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Beyond Basic: What do the details of a basic income look like for Canadian farmers?

Design considerations for the NFU's guaranteed annual income policy

—by James Hannay, NFU Policy Analyst

The National Farmers Union (NFU) had Canadian news media buzzing after we passed our Guaranteed Annual Income (GAI) resolution at this year's convention. "The NFU will advocate for a guaranteed annual income pilot program for farmers of $50,000 a year (tied to inflation) for 10 years," reads the amended resolution coming from NFU-PEI. A bold policy solution, our GAI resolution was picked up so fervently because it reflects broader societal worries about income security.

Both farm and mainstream media reported on the resolution with curiosity, posing questions to NFU leadership on how the pilot would work, how much it would cost, and whether GAI is a real policy solution.

A GAI is different from a universal basic income (UBI), which provides equal cash payments to an entire population, regardless of income. GAI on the other hand would only apply to people under a certain income and will provide a "top-up." For example, if a GAI policy guarantees $50,000, but you only made $30,000, you could receive a GAI payment of $20,000 to bridge the gap. GAI payments could be based on tax returns on personal income – something that farmers have to fill out in detail every year.

A GAI is not the silver-bullet for solving the issues that are plaguing farmers and rural communities.

Sheila Regehr, Chair of the Basic Income Canada Network, spoke to NFU members at NFUniversity and asked: "What is a farmer? What if someone tries their hand at farming and decides it's not for them?"

These are important questions. How should we define "farmer"? Do we want to advocate for a GAI that includes migrant farmworkers? Should we distribute a GAI to census households and then what do we do about farmworkers who are not part of a household?

Based on some of these design considerations, a preliminary GAI program would distribute $851 million dollars of top-up payments annually to 39,225 farm households making under $50,000 a year. A GAI for farmers could help revitalize rural communities and allow farmers to continue selling their produce to their communities for reasonable prices, contributing to our food sovereignty.

An expenditure of $851 million/year on top-up payments to bring the approximately 40,000 Canadian farm households to a $50,000 annual income is realistic. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada spent $900 million on their AgriStability program in 2024, a program that has only been used by a third of Canadian farmers due to program design. Even $13 billion to fund a $50,000 UBI for the entire Canadian farm population is possible. $86 billion dollars were transferred to 8.9 million Canadians under the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But here's the most important question: "Is GAI a real policy solution for farmers?"

A GAI is not the silver-bullet for solving the issues that are plaguing farmers and rural communities. A GAI will not reverse the price-trends of farmland, corporate concentration and the rise of oligarchs in the food system, or agriculture's on fossil fuels, nor will it advance Indigenous sovereignty, or meaningfully address all of the other systemic issues that the NFU understands as obstacles to a sustainable food system. We must advocate for taxation reforms, funding for public agronomic advice and on-farm climate adaptation programs, public agriculture research, regulations on corporate concentration, and Land Back, in addition to any measures to improve farmer economic dignity, like a GAI. ▪

A country that cannot feed itself has few options: cutting agriculture research is false economy

—by Cathy Holtslander, NFU Director of Research and Policy

The 2025-26 federal budget authorized a *Comprehensive Expenditure Review*, which it describes as "a government-wide exercise to reduce duplication and inefficiencies and realign activities towards the core federal mandate," and a 10% reduction of the civil service by cutting about 40,000 positions. This, it said, "reflects normal attrition through retirements, voluntary departures, and previous savings exercises, as well as further action the government is taking to slow spending and return the public service to a sustainable size," and "the introduction of new and better tools such as AI, the tech-enabled public service of the future will still deliver the services that Canadians depend on."

