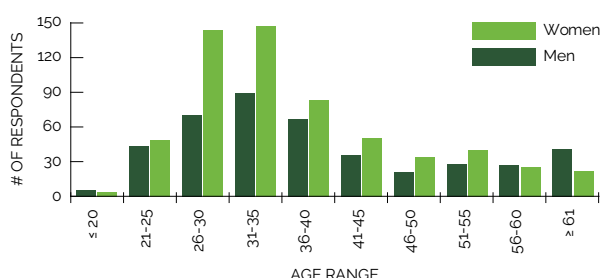
One of the most revealing outcomes of the survey was that 68% of respondents did not grow up on a family farm<sup>21</sup>. This finding reflects previous studies suggesting a rise in entry of individuals from non-farming backgrounds in comparison to those entering through family farming. Of those with less than 10 years of farming experience, 83% did not grow up on a farm, while those with 11 years or more of experience responded that 29% did not grow up on a farm, which may indicate a shift in the origin of new farmers in Canada<sup>22</sup>.

FIGURE 5  
DID YOU GROW UP ON A WORKING FARM?



58% of respondents were female, 41% were male and 1% identified as other<sup>23</sup>. This survey finding, alongside other background research including the 2016 agricultural census, suggests that in contrast to historical trends of agriculture being a male dominated sector, an increasing number of young women and non-binary youth are entering the sector, especially in agroecological and sustainable agriculture in Canada and beyond<sup>24</sup>.

FIGURE 6  
AGE AND GENDER BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS



What motivates this group of aspiring farmers? As one respondent in central Alberta put it, "...the intention with which I farm goes well beyond the fences that border the farm." The top three motivations for farming that survey respondents provided were an attraction to the farming lifestyle, a commitment to environmental sustainability, and a desire to participate in a family that is involved in agriculture.

Yet, the challenges remain: most recently-exited farmers that completed the survey indicated that the main reasons why they left agriculture were family, personal health or low profitability.

We compared the production and marketing practices of respondents who grew up on a family farm to those who did not, which revealed some interesting trends. We found that "first generation farmers" (those who did not grow up on a farm) are much more likely to engage in direct marketing, ecological production practices, and production of vegetables and niche products such as berries, mushrooms, and sheep/goat dairy. They also tend to farm smaller parcels of land.

Those who grew up on a farm, especially those who are still operating their family farm, were more likely to engage in conventional agricultural practices, production of beef, grains/oilseeds and dairy, and were more likely to sell into export markets, supply managed markets, or "other" markets such as through contracts, brokers, elevators or auctions. They were more likely to be farming larger parcels of land.

These survey results raise important questions that warrant further research. First, an analysis into the fact that "first generation" respondents may be farming the way they do because it is prohibitively expensive to start a farm that requires a large land base and huge financial investments in equipment and infrastructure should be investigated. Next, it would be interesting to learn how new farmers are accessing capital to start new farm businesses, especially small-scale diversified operations.

*If we allow the number of farmers to continue to decline, and if new entrants to agriculture face economic barriers when starting new farms, we will see further corporate consolidation of land and market power.*

<sup>21</sup> Laforge, J., et al. "New farmers and food policies in Canada". (Canadian Food Studies: 2018). <https://bit.ly/2XeM4q6>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Hassanein, 1999; Sachs et al., 2016; Trauger, 2004.

# OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW FARMERS

In the New Farmer Survey, we asked several questions about what programs, policies, or initiatives are supporting new farmers, what is hindering success, and what must be developed. Access to land, capital, infrastructure and income-generating markets emerged as primary obstacle areas. In contrast, knowledge and community were areas where existing programs are considered valuable and effective.

---

## When we asked new farmers what is already working well for them, the top ranked answers were:

1. Informal farm workshops, field days, and farm tours
2. On-farm training (includes paid and unpaid apprenticeships and internship programs)
3. Farmer to farmer mentorship programs

*\*All of the above are typically programs initiated by farmers or by grassroots farmer organizations.*

---

## The top 5 obstacles to success were:

1. Affordability of land ownership
2. Lack of access to capital/credit/other sources of financing
3. Low profitability of the agricultural sector
4. Lack of agricultural infrastructure (abattoirs, storage/processing facilities, etc)
5. Lack of security of demand, markets or distribution channels

---

Interestingly, the obstacles cited by survey respondents are all **economic**. These are the same problems that farmer organizations such as the NFU have been working on for over half a century. Successes have come through collective organizing, political action, and the creation of institutions that give farmers power in the market and/or limit the power of corporations and financial institutions.

A holistic transformation of the agriculture system is necessary. Farmers must continue to work together to envision the change we need to see.

Respondents were also asked to rank the changes that would impact them the most as they established their farms.

---

## The top 5 initiatives to develop or expand were:

1. Farmer to farmer mentorship programs
2. Incentives for landowners to sell or rent land to new farmers
3. Curriculum in primary and secondary schools to promote farming as a career
4. Shared agricultural infrastructure (processing facilities, machinery co-ops, food hubs, etc)
5. Direct marketing support and promotion

---

While farmers did not highlight the obstacle of training/knowledge, they did want to have the ongoing support for mentorship and the supportive relationships that come with it, much like farmers of previous generations relied on their parents and older neighbours for advice and support. Another recommendation was for more education for farming as a career in primary and secondary schools. This was particularly interesting: most respondents who did not grow up on a farm came to farming as a second career, unaware that farming was a viable option earlier in life.

