



Digital Agri-Food Policy Forum

First Meeting Summary | July 2026

Summary

The CAPI-EMILI Digital Agri-Food Policy Forum is a new platform convening industry, technology, research, and policy leaders from across Canada to discuss shared challenges in digital agriculture and agri-food, exchange perspectives, and identify practical opportunities to support adoption and scale innovation and new technologies. The goal of the Forum is to create a focused space for informed, solution-oriented discussion that can help bring more coherent conversations across the system.

The creation of the forum stems from previous CAPI-EMILI research and engagement, particularly our [2025](#) and [2026](#) Digital Agri-food Reports, where we observed a highly fragmented landscape with limited opportunities for cross-sector dialogue at a national level.

The Forum's first meeting, held in late June 2026, focused on introducing forum participants, identifying shared priorities, and shaping future discussion topics. A major theme of the discussion was that Canada's digital agriculture system is highly active, but still highly fragmented. Participants described strong research capacity, emerging smart farm networks, growing private-sector innovation, and increasing interest in AI, automation, robotics, and data systems.

However, they also emphasized that promising technologies often struggle to move from proof-of-concept to commercial adoption. This "messy middle" between validation and scale was repeatedly identified as a core policy challenge that requires greater attention and resources.

The Forum is not unearthing anything new. Rather, it brings together the barriers, challenges, and opportunities that have consistently emerged across the sector and creates a space for national leaders to discuss them, identify areas of alignment, and help advance Canada's position in digital agriculture and agri-food.

Key Insights

1. Commercial validation and de-risking adoption

There was clear consensus that adoption depends on reliable, real-world validation. Farmers and processors need clearer evidence that technologies work in practical operating conditions, deliver measurable return on investment, and can be serviced or supported after purchase. Smart farms, demonstration sites, and on-farm validation networks were seen as important tools for reducing risk and building confidence.

2. Data governance, interoperability, and standards

Data is a major asset for improving operations – yet also presents major challenges. Digital agriculture systems already in widespread use generate large amounts of data, but producers lack the trust, internal capacity or supportive expertise to use it effectively. Some common issues include

data-sharing barriers and privacy and security concerns. But also, unclear data governance models, limited interoperability between platforms and the need for established data standards.

3. Skills, workforce, and advisory capacity

Sometimes overlooked is how digital agriculture is not only a technology issue, but also a workforce and skills issue. The sector needs people who understand both agriculture and digital systems. Several speakers pointed to a gap between technology expertise and agricultural knowledge, including the need to bring AI, data, and automation expertise closer to producers, agronomists, advisors, and processors. Participants also highlighted the complexity of skills development and the need for greater clarity about what it means in practice.

4. Trust, usability, and farmer-centered design

Too often producers and processors have seen technologies overpromise and underdeliver. As a result, adoption will depend on ensuring tools that solve real problems – rather than technologies created as “solutions looking for a problem.” They must also be easy to use, provide clear economic value and return on investment, and fit into existing operations by being designed around producer and value-chain needs.

5. AI as an emerging opportunity that needs clear framing

There is a risk that Canada could miss opportunities if AI development in agri-food remains too slow, fragmented, or disconnected from real operational needs. Indeed, AI can become a major opportunity for Canada’s agriculture sector, but also an area where definitions and priorities need to be clarified. For example, there are important differences between general digital automation, precision agriculture, generative AI and more advanced AI applications.

Barriers

Each participant was asked to outline a barrier they encounter in their work:

Barrier	What participants emphasized
Commercialization gap	Promising technologies often struggle to move from research or pilot stage to commercial scale.
Trust and validation	Producers and processors need evidence that tools work, produce ROI, and can be supported in real-world conditions.
Fragmentation	Research, smart farms, data initiatives, and innovation programs are often not connected enough across regions and sectors.
Data challenges	The data exists, but barriers remain around governance, interoperability, quality, privacy, security, and practical use.
Skills mismatch	The sector needs people who understand both agriculture and technology, especially in AI, data, robotics, and automation.
Regulatory lag	Approval processes, regulatory modernization, and government

	capacity can slow adoption in food, seed, and agri-food systems.
Regional diversity	Technologies must work across Canada’s very different farm sizes, commodities, geographies, and production systems.
Unclear ROI	Producers are unlikely to adopt tools without specific hard evidence of financial value, especially under tight margins.

Areas of Synergy and Further Discussion

From the meeting discussion, several areas of synergy emerged to inform future discussion and work of the Forum.

- **Smart farm and validation networks:** Participants identified Commercial validation and de-risking adoption as critical and flagged the potential opportunity to connect existing sites and avoiding duplicating efforts.
- **Data governance and data-sharing initiatives:** Several participants highlighted theirs and others work on data governance, data spaces, or federated data systems. These efforts could benefit from greater coordination.
- **Workforce and skills development:** Several participants identified the need to better connect agriculture, technology, and workforce planning.
- **AI and producer-centred problem solving:** Participants agreed that AI has major potential, but future work should focus on practical use cases, advisory tools, agronomic support, and producer-relevant applications rather than abstract technology discussions
- **Policy alignment across sectors and regions:** The Forum can help connect federal, provincial, academic, industry, and producer perspectives so that policy discussions reflect the full innovation pathway from research to adoption.

Next Steps/What to Expect

The work does not stop here. The Forum is time-bound and action-oriented, meeting over the next year to establish a clearer, shared understanding of key challenges and opportunities in digital agriculture; foster alignment, or at minimum informed dialogue, across a diverse set of actors; strengthen relationships and connections that enable more coordinated action and advocacy; and generate practical insights that can inform policy discussions and decision-making.

Insights generated through these discussions will be synthesized and mobilized to inform broader policy and system-level decision-making. While Forum participation has been intentionally limited to a small group to enable candid, in-depth discussion and the exchange of ideas, the conversation will extend beyond the Forum itself. Meeting summaries, key insights, and emerging themes will be shared with the broader network to encourage ongoing dialogue and support wider engagement on the future of digital agri-food.

For more information on the work of the Forum, please contact Elise Bigley, Director of Strategic Projects at bigleye@capi-icpa.ca.