On January 20 at Davos, Prime Minister Carney said that a country that cannot feed itself has few options. A few days later, hundreds of employees at AAFC got notice their jobs would be ending. It soon became clear that AAFC's cuts - reducing its budget by $157 million per year and eliminating 12% of its workforce -- were not mere attrition and delivering services with more efficiency: research is a core function of Canada's agriculture departments since the Experimental Research Farm system was established in 1886. [1]

When House of Commons Agriculture Committee member, Bloc MP Sebastien Lemire asked Deputy Minister Lawrence Hanson if AAFC has provided the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) with an analysis of the cuts and their potential impact on the level of service for 2026 to 2030, and if so, provide a copy to the committee, Mr. Hanson replied he assumed this was provided to the committee as a matter of course. When the NFU asked if this had happened, PBO replied the information was not provided to the committee because "AAFC indicated that they did not consent to the public disclosure of the information." The week after cuts were announced, a media outlet received an internal AAFC email where management is asking researchers to compile a list of their research to help the ministry evaluate the impact the site closures will have on research projects.[2] Clearly, any analysis of the cuts did not look at the actual work being done by staff at the targeted facilities. The difference between how the federal budget described the budget cuts and what cuts were actually announced at AAFC suggests a lack of transparency and accountability.

The seven research facilities - at Lacombe, Indian Head, Scott, Portage la Prairie, Guelph, Quebec City and Nappan - and the Organic and Regenerative Agriculture program at Swift Current, along with their staff, are essential elements of a sophisticated, integrated system that creates new knowledge, providing immense value to farmers, the public and the Canadian economy.

The scientists and technicians whose positions are being cut represent thousands of years of education and knowledge developed through the course of their careers. AAFC research centres collaborate with universities, hosting graduate students and employing over 600 students annually. These cuts amount to a self-inflicted brain drain, and a disincentive for young people interested in agricultural science fields.

AAFC facilities provide scaffolding for research collaborations with universities, private companies and non-profit research consortiums, with many projects funded by farmers through commodity check-offs. We have invested millions of dollars in buildings, laboratory facilities, equipment ranging from custom small-plot seeding and harvesting machines to precision laboratory instruments, and biological materials including unique collections of insects, disease inoculum and germplasm, and land representative of multiple soil and climatic regions. Shutting down the AAFC facilities and terminating their staff also ends much of this externally funded research and destroys the value of their investments. Closing them will compromise on-going work and reduce the scope and benefits from future farmer-directed research.

In their brief to the Agriculture Committee, Former AAFC Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Scientist, Dr. Gilles Saindon, and Former Chief Scientist, Dr. Yvon Martel

[1] The Dominion Experimental Farms: A system of experimental stations operated by the Federal Government which investigates agricultural problems and is capable of giving continuous service to Canadian farmers, Printed by Authority of the Hon. W. R. Motherwell, Minister Of Agriculture Ottawa - 1925 https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/e4fd40c6-3c02-4fcc-be1b-24be48389f64/content

[2] Feds slashed farm research. An internal email suggests they don't know what Canada's losing, By Marc Fawcett-Atkinson, *National Observer*, February 2nd 2026

(*Cutting agriculture research is false economy, from page 3)*

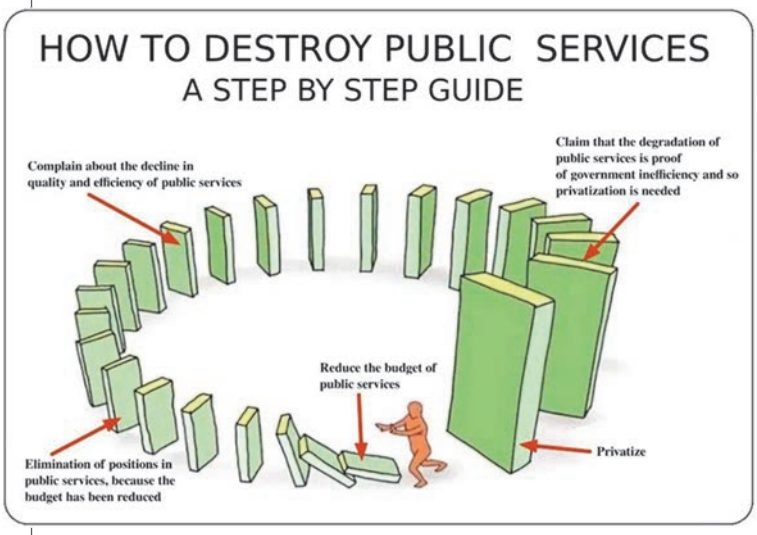
described the decline of federal scientific capacity.[3] In the 1980s, we had 1,100 AAFC research scientists across a vast network of national research centres. In 2005, the Paul Martin government proposed closing St. John's, Nappan, Kapuskasing and Winnipeg facilities, but after a national consultation on research priorities, this decision was reversed. In 2012, the Harper government closed the Cereal Research Centre in Winnipeg, the Horticulture Research & Development Centre in Quebec, the Plant Pathology Program in B.C. and dismantled the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA). Harper's cuts eliminated tens of thousands of small research plots used to test potential new varieties. Today we only have around 350 AAFC scientists.