## SUPPORTING THE TRANSFORMATION

---

We have the opportunity to support a diversity of farm types, farm products, and farm communities because of the wealth of ecoregions and cultures across the country.

In order to support farms of every size, scale and structure in diverse communities, contextualized support mechanisms are required to ensure their success.

For example, the Prairies are more ecologically suited to ranching and grain production. Agroecological practices can be engaged in both cases, but there is a unique challenge in this type of farming when it comes to new farmers who don't come from a farming background. Most first-generation farmers we surveyed see vegetable and small-scale livestock production as the most accessible, affordable, and easily approachable types of farming, but with a decreasing population density in rural areas it is more difficult to support infrastructure like abattoirs, storage and distribution facilities. Challenges also exist for young people in intergenerational farms, including over-financialization of land, profitability as it relates to succession, and the marketing of farm products in geographically isolated places. In the context of the Prairies, we will need strategies to overcome this accessibility issue and encourage new farmers to gain the interest, confidence, skills and capital to take on larger scale farms.

Though there are common barriers to agriculture for new farmers across the country, solutions must be regionally specific and culturally appropriate.

---

*A food sovereignty approach to supporting new farmers ensures that new farmers from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds can enter different agriculture sectors in every part of the country.*

---

### Living the Transformation and Organizing for Change

In the pages that follow we've highlighted organizations, movements and farmers that are implementing the agroecological shift discussed in this report. From the land matching programs of Young Agrarians to the International movement of La Via Campesina, groups of people are organizing across Canada and the world to promote and assert this vision for food sovereignty. Farmers are using their farms to share knowledge, reduce external inputs, shorten supply chains, promote farmer power, protect collective rights and implement practices based on ecological principles which benefit their farms, ecosystems and communities long-term. From the global to the local, the following examples bring the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology to life.

# LA VIA CAMPESINA

## THE GLOBAL MOVEMENT FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY



The National Farmers Union is a founding member of La Via Campesina (LVC), the international social movement bringing together millions of peasants. LVC has politicized the term “peasant”: it casts a wide net and includes small and medium size farmers, landless people, rural women and youth, Indigenous peoples, migrants and agricultural workers, pastoralists, and fisherfolk from around the world. Built on a strong sense of unity and solidarity, LVC defends peasant agriculture for food sovereignty as a way to promote social justice, dignity, and democratic food systems. The movement strongly opposes corporate driven agriculture that destroys social relations, nature, and communities. LVC comprises 182 local and national organizations in 81 countries from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas: altogether it represents about 200 million farmers. It is an autonomous, pluralist, multicultural movement, political in its demand for social justice while being independent from any political party, economic or other type of affiliation<sup>25</sup>. Its advocacy is rooted in place: grassroots organizations are the driving force of the movement, with women and youth at the centre. Women produce over half of the food on earth<sup>26</sup> but are marginalized and oppressed by the intersecting forces of neoliberal globalization, colonialism and patriarchy. The movement defends women’s rights and gender equality and struggles against all forms of violence against women. Youth also play an important role and maintain structures within the movement to ensure that they have a strong voice.

In 2018, after nearly 20 years of advocacy, LVC was successful in bringing an aspirational framework of new human rights from grassroots origins to the United Nations. The General Assembly voted to pass the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) on December 17, 2018. UNDROP sets out to ensure that peasants can live and carry out their livelihoods protected by a unique set of human rights that relate to their socioeconomic and political circumstances and contexts. Unfortunately, Canada abstained from supporting UNDROP at the General Assembly vote in 2018. However, because UNDROP is now a piece of international human rights law, it can be called upon by human rights defenders in courts of law around the world, regardless of government support. In fact, in 2020 UNDROP was cited in a case in Ontario where migrant farmworkers’ right to health and safety was under threat by their employer. UNDROP is just one way that LVC is struggling to transform food systems in line with food sovereignty.

<sup>25</sup> La Via Campesina, <https://viacampesina.org/en>.

<sup>26</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization. “The gender gap in land rights”. (2018). <http://www.fao.org/3/i8796EN/i8796en.pdf>.

## YOUNG AGRARIANS

Young Agrarians (YA) was created in 2012 to address the declining number of new and young farmers in Canada with a vision to support a new generation to access land and grow “good, clean and fair” food for their communities. It has developed to include programs in a number of provinces across the country.

The YA Business Mentorship Network is a B.C. based program that matches up new farms with appropriate business and production mentorship. Mentorship provides an entry point for new farms in start up that don't meet government thresholds for business advisory services. This program has the potential to be run nationally but currently doesn't have the funding framework to meet that delivery.

The B.C. Land Matching Program (BCLMP) began as a pilot in Metro Vancouver / Fraser Valley in 2016. Quebec's Land Bank Program L'ARTERRE provided the program methodology and training background, and was adapted from French into English and customized to the B.C. context. Through a growing number of stakeholders from the Province of British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture, local governments and funders, the funding was developed to scale the program from one land matcher to five across B.C.

