



PLAN Policy Network - Meeting Summary

Date: March 25, 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 sixth meeting of the PLAN Policy Network focused on agricultural extension services in Canada. The discussion highlighted a critical issue. Extension services in Canada, which deliver research and practical support to farmers, suffer from fragmentation, insufficient funding, and a lack of leadership. Provinces like Alberta and Ontario once maintained strong public systems, with specialists in every rural municipality enhancing farm productivity and addressing challenges. Alberta's network, previously a leader in North America, managed 600,000 farmer contacts annually. Budget reductions and a shift toward private-sector reliance have since diminished these efforts, reducing Alberta's system to a largely shuttered call center. Other provinces have followed a similar path, scaling back public involvement and leaving private companies and not-for-profits to fill the void. Without a cohesive strategy or defined oversight, many farmers lack consistent support.

This matters for policy because extension services yield significant returns. Research indicates a 5-to-1 or even 9-to-1 return on investment, surpassing the gains from pure research alone. These services improve farm profitability, strengthen resilience, enhance soil health, and maintain Canada's agricultural competitiveness amid climate pressures. Effective extension enables farmers to adopt improved practices, increasing yields and benefiting both private stakeholders and the broader public. The current lack of coordination delays the timely spread of valuable

insights from research or innovative producers. The discussion highlighted that the government should address this to sustain a robust, forward-looking agricultural sector.

Policy should prioritize targeted investments, starting with specialists. A compact team of experts could support existing private and not-for-profit advisors by linking researchers, advisors, and farmers with practical, region-specific solutions. Government need not employ these specialists directly. Funding them through universities, commodity organizations, or collaborative partnerships would suffice. The focus should be on providing resources and ensuring alignment. Private initiatives, such as those tied to regenerative agriculture or corporate objectives, offer value but remain vulnerable to shifting priorities. Public investment provides a stable foundation, keeping extension services reliable and effective.

Training represents another critical need. New advisors, whether independent crop consultants or commodity group staff, lack structured opportunities to develop extension skills. Success in this field requires understanding people, building trust, and translating data into actionable steps, beyond just technical knowledge. Universities and colleges could address this through concise, practical courses, such as micro-credentials, designed for farmers and advisors. Programs like Ontario's Knowledge Translation and Transfer initiative or the Living Lab approach, where farmers and researchers collaborate on real-world solutions, show potential. Expanding these efforts with increased funding and reach would amplify their impact.

Leadership remains absent from the current system. No single player guides the effort. Provincial and federal governments should designate champions who understand agriculture, know the key players, and can unite them toward shared objectives. Multiple groups, including private firms, commodity boards, and researchers, operate independently without sufficient collaboration. The goal should be to refine the existing framework, not to recreate past models.

Technology also demands attention. Artificial intelligence and digital tools cannot replace human advisors, as farmers value personal trust, but these tools can enhance advisors' capabilities. For example, a consultant could use AI to analyze soil health data and then work directly with a farmer to apply it effectively. Policy should encourage this integration by ensuring advisors have access to appropriate tools and training. This approach should remain inclusive, supporting all farmers regardless of scale, while avoiding information overload.

In summary, the discussion emphasized that extension services are vital to Canadian agriculture's success, yet they struggle to function effectively. Strategic policy can revitalize them through focused funding, practical training, defined leadership, and technology integration, all at a manageable cost. Farmers would see increased profitability, the sector would gain resilience, and the public would benefit from a secure, sustainable food system.