Tens of thousands of small research plots distributed across a wide range of soil types, disease and insect pressures, and climatic conditions are needed for plant breeders to test potential new varieties. Pathologists must screen them against diseases in natural field conditions to ensure they have adequate resistance. What makes a successful variety is the combination of genetics, agronomic practice and environment. These real-world conditions are specific to the regional soils and climate, and cannot be reproduced in a laboratory or greenhouse, or modelled with Artificial Intelligence (AI). As our climate gets more erratic, real-world testing becomes even more critical.

Lacombe, Indian Head, Scott, Portage la Prairie, Quebec, Nappan, and the Swift Current Organic program currently provide a large proportion of the small plot capacity for AAFC breeding work. Swift Current is the only location with research plots under organic management to test varieties suited to low-input production systems. Removing all these plots from the system will seriously harm, and potentially destroy Canada's public plant breeding capacity.

Dr. Richard Gray, agriculture economist at the University of Saskatchewan, has determined that for every dollar spent on public wheat breeding the return to the economy is over $30.00. It takes about a dozen years to develop a new variety of wheat, and the effect of Harper's 2012 cuts is now showing up, as the number of new varieties coming onto the market has dropped off. Throttling public plant breeding capacity is truly false economy.

Offloading plant breeding to the private sector and/or universities will lead to higher seed costs for farmers and less value to the broader public. Universities need to at minimum recover costs, and for-profit seed companies need a return on investment. Farmers can expect higher royalty payments and restrictions on using farm-saved seed, further increasing annual seed costs. Smaller acreage crops such as flax, chickpeas and camelina, and perennial forages such as alfalfa, cannot provide enough return to cover breeding costs without access to AAFC's infrastructure. Lack of breeding for these crops will make our agriculture system more brittle, with fewer choices for farmers and less biodiversity.



Who funds and makes decisions about plant breeding, and who controls the commercialization of new varieties affects the land, livelihoods, economy, community, biodiversity and future prospects of farmers. The AAFC research network provides widespread public benefits that ripple outward to not only support the prosperity of farmers, but to safeguard the stability of our ecosystems, and the intrinsic value of nature in Canada.

Closure of key research farms and facilities at Lacombe, Nappan and Québec, and loss of staff, will also do long-term damage to forage breeding, permaculture trials, carcass grading, and the development of agronomic practices (including grazing trials) that we need to enable small and mid-scale mixed farms and cow-calf operations to adapt to changing climate realities and maintain sustainable livestock production.