YA Alberta received support funding to adapt the B.C. Land Access Guide to the Alberta context, and run's “Land Links” and “Succession Cafes”. Currently, there is no funding capacity to expand land matching services throughout the Prairies: developing the funding frameworks is key to being able to offer this complex type of service and fund staff hours. The BCLMP is a free service that works to provide land matching and business support services to new and young farmers, to ensure that they have the best chance possible of starting a new farm and accessing necessary support.



The Business Mentorship Network requires mentors who have an ability to provide educational support relevant to the production modality and business type that the new farmer is undertaking. YA has developed a pool of mentors in B.C. who have the skills and leadership qualities. The program focuses on building farmer self-efficacy in order to ensure that new farmers can think through existing challenges and implement relevant strategies to that specific farm operation relative to its market access. Regional context is very important: in order to offer the program in Manitoba, a new batch of mentors would need to be developed. Key to the program is that our mentors are farmers. Wherever possible YA uses a “farmer2farmer” model to keep growing the capacity of the sector to grow and support start-up and transition.



Young Agrarians Business Mentorship, Land Matching and on-farm Training in Regenerative Agriculture programs require sustained, long-term funding frameworks. Growing new farmers is a complex developmental process that requires a number of players and services. Quebec implemented a new entrant strategy 2008–2013—English-speaking Canada is behind in terms of government funding to enable third party delivery to increase effective delivery for revitalizing and transitioning our food systems to a new generation.



## CAMMIE HARBOTTLE, WALDEGRAVE FARM

### (TATAMAGOUCHE, NS)

Cammie Harbottle began farming 18 years ago in British Columbia and started Waldegrave Farm in 2009 in Tatamagouche, NS. She started Waldegrave Farm and helped establish the Tatamagouche Community Land Trust Cooperative as a new farmer, and she believes the model is of value to new farmers.

In 2005, a group of friends purchased the land that would become the Tatamagouche Community Land Trust together, formed a co-op and then placed the 100 acres in trust for perpetuity, managed by the members of the co-op. Waldegrave Farm leases 9 acres from the greater 100 acre trust for a 24 year period. Since she has a longer-term lease, she was able to make several infrastructure improvements. As part of her lease agreement, she agrees to good stewardship principles, including maintaining organic certification. Four members of the co-op are on neighboring 2 acre parcels, although not all members live on-site and some of the initial purchasers have been bought out. There is additional communal land all members can access and yearly infrastructure fees go to its upkeep.

Cammie believes that the community land trust holds a lot of potential for new farmers. To establish a trust, a group of buyers can purchase the property outright if there are enough savings available. Or a mortgage could be held together—thus minimizing the financial commitment of individual members. Cammie also points out how provinces could model themselves after the State of Maine, which has a farmland trust program. The state purchases properties—particularly from retiring farmers—and holds the land as farmland in perpetuity. The funds raised by lease fees fund purchasing new properties. Another positive point of community land trusts is the possibility that the retired farmers, who either donate their land or become members of the co-operative, can then continue to live onsite and still have their farms used for agriculture. New farmers live on the property, if zoning permits, or live off property and commute to the site. These models remove properties from the speculative market and with affordable leases, are specifically beneficial to new farmers.

Cammie and the Tatamagouche Community Land Trust had few models to turn to when they established their trust and co-operative. Because they were able to access legal advice, they have solid bylaws and systems set up. Cammie hopes that soon they can make this information and their process available to the public, especially new farmers, so that in the future more community land trusts can be established in Canada.



# WILL ROBBINS, MAIDA VALE FARMS

(LAURA, SASKATCHEWAN)

Will Robbins grew up on his family's certified organic grain and cattle farm in Laura, Saskatchewan. As a teenager Will had no aspirations to take over the family farm. Although he worked on the farm when necessary, he left for university without the intention of returning to take over the farm. He was gone for several years studying at the University of Saskatchewan, earning a masters in philosophy as well as traveling abroad and working in telecom and powerline construction.

In 2015, his parents had a frank discussion with him and his three sisters regarding their retirement and what, if any, the long term plans for the farm could be. Faced with the idea of losing the opportunity to farm and a closing window in which to make a decision Will made the choice to return in 2016 for a trial year in which he experimented with different techniques and crops and explore, alongside his parents, to see whether the farm could be profitable to support him and his parents both through their retirement and the farms eventual succession. He credits the decision to intentionally minimize debt on the farm alongside their focus on organic principles and limiting off farm inputs as the main driver for the farm's profitability and sustainability.

Today Maida Vale Farms Ltd. crops approximately 900–1100 acres in certified organic mixed grain and cover crops with another 1000 acres in pasture and hay for their cattle herd. They sell a good portion of their crops on contract to organic buyers and since Will's return to the farm business they have begun direct marketing some of their wheat, lentils and cattle to retailers and customers in Saskatoon and Vancouver. Will believes there is opportunity for more domestic use of grains in Canada and that while it takes time to develop direct marketing relationships with buyers and retailers, it's an avenue that can be profitable for both parties. He thinks having buyers who support the overall mission and vision of the farm and their direct relationship increases the viability of the operation. He continues to explore more avenues for the direct marketing of grains with the belief that reducing the number of links in the supply chain can lead to increased revenues for farmers.

