

# Agrifood still has to explain its economic importance



**BY ALEX BINKLEY**

*The writer is a veteran national affairs reporter based in Ottawa  
alex.binkley@sympatico.ca*

Members of the agrifood community gathered recently at what could probably best be described as a working dinner to discuss the future orientation of the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute and meet Donald Buckingham, the new President and CEO.

The event brought out a mix of politicians and representatives from farm and commodity groups and related organizations. The discussions around the dinner tables were on the issues facing the sector and the best role for CAPI in addressing them.

As backdrop to the evening there were the NAFTA talks, the consultations on a national food policy and revisions to the Canada Food Guide and the simmering anger over the proposed federal tax changes to name just a few.

One theme that emerged frequently as members of the audi-

ence spoke after dinner was sustainability, not just in terms of preserving our current food producing capacity. We need to find ways to make our soils more productive and weather resilient while protecting water quality, wildlife habitat and supplying safe food.

Coupled with that is gaining public trust, a matter the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture have been addressing. If the public doesn't understand agrifood, it's open to the outlandish claims of hostile interest groups.

Underlying all the comments was the ongoing frustration at get-

ting the government, both politicians and bureaucracy, to fully comprehend the economic potential of the agrifood sector. The centrepiece of that initiative is implementation of the principal recommendation from last spring's Powerhouse Report, prepared in part by CAPI, and the Barton Report. It calls on Prime Minister Trudeau to appoint an Agrifood Growth Council composed of sector leaders and senior bureaucrats to ensure that agrifood sector's needs and potential play a role in government policy-making instead of being treated as an afterthought.

The consensus of the more 50

men and women in the room was CAPI should keep on the policy tracks it has followed in recent years to bring the sector together and educate governments. But a key role for CAPI should remain being the place where farmers, processors, suppliers, retailers and social policy groups interested in food issues can openly discuss the tough subjects facing them.

Invoking Wayne Gretzky's hockey motto of going to where the puck will be, not where it is, Buckingham said CAPI has to foresee how issues will progress and prepare for that outcome. Now to make it happen.