



## PLAN Policy Network - Meeting Summary

**Date: February 27, 2025**

### **Key Information:**

Policies for Land Use, Agriculture, and Nature (PLAN) Policy Network is a collaborative initiative led by CAPI focused on addressing pressing land use challenges and unlocking new opportunities within Canada's agricultural sector. The network brings together practitioners, policymakers, and experts to exchange knowledge, develop innovative solutions, and shape policies that support sustainable land use, agricultural productivity, and biodiversity conservation.

The fifth meeting of the PLAN Policy Network focused on exploring how Canadian agricultural sector can ensure agricultural productivity and profitability while protecting ecosystems that underpin long-term resilience. Farmers, policymakers, and conservation experts highlighted practical tensions, opportunities, and policy gaps. Against a backdrop of steep declines in grassland bird populations (67% since 1970) and ongoing conversion of native prairie to cropland, the discussion centered on actionable solutions that respect the economic realities of farming in Canada. Here's what emerged:

### ***Soil health and farm viability drive decision-making***

For producers, soil health and the ability to pass down a viable operation to the next generation are non-negotiable priorities. These concerns often overshadow biodiversity initiatives like pollinator protection or grassland restoration. However, practices such as rotational grazing, adaptive pasture management, and maintaining native grass were widely recognized as "win-wins" that improve soil quality and ecological resilience. Skepticism arises with newer methods like polycropping (mixing plant species for grazing), where limited data on outcomes and unclear profit margins create hesitation. Participants highlighted the need for hyperlocal research and clear communication about how

biodiversity directly supports drought resilience, pest control, and long-term land value to close this gap.

### ***Incentives must address real-world barriers***

Traditional government programs that cost-share infrastructure (e.g., fencing for rotational grazing) remain critical but lack flexibility to address regional needs. Participants stressed the importance of blending these with outcome-based models, where payments hinge on measurable results like habitat quality for grassland birds. A major discussion emerged around “additionality”-ensuring incentives reward new conservation actions without excluding early adopters already using sustainable practices. For instance, producers who’ve maintained native grass for decades often receive no support, while newcomers do. Solutions like term-limited conservation easements (instead of permanent ones) or payments during land transitions (e.g., inheritance or sales) were proposed to balance ecological goals with intergenerational flexibility.

### ***Grassland loss is a silent crisis***

The rapid conversion of native prairie to cropland-driven by commodity prices, larger machinery, and drainage technology-has made grasslands Canada’s most threatened ecosystem. Wetlands face similar pressures, despite their role in flood mitigation and water filtration. Participants emphasized that policy must pair “carrots” (e.g., payments for wetland retention) with “sticks” (e.g., provincial land-use rules limiting drainage). Saskatchewan’s proposed wetland policy, which ties drainage permits to conservation offsets, was cited as a potential model. However, skepticism remained about enforcement capacity and whether payments truly offset lost revenue from converting marginal land.

### ***Markets alone won’t fix this***

Biodiversity credits-modeled after carbon markets-sparked discussion. While some see potential to scale conservation, others warn against oversimplification, such as valuing “species counts” over habitat complexity-and whether payments would reach farmers directly. One participant noted, “If I’m paid \$50/acre for carbon but \$500/acre to grow wheat, the math isn’t hard.” Others warned that markets alone can’t reverse grassland loss without strong baseline regulations and upfront public funding to de-risk innovation.

### ***Bottom line***

Biodiversity isn’t a competing demand-it’s foundational to agricultural resilience. As one participant put it: “*Your grass is your bank account.*” The challenge lies in designing policies that recognize this reality while respecting the economic and cultural realities of farming.