Over the years the puzzle of farm profitability and fairness in the face of farm succession has been a tricky question for everyone to answer. Following his return in 2016 the farm incorporated with Will's parents contributing the farm machinery and infrastructure as a

loan to the business. Incorporating has really helped to clarify the roles and responsibilities on the farm and provided a clear understanding of the ownership stake for everyone. It's been an important guiding principle to maintain fairness within the process. They've intentionally tried to balance the following: fair incomes for Will and his parents, fair remuneration for the investments made by Will's Parents Nettie and Jim and equal treatment for Will's siblings who have chosen not to be part of the farm business. The land was not part of the farm business incorporation, in part to maintain an equal treatment of all the children in the family when the farm is passed on down the road.



As far as the succession is concerned there has been a real lack of information for how to go through the process and what considerations are worth exploring. He has relied on his personal relationships and the advice of other farmers who've gone through similar transfers as he's navigated the process. While Will continues to feel concerned about the future, the farm's profitability and the effects of climate change he remains confident that what he does and takes from farming still off-sets his concerns for the future. Will believes that growing food is unambiguously positive in what it contributes to the world and it's one of the core reasons that he returned to the farm and is farming today.



# BROADFORK FARM

(RIVER HEBERT, NS)

After several years of apprenticing and managing other farms, Shannon Jones and her partner, Bryan Dyck, began searching for land to start their own business, Broadfork Farm, which produces organic vegetables and cut flowers. Their business originally began on leased land at Windhorse Farm in Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, but they had a vision that necessitated a long-term stewardship plan. They found their current farm property in Cumberland County, Nova Scotia.

Between the two of them, Shannon and Bryan had spent over a decade gaining farming experience and honing all of the skills needed to run a small farm business. They had savings for a down payment, but needed financial advice and a mortgage to purchase the property. They first approached Farm Credit Canada with their loan application, but were promptly turned down and advised that one of them needed off-farm employment in order to receive a loan. However, their carefully crafted business plan intended for Shannon and Bryan to work full time on the farm with no additional labor. Finding this disheartening, they tried their local credit union, but it did not deal with farm mortgages. On the third try, they won out, applying to the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board, which provided financial assistance to purchase their property. They were also able to secure funds for needed infrastructure.



As Shannon wrote on her website, “From my perspective, we were a good bet. We have always paid our mortgage payments on time and have always paid back more than the minimum owed. We also feel comfortable thinking about taking on more debt in order to build our farm business because of the positive experience we had with the NS Farm Loan Board.”



Shannon and Bryan were lucky to be in Nova Scotia to work with the NS Farm Loan Board, but they warn how provincial and federal programs can have difficult, lengthy, and confusing application processes. In regards to loans specific to new farmers, there are vague and unhelpful definitions of the term “new farmer”. It is sometimes defined as a person who has never performed farm work for a salary. This sets up contradictory expectations: wanting experienced and financially reliable applicants, but at the same time limiting the ability for future applicants to gain experience and earn income to save for their future farm. Shannon also highlighted how difficult it was as a business to make plans for purchasing a farm property, including how to set oneself up as a good candidate for a farm mortgage. While well equipped with production knowledge and business skills, she noted that new farmers also need training in preparing for and purchasing farm properties.

## THREE FORKS FARM

(MANITOULIN ISLAND, ONTARIO)

Three Forks Farms is owned and operated by Peggy Baillie and Eric Blondin. Established in 2016 in Warren Ontario, the farm moved to Manitoulin Island in 2020. They focus on growing high quality, safe and organic vegetables, seeds and pasture raised chicken. Three Forks farms does two farmers markets and services 8–10 wholesale customers per week. The first two years of operation were slow growth years, where skills were put to the test, and systems and crops were identified which worked for their operation. The third and fourth years were seasons of significant growth and infrastructure development.

In 2020 the entire operation moved 3 hours away to Manitoulin Island. Manitoulin offers a better climate, and soil for the crops they grow, an incredibly supportive community, and the type of recreation and community they need for their mental and physical health.

The farm also participates in the The Artisanal Chicken program, a new entrant program within Canada's supply management system, which allows farmers to "rent" quota for a year, to produce between 300–6000 chickens. Each farmer needs to follow all the existing standards for quota chicken holders, including animal welfare practices, standard operating procedures and health and safety practices.

As supporters of the "We Want Northern Chicken" Campaign, they knew the strong demand for chicken in the region and also wanted to incorporate a livestock element into their operation for sustainability purposes. They have loved participating in the program and loved working with the Chicken Farmers of Ontario (CFO). They believe that the program has made them better farmers, by requiring them to have better record keeping, better standards of practice, and cost of production. Having chicken on the farm has allowed them to have greater diversity which is good for their land, resiliency, and financial viability. It has allowed them to scale up accordingly, and grow as their markets and skills do.

They believe that this mixed system of large and small supply managed products is overall more sustainable for the economy, communities and the environment. Supply management ensures that supply does not exceed demand, therefore maintaining a standard of pricing to ensure that the farmer can make a living wage. Supply management needs reforms and appropriate regulatory oversight to ensure that it is achieving its original goals—to maintain sustainable small and medium-size farms and move our agriculture system towards food sovereignty. Ensuring new entrant programs like this one continue to exist promotes a more sustainable and resilient localized food system.





