



PLAN Policy Network - Meeting Summary

Date: April 28, 2025

Key Information:

The *Policies for Land Use, Agriculture, and Nature (PLAN) Policy Network* is a collaborative initiative led by the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute (CAPI). It brings together policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to address key land use challenges while supporting biodiversity, agricultural productivity, and long-term sustainability. The seventh PLAN Network meeting featured two Distinguished Fellows projects, both focused on how scientific knowledge can better inform land-use decision-making in Canada. The first presentation examined farmland valuation and rental rates; the second focused on adaptive management and its application to species-at-risk policy.

The first presentation explored publicly available census and tax data from 1991 to 2021 to understand how farmland value and rental returns have changed over time. The analysis showed a steep increase in the value of farmland per acre since the early 2000s, alongside a decline in total farm area. This relationship varied across provinces and was heavily influenced by regional population density. In high-density areas, the gap between land value and rental value widened, reflecting increased development pressure and competition for land.

Despite this, the data revealed a close overall correlation between asset values and rental returns. Rental rates represented approximately 90% of net operating income per acre, indicating strong competition among producers. The research also suggested that farmland appreciation alone is insufficient to justify investment. Returns from farming and rental are necessary to meet a typical investor's all-in discount rate, but both options carry higher risk (compared to just owning the land). These insights have important policy implications. Considering the competition for land as urbanization increases, we need to understand what future generations need to invest in farming. As well, this research highlights the importance of comprehensive data collected by the Census of Agriculture.

The second presentation examined how adaptive management, a “structured, iterative decision-making process” can help bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and policy action in conservation. Drawing on decades of experience in conservation biology and forest policy, the speaker argued that uncertainty is a major barrier to effective biodiversity protection. Scientific uncertainty and debate, when unacknowledged or poorly communicated, leads to missed opportunities, delayed interventions, and weaker conservation outcomes.

The Species at Risk Act (SARA) was used as a case study to demonstrate how uncertainty creates bottlenecks in decision-making. While early-stage assessments of species threats are rigorous, the downstream policy response often falters. Political considerations, lack of clear causal evidence, and administrative complexity delay or dilute recovery strategies—especially for species with cultural, economic, or land use implications, such as caribou or grassland birds. The speaker used the bobolink as an example: although listed as threatened, uncertainties around the primary drivers of its decline led to stalled policy action and disagreement about the appropriate recovery path. Additionally, anecdotal evidence in the form of “there are lots of bobolinks on my farm” can support this confusion.

Adaptive management offers a way forward by embedding learning into the policy process. Instead of waiting for perfect knowledge, decision-makers can treat policies as hypotheses and management as experiments. This approach has existed for decades but struggles with implementation due to factors such as limited funding, weak leadership, reluctance to embrace uncertainty, and minimal stakeholder involvement. While terms like “structured decision-making” and “participatory planning” are now more common, they represent an evolution of adaptive management rather than a departure from it.

In this context, science must not only provide evidence but also participate in the design of decision frameworks. Rather than rely on linear models of science-to-policy transfer, adaptive governance embraces cycles of implementation, monitoring, and revision.

In summary, the discussion emphasized that sustainable land use and biodiversity protection both require better integration of scientific data, economic insight, and new policy tools. Farmland values and rental rates shape the landscape for agricultural decision-making, while conservation policies must grapple with uncertainty and trade-offs. Strategic public investments, transparent risk communication, and collaborative governance frameworks are essential to ensuring that Canadian agriculture remains productive, resilient, and ecologically responsible.