

Project Overview

The engagement is in preparation for the upcoming Federal/Provincial/Territorial (FPT) Ministers of Agriculture meeting on November 12 to 13, 2020. Industry and public feedback on discussion topics supports the policy and program development process. The discussion topics include post-COVID-19 resiliency, market opportunities, Business Risk Management (BRM), and the use of technology and innovation to advance the agriculture sector.

To enhance the online dialogue, Minister Pedersen hosted a series of small in-person sessions across rural Manitoba to talk directly to farmers about issues and opportunities. The minister's tour, paired with the EngageMB online engagement event, provided opportunity for a fulsome perspective on key issues from the entire industry.

Engagement Overview

COVID-19 eliminated the ability to host the traditional large in-person pre-FPT stakeholder engagement event. Under normal circumstances, these engagement events focus on interchange between industry members around specific sector challenges. Active participation of industry members lead to deeper issue exploration, novel solutions and further network development.

In order to continue a conversational form of engagement, Manitoba Agriculture and Resource Development (ARD) adopted the use of forums through the EngageMB portal. Forums allowed for open dialogue around key questions between participants. Small in-person meetings between producers and Minister Pedersen enhanced the engagement process. The in-person meetings were hosted in late July across Manitoba.

The portal was open to the public and industry from July 31 to September 4, 2020. Email invitations, Twitter posts and other social media platforms raised event awareness. There was a combined total of 59 contributions on the forums presenting a diversity of views on each topic. These comments, alongside key messages from the minister's in-person tour of rural Manitoba communities, will inform government on priority areas and support future engagement events.

What We Heard

Topic: Market Opportunities

Introduction: Manitoba's agriculture industry continues to be export driven and government wants to ensure that producers and processors have continued access to current and new market opportunities.

Question: How has the recent pandemic shed light on hurdles or process changes we need to consider when looking at strengthening our market opportunities or reducing risks associated with those market opportunities?

Key themes:

- Must continue to invest in infrastructure to support the movement of goods and adoption of technology.
- Support local processing growth with regulatory changes to decrease import reliance.
- Need for continued investment in variety development.
- Increased support for start-up farms that include young farmers and new entrants; and innovative production models.

Messages for government action:

- Manitoba is exporting live animals for processing when it would be more humane and economically viable to harvest locally. Regulatory changes to abattoir licensing requirements around inter provincial trade will increase value added benefits for Manitoba producers and processors.
- Government must ensure the policy environment allows the private sector to capture market share. This includes funding models and risk management programs that support innovation, market information to identify opportunities, and effective bilateral and multilateral trade relationships.
- Government has a role to play in building networks and strategic relationships that identify sustainable markets for primary products and grow value added industries.

Topic: Business Risk Management

Introduction: Federal and provincial governments have been exploring changes to existing BRM programming as producers have indicated programs are not effective for some sectors. Government seeks to ensure future changes align with producer's needs, government mandates, and financial commitments.

Question: What type of BRM programming will accelerate investment and innovation in the industry?

Key themes:

- Producers need reliable disaster coverage for unforeseen extreme weather and trade disruption.
- BRM programming must provide benefit to diversified operations across Manitoba.
- Risk management program improvement must be in concert with innovation and market development investments.

Messages for government action:

- Review options to increase investments in an improved disaster relief program rather than continuing with AgriInvest. Reliable disaster coverage for unforeseen extreme weather and trade disruptions is imperative for sector resiliency.
- Food security requires collaboration between levels of government and industry to review options including consideration for an 85 per cent AgriStability coverage rate with no reference margin limit.
- Government