## JOHN BONAPARTE, BARE BONES FARM

### (AKWESASNE)

John Bonaparte is a vegetable farmer and Mohawk man of Akwesasne. Akwesasne is a Mohawk Territory that has the borders of NY, Ontario, and Quebec running through the center. Many community members try to live as borderless as possible since their territory predates colonial borders. He grows a mix of vegetables, herbs, cut flowers, chickens, and starting in 2021 is doing contract seed growing and raising turkey and rabbits at Bare Bones Farms. He serves as a manager of the Akwesasne Farmers Market, is a CCE Master Gardener Volunteer, and has recently been inducted on to the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliances Leadership Committee, and also the Cornell Cooperative Extensions Franklin County Agriculture Advisory Committee.

John initially got into horticulture in 2017 when he started working at The Strong Roots Community Garden, a 501C non-profit in Akwesasne focused on providing healthy food to the community through selling and donating goods. All proceeds went into a grant fund for The Strong Roots Charitable Foundation. He served as farm manager of Strong Roots Community Garden for 2.5 years, growing and donating food throughout the community and assisting with local gardening projects. In 2019 he and colleagues founded the Akwesasne Farmers Market as a way for local producers and artisans to have another avenue for marketing their goods and to stimulate the local economy.

From his experience he believes growing food with ecological practices while also trying to master those practices will result in low cost, local and ethically grown food. Focusing on local food is not the only answer to building a better food system but it plays a major part, especially in smaller communities like his, where they focus on the local economy. Creating an environment where land is more accessible and funds are allocated to BIPOC farmers, and where young people of all ethnic backgrounds are able to afford land is where the next generations of forward-looking farmers will come from. Learning about the practices Indigenous peoples have been using since pre-colonization and highlighting those that are doing it not only spreads knowledge on what many would consider superior growing practices but also promotes more BIPOC growers to share some of spot light in eco-ag and allows them to educate others on the how and why they farm like they do.



He will be utilizing Bare Bones Farms as a way to provide healthy, local food to my community and to showcase different farming models to the employees so they can one day start their own farming careers if they choose to do so. His philosophy is to look at producers around him as a community more so than competition, and believes that with the success of one business comes the success of others. With this in mind, he is going to be marketing his produce on a mobile Co-Op Stand as a way to highlight the other amazing producers and artisans they have in the community and provide them another outlet for marketing with less stress involved for them. Enabling the success of others will have benefits for everyone as we turn Akwesasne into an area that is a local food hot spot.



# BUILDING THE TRANSFORMATION

---

While the vision described in this report is one based on contextualized and structural change of our society, relationships and food production systems. The solutions to our problems are as varied and numerous as the problems are difficult. To this end, within the pages that follow, we've identified what communities across Canada are already doing to support this change and how leaders and decision makers can act to support a change to a more equitable and sustainable food system.

**The themes and strategies identified in this section are:**



A Sustainable,  
Agroecological Future

---



Managing The Climate Crisis

---



Keep Farmers On Farmland

---



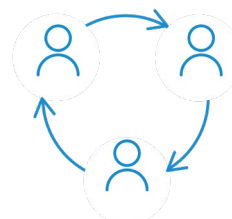
Access To Financial Resources

---



Fair Markets, Fair Incomes

---



Knowledge & Community

---



Infrastructure & Scale-Appropriate Regulation

---



## BUILDING THE TRANSFORMATION: A SUSTAINABLE, AGROECOLOGICAL FUTURE

---

### Principle

Prioritize a just and sustainable agriculture and food system based on the principles of food sovereignty and agroecology.

---

### Rationale

For too long, our human activities have been centered around economic growth at any cost. With threats of climate change, environmental destruction and social unrest, we must learn to recognize that our economy depends on the health of natural ecology. The challenge of our place and time in history is to align our activities with this way of thinking. Many new farmers are onto this, choosing production practices that work with nature, not against it.

---

### Seeing the Change

Increasing numbers of young people are attracted to farming as a viable career and building successful farm businesses that are in line with their values: *89% of new and young farmers surveyed are using ecological practices.* Farmers and eaters must work together to build food sovereignty.

---

### Policies that would support this change:

- An agricultural policy framework based on the principles of food sovereignty rather than corporate profit and export fundamentalism
  - Develop national, provincial and municipal food policy platforms that recognize the crucial role played by farmers and farmer organizations
  - Prioritize policies that incentivize farmers to adopt ecologically sound production practices
  - Invest in localized distribution systems that ensure access to healthy food for all
  - Update the Canadian Agricultural Policy framework to address challenges associated with access to land, resources, financing and knowledge faced by a diversity of new farmers
  - Develop policies based on input from farming communities rather than corporate interests
- 

### Community-based action supporting the change

- Becoming informed about how food is produced and meeting the farmers behind it
- Recognizing that purchasing decisions are political decisions
- Supporting organizations that advocate for food sovereignty and agroecology by becoming members, donating time and/or resources, and sharing work within community networks



## BUILDING THE TRANSFORMATION: **KEEP FARMERS ON FARMLAND**

---

### Principle

Protect agricultural land and ensure land tenure is accessible to new farmers.