The NFU has been a strong leader in opposing these cuts, organizing many actions including letter-writing, petitions, meetings and a town hall. Check the NFU website for more ways to get involved. ▪

For more information:

NFU submission to Agriculture Committee study on AAFC Research Closures

Impact of AAFC Budget Cuts on Organic Research - Joint Brief to Agriculture Committee by NFU and Organic organizations

Joint letter to Minister MacDonald from 22 farm organizations

Virtual Town Hall: Act to Defend Canada's Public Agriculture Research! NFU Youtube channel

Podcast From the Ground Up Ep. 393: Cathy Holtslander interview on AAFC cuts

Growing Seed Sovereignty: Farmers, Seed Policy, and the Common Good NFUniversity March 12, 2026

[3] *Maintaining Canada's Agricultural Science Capacity: Remarks on the Proposed Closure of Agriculture and Agri-Food Research Centres,* Submitted to the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food by Dr. Gilles Saindon, Former AAFC Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Scientist Science and Technology and Dr. Yvon Martel, Former AAFC Chief Scientist International Science and Technology, March 13, 2026. https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/451/AGRI/Brief/BR13974302/br-external/Jointly02-067-260313-020-e.pdf

"Science isn't a luxury, it's an insurance policy":

Cuts to Public Agriculture Research Catastrophic for Climate Progress

—by Sarah Marquis, NFU Outreach Strategist

Extensive cuts to public agriculture research will set back climate progress in agriculture, and the harm will be felt for generations. Earlier this year, Agriculture and Agrifood Canada announced that seven research facilities - at Lacombe, Indian Head, Scott, Portage la Prairie, Guelph, Quebec City and Nappan – and the Organic and Regenerative Agriculture program – will no longer receive funding. The cuts would be devastating on multiple fronts, however, the immense costs to agricultural climate science must be considered in their own right, as the closing of these facilities and programs will be consequential well into the future.

As farmers and farm workers feel the worsening financial, emotional and existential stress of climate change, the loss of crucial research facilities and programs is all the more reprehensible. Drought in southwest Saskatchewan has left some areas severely depleted of moisture for the past eight years, leading to crop failure and financial losses; and there's not much relief in sight. And record-breaking wildfire seasons across Canada have had serious impacts on crops, livestock and agricultural communities.

Meanwhile, scientists at the Nappan Research Farm in Nova Scotia have found that feeding kelp supplements to heifers reduces their methane emissions, a potent contributor to greenhouse gases. The Organic and Regenerative Research Program, the only AAFC program dedicated to the study of organic agriculture in the Prairies, is a front line for climate adaptation research, helping farmers manage increasing climate variability, soil degradation, and emerging pests and diseases. As farmers struggle, the facilities and programs on the chopping block have been contributing to indispensable climate mitigation and adaptation research.

Consider climate impact in agriculture through a financial lens: crop insurance payments in Canada surged from $890 million in 2018 to *$4.9 billion* in 2022. Given the amount that the provincial and federal governments are spending on insurance compensation and Business Risk Management program payments after climate-related extreme weather impacts on farms, public research into climate mitigation and climate adaptation should be protected, invested in, and expanded. As Sophie Martel, General Manager of the Centre d'expertise et de transfert en agriculture biologique et de proximité (Victoriaville, QC), said in her testimony to the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, "Science isn't a luxury, it's an insurance policy." Halting agricultural research that has been on the cutting edge of emissions reductions research will cost the government billions, and will have long-lasting negative impacts on the climate and the food system.

These cuts to public agriculture research fit into a larger pattern of the federal government's disregard for climate action. For example, the majority of the proposals on the federal government's Nation-Building initiatives list are extractive projects, like mines and liquefied natural gas plants, that will harm the environment. Furthermore, the federal government is determined to increase Canada's defense spending, a move that will increase fossil fuel emissions both in Canada and abroad. The decision to redirect spending from programs, facilities and research networks that have been increasing farmers' abilities to both mitigate and adapt to climate change into carbon intensive military infrastructure should concern not just agricultural organizations but all of us.

Now is not the time to cut funding for research centers, farms and programs that are on the frontlines of agricultural climate science. Public interest research on sustainable agriculture should be a central part of Canada's climate action strategy. Public science is a public benefit; and research capacity is absolutely essential to facilitating transitions towards a more sustainable Canadian agricultural sector. ▪

SAVE THE DATE

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November 19 to 21, 2026

Radisson Hotel Downtown

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