

Opinion

Let's ditch the silos: towards an integrated agri-food policy framework



Don Buckingham

Agriculture

The Canadian government has identified the agriculture and agri-food sector as an engine of growth, with some pretty ambitious targets over the next decade. The 2017 Barton Report by the government's Advisory Council on Economic Growth proposed that Canada should boost its agriculture exports by \$11-billion and its agri-food exports by \$19-billion by 2027.

The Agri-Food Economic Strategy Table released last fall asserts that we can do even better, setting targets of \$85-billion in agriculture and agri-food exports as well as \$140-billion in domestic sales by 2025.

But to make this growth happen, specific policy areas need to be strengthened. There is no better time than now to demonstrate how important a whole-of-government approach can be in achieving these ambitious objectives.

Three key focus areas for a whole-of-government approach

come to mind: water management, climate change mitigation, and economic growth through trade diversification. The multifacetedness of each makes it hard to see how the required policy initiatives for the agriculture and agri-food sector could come out of the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada shop alone.

Instead, a priority list established by several government departments and stakeholder groups needs to be developed based on "win-win-win" (economic-environmental-social) best practices and new technologies that can apply across Canada. Many of the best practices in agriculture and agri-food, including precision plant nutrient application, improved soil and water management schemes, animal genetics, and improved feeding practices, have the potential to significantly advance Canada's public policy objectives in all three focus areas.

Take water management. Canada has seven per cent of the world's renewable freshwater supply, but faces pressures from urbanization and agriculture. As the world struggles to produce more food, water will become an increasingly limiting factor for many countries. Some of the world's major exporters are at risk of groundwater depletion because they produce and export food using irrigated land with water from rapidly depleting aquifers.

Canada can become a world leader in water management in-

novation by developing a model of efficient and managed water use, while at the same time protecting our natural resource base. An effective policy dialogue needs to occur as to how industry and other competing water users can best meet their water needs while conserving Canada's water resources that are maintaining water quality in our rivers and lakes, particularly those near agricultural operations.

Regarding climate change, the world faces the challenge of producing enough affordable, accessible, and healthy food for a growing population while maintaining profitability and without destroying Canada's and the planet's natural capital (land, water, air, and biodiversity).

Food production needs to grow by 70 per cent between now and 2050 to meet the projected global demand, but we must do this while reducing the carbon footprint of the agriculture and agri-food sector in Canada and beyond. It is crucial to bring together scientific research and innovation; environmental practices; improvements in nutritional quality and human health; the integration of microbiome, plant, animal, and human health (the One Health concept); and market and non-market costs and benefits with policies and practices that encourage innovation and scaling up, to increase production and profitability while reducing our greenhouse gas emissions.



Agriculture Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau should be part of a whole-of-government approach to grow Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector, says Don Buckingham. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Finally, economic gains through trade diversification will require co-operation across government departments to get new (and maintain existing) market access for quality Canadian products. New innovations will allow Canadian products to hit the market with better sustainability and nutritional attributes to be offered to eager customers, at home and to many countries abroad. The agriculture and agri-food sector needs to be able to brand its products with strong, reliable metrics that reflect the diversity of players along the value chain, while also assuring consumers that the sector is nimble enough to respond to their ever-changing needs.

Government and industry players must work together with academia, experts, and practitioners to share knowledge about these changing requirements. Standards must be enshrined in regulation, which will signal quality and authenticity of those standards to markets. Stakeholders must come together to discuss and decide upon appropriate industry actions and government policies for branding Canadian agri-food products.

All of this policy heavy-lifting can no longer be done in isolated government departments or industry-specific silos. We must work together for the development and roll-out of

an integrated agri-food policy. Instead of defining joint mandates for various adjacent ministries alone, Canada should look to create a trans-disciplinary knowledge network, including scientists, policy researchers, individual producers, and processors across various regions.

Such a network would work as a hub to bring together the knowledge created by these players and to establish an integrated policy development process. With this renewed approach to international markets, new challenges and opportunities will emerge requiring transparency in communicating sustainability and quality attributes of our products. This will be key for maintaining public trust and capturing value in markets home and abroad.

By adopting a whole-of-government approach, then developing an integrated policy framework, and finally rolling out this strategy for strong economic and environmental performance, the tremendous export potential of our agriculture and agri-food sector can be realized. As this government's four-year mandate closes and another one begins, the timing could not be better to put this strategy in place.

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The Hill Times