---

### Rationale

Canada is losing millions of acres of farmland every year to development, speculative investment and consolidation of corporate land holdings. These pressures, while different, are also driving the cost of land beyond the means of farmers. Farmland should be protected and used to produce food for local communities, not to generate profit for the capitalist elite. New farmers need secure land tenure to invest in developing ecologically sustainable operations.

---

### Seeing the Change

Agricultural land is protected against non-farm uses and speculative investment, and new farmers are able to secure land tenure via ownership, long-term leases, or innovative tenure models.

---

### Policies that would support this change:

- Fund and support the development of land linking and land matching programs such as Quebec's ARTERRE and the B.C. Land Matching Program
  - Fund and support the development of farmland trusts and land banks, like the former Saskatchewan Land Bank<sup>27</sup> that can acquire and hold farmlands then leased to farmers, or sell back to farmers
  - Develop a national farmland succession strategy
  - Limit investment acquisitions, non-agricultural development, and non-occupancy ownership of farmland (see "Losing Our Grip: 2015 Update" from the NFU)
  - Provide fiscal and tax incentives for landowners to sell or rent land to new farmers
  - Review tax codes to ensure that tax penalties are not discriminatorily applied to non-family transfers of land to young farmers, compared to family transfers
  - Develop Agricultural Land Reserves in every province and territory that prioritize both family and non-family intergenerational transfers and promote agroecological practices
  - Re-evaluate subdivision and multiple residency policies to ensure they are not prohibitive to farmers that may require additional housing to accommodate multiple operators and/or workers
  - Re-establish and protect community pastures<sup>28</sup>
- 

### Community-based action supporting the change

- Farmland owners connecting with new farmers directly or organizations supporting new farmers (such as NFU, L'ARTERRE, Young Agrarians, or EFAO) and leasing land to them.
  - Supporting local farmland trusts—or forming new ones! Placing farmland conservation easements on land to protect it, ensuring accessibility to new farmers in the future
  - Forming of community groups to put pressure on municipal planners to limit development sprawl and protect adjacent farmland
  - Supporting indigenous land defenders and other initiatives that are working to protect land, water, and other natural resources
- 

<sup>27</sup> See <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/banking-land-in-saskatchewan> or <https://www.producer.com/1997/01/land-bank-still-a-good-idea-says-former-official/> for more information about this former program.

<sup>28</sup> Public Pastures, Public Interest. <https://pfrapastureposts.wordpress.com/about/six-principles/>.



## BUILDING THE TRANSFORMATION: FAIR MARKETS, FAIR INCOMES

---

### Principle

Ensure that farmers and farmworkers can earn a livable income. Re-create direct, fair and transparent distribution chains that support farmer renewal. Re-establish farmers' market power by strengthening existing farmer-owned marketing institutions and establishing new ones which allow for farmers to become price makers and not price takers.

---

### Rationale

*Between 1986 and 2019, 97% of farmers gross revenues were captured by agribusiness corporations. Wealth generated by farming should support farmers and local communities. Currently, the majority of the wealth in the agricultural system is captured by multinational corporations that exploit workers and the earth. New farmers can be drivers of local economies and creators of jobs. Despite the fact that the number of farmers is declining in Canada, there is increasing public awareness and mobilization around issues of food justice, and an increasing demand for local food. New farmers with viable businesses are needed to reinvigorate rural economies and to meet the public demand for a sustainable Canadian food system.*

---

### Seeing the Change

New farmers can create viable farms, create meaningful well-paying jobs and reinvest returns in the local community. By engaging in shorter, fairer distribution chains, good food can be made accessible to eaters without externalizing the environmental, social and health costs of production. In this way, wealth is retained in local communities, not captured by corporate suppliers, processors, and distributors.

---

### Policies that would support this change:

- Promote direct marketing and re-evaluate regulatory regimes to reduce obstacles to direct marketing
  - Develop local food procurement programs for governments and public institutions
  - (Re)establish Self-Employment Benefit programs in all provinces and territories to help new farmers during their start-up phase
  - Implement a guaranteed income supplement and other poverty reduction measures to support a “distribution of the middle” to ensure farmers have a livable income that eaters can afford to purchase healthy food
  - Maintain and uphold the Canadian Grain Commission with its mandate to “in the interests of the grain producers, establish and maintain standards of quality for Canadian grain and regulate grain handling in Canada, to ensure a dependable commodity for domestic and export markets.
  - Protect supply management systems and farmer-controlled marketing boards by reforming new entrant programs, quota distribution systems, off-quota exemptions and other regulations to promote greater production diversity and to maximize the number of farmers involved<sup>29</sup>.
  - Strengthen and reestablish democratic and farmers owned institutions utilizing collective bargaining and “single desk” marketing.
- 

### Community-based action supporting the change

- Participation in campaigns for food system justice led by farmers and farmworkers
  - Supporting poverty reduction initiatives and campaigns (ex. Basic Income Canada Network)
  - Getting involved with trade justice advocacy movements (ex. Trade Justice Network)
- 

<sup>29</sup> See “Strengthening Supply Management” by the NFU:  
<https://www.nfu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Strengthening-Supply-Management.pdf>



## BUILDING THE TRANSFORMATION: MANAGING THE CLIMATE CRISIS

---

### Principle

Mitigate and adapt to the reality of climate change, using ecologically based adaptation strategies to regenerate soils and ensure sustainable food production into the future.

---

### Rationale

Farmers and farms play an essential role in managing our environmental resources. Weather has always played a large role in farming and the increasingly irregular and extreme weather patterns that we are already seeing, will further increase risk to food supplies as well as the viability of farms in Canada. High-input agriculture is destroying climate stability, as well as economies and societies around the world. Low-input, agroecological food production can feed the world while reducing costs and increasing incomes for farmers. Canadian farmers have an extraordinary capacity to mitigate climate change by reducing emissions and adopting climate-friendly growing and production practices, sequestering carbon in the soil through regenerative and agroecological practices.

---

### Seeing the Change

Farmers have the knowledge and resources required to adapt to and mitigate climate change. Ecosystem services such as habitat and biodiversity protection, groundwater recharge, flood/drought buffering and preventing land conversion based emissions should be economically valued, and negative ecological impacts should not be externalized.

---

### Policies that would support this change:

- Create federally-funded incentive programs for farms providing ecological services, including alternative land use such as wetland protection and reforestation
  - Incentivize low-input, low-emissions production practices and investment in emissions-reducing technologies and retrofits
  - Create a Canadian Farm Resilience Administration (modeled after the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration<sup>30</sup>) to protect soils, farmland, water, and our food-production capacities
  - Implement stronger greenhouse gas emissions targets based on the Paris Agreement<sup>31</sup>
  - Incentivize investment in on-farm ecological infrastructure such as hedgerows and swales etc.
- 

### Community-based action supporting the change

- Buying food directly from farmers who practice agroecological farming
  - Purchasing of farm and food products produced regionally to reduce transportation emissions
  - Lobbying of politicians to take bold climate action which includes policies reflecting the pillars of agroecology and food sovereignty
  - Participating in direct actions to raise awareness and to demand climate action and climate justice
- 

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/2009/04/27/pfra-the-organization-that-saved-western-canada/> for more information.

<sup>31</sup> UNFCCC The Paris Agreement: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/what-is-the-paris-agreement>





## BUILDING THE TRANSFORMATION: ACCESS TO FINANCIAL RESOURCES

---

### Principle

Ensure that financial resources are accessible to new farmers of diverse scales, knowledge bases and skill sets, and production types.

---

### Rationale

Significant financial resources are required to invest in the land, equipment and infrastructure of a viable farm. For new farmers who are not taking over an existing farm, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to access the necessary financing: *access to financing was rated the #2 challenge by survey respondents*. Most new farmers who responded to our survey are producing vegetables or mixed livestock, as these types of farms require the lowest start-up investment. In a truly sustainable system, new farmers need to be able to produce all of the food products required by the population.

---

### Seeing the Change

New farmers are able to access the financing required to start and maintain farm businesses. Innovative financing options are available to new farmers aspiring to produce a wide diversity of food products at a variety of scales.

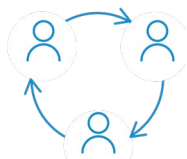
---

### Policies that would support this change:

- Create and expand national and provincial loan, microloan and grant programs that are accessible to a wider diversity of farms
  - Develop cost sharing initiatives for investments in startup farm infrastructure and agroecological farming practices
  - Restructure business risk management programs to ensure that they are relevant, workable and useful for smaller and more diverse farms
  - Realign Farm Credit Canada's mandate to support food sovereignty and increasing the number of farms and farmers in Canada
- 

### Community-based action supporting the change

- Contributing to innovative farm financing models such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), community bonds, food hubs, etc.
- Landowners engaging with new farmers in a rent-to-own or other accessible financial mechanisms to transfer land
- Encouraging Community Development Investment Funds and next-generation cooperatives
- Reinvesting of financial resources in local financial institutions rather than the big banks
- Investing in local businesses and community loan programs (ex. Slow Money)



## BUILDING THE TRANSFORMATION: KNOWLEDGE & COMMUNITY

---

### Principle

Rebuild strong, vibrant agricultural communities and ensure that training and mentorship is accessible to all new and aspiring farmers in Canada.

---

### Rationale

In the past, most farmers learned how to farm from their families, and cohesive farm communities provided support systems. Now, with many new farmers coming from non-farm backgrounds, new publicly-funded models are needed for transferring knowledge and ongoing support. *Amongst all existing programs/initiatives for new farmers, survey respondents identified farmer-to-farmer learning initiatives as the most valuable.* On-farm experimentation is a primary driver of innovation, so horizontal, farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange opportunities are crucial.

---

### Seeing the Change

The knowledge required for sustainable food production is shared freely, horizontally (peer-to-peer) and intergenerationally. New farmers are accessing the educational opportunities and networks they need to start and sustain viable farms. Socio-economic background does not preclude anyone from learning to produce food.

---

### Policies that would support this change:

- Create core curriculum for elementary and secondary schools on food and agriculture from an agroecological perspective
  - Provide core funding for farmer-to-farmer training programs
  - Create farm employment support programs to help farmers employ and train young people interested in farming
  - Provide funding for extension services focused on agroecological practices
  - Create minimum standards for apprenticeships through farmer-driven accreditation programs
  - Support training programs that share intergenerational traditional knowledge, including indigenous knowledge
  - Invest in rural economic development and essential rural infrastructure such as schools, transportation, healthcare, and high-speed internet to enhance quality of life and create equality of services between urban and rural areas
- 

### Community-based action supporting the change

- Encouraging children to learn about food production and get involved with a community garden or local farm
- Supporting local farmer training organizations or incubator farms
- Farm tours and workshops led by farmers
- Support and partner with urban agriculture programs, which often serve as a gateway to agriculture for urban youth



## BUILDING THE TRANSFORMATION: INFRASTRUCTURE & SCALE-APPROPRIATE REGULATION

### Principle

Ensure that all farmers have access to the agricultural infrastructure they need to store, process and market their products. Re-evaluate regulatory regimes to ensure that they are not unnecessarily burdensome to small- and medium-scale producers. Rebuild robust regional processing capacity to challenge the excessive ownership and geographic concentration in the processing sector, and put money and power back in the hand of farmers, and rural communities.

### Rationale

Food safety regulations, which have been designed for industrial-scale production and processing, have become so onerous and expensive that many small scale processing facilities (such as abattoirs and egg-grading stations) have been forced to shut down. This results in increased costs of production for farmers and increased stress to animals in transport traveling farther. Currently small-scale livestock farmers bear the brunt of this regulatory burden; at a time when the demand for local, sustainable, and ethical, meat products is increasing rapidly, many farmers and ranchers are missing out on the opportunity to grow their business, and contribute to their local economies, due to the lack of reliable access to meat processing. *Survey respondents identified the expansion of shared agricultural infrastructures as one of the most important initiatives to help new farmers succeed.* Lack of infrastructure is a problem for many other new farmers, especially when it comes to long-term storage and year-round distribution of products. It can be prohibitively expensive for individual farmers to invest in private infrastructure, but shared resources are increasingly rare.

### Seeing the Change

Farmers of all scales are able to get their products to market, and regulations recognize that oversight needs to match the risk, and that farmers and processors need to be regulated in a manner that is proportionate to the lower risk, and increased traceability of the shorter food chain created by small-scale agriculture and direct-to-consumer marketing. Close relationships between farmers and eaters re-establishes trust and places transparency and accountability at the forefront of food production. Communities support their producers in developing shared infrastructure that benefits farmers and local economies.

### Policies that would support this change:

- Create funding streams at all levels to support the development of food hubs, cooperatives or private enterprises that provide processing or amalgamation facilities and services to producers
- Develop food safety processing regulations that are clear, scale appropriate and less onerous for the farmer & processor
- Ensure that Supply Management programs allow for production of niche products demanded by the market
- Support a mechanism for the legal inter-provincial direct-to-consumer sales of meat
- Fund and incentivize educational programs for essential food-related trades such as butchery and processing skills. Whole-animal butchery skills and value-added butchery services would increase regional capacity for livestock processing and ensure labour shortages do not contribute to bottlenecks in the supply chain.
- Adopt regulations to facilitate on-farm slaughter in provinces that do not have them

### Community-based action supporting the change

- Supporting shared infrastructure initiatives such as food hubs and community abattoirs
- Helping develop and maintain existing community owned co-operative businesses for local food processing and distribution
- Becoming part of the food chain! Encouraging and supporting the next generation of butchers, local food processors, chefs, and so on to support an agroecological food system

# SUMMARY

## HOLISTIC APPROACHES & COLLECTIVE ACTION

---

This report has outlined many challenges and recommendations to support new farmers and build food sovereignty in Canada. It is clear that a holistic approach is needed: while we have broken down our recommendations into sections, none can exist in silos. Creating new farmer training programs, for example, will mean nothing if farmers do not have the infrastructure needed to get their products to market and earn a living.

Solutions needed to be rooted in local communities, not imposed from above. All across this country, there are grassroots organizations, non-profits, and groups of farmers and eaters doing incredibly valuable work on the ground to change our food system for the better. Often in discussions about agricultural policy, the word “innovation” is taken to mean only the patentable types of innovation. We must also pay attention to social innovation—those creative grassroots solutions that address entrenched social, environmental and economic problems, not just technological ones. Policy makers should look for ideas from the people who are actually living with the problems in their everyday lives, in agriculture and every other sector.

It is our collective responsibility to create the change we need. This is why we have highlighted how some communities, organizations, and individuals are already taking action in addition to policy recommendations. However, more action is still needed: governments do not lead change, they follow it. We must build a critical mass of public engagement and cultural change, in addition to political pressure, to build and maintain a more just food system for all. Talk to your family, friends and neighbours; join a community group; volunteer at your community food centre; get to know your farmers and bridge the rural-urban divide.

Please support our work by joining the National Farmers Union. You can read more about our work and become a member at [www.nfu.ca](http://www.nfu.ca).

“What is honoured in a country will be cultivated there.”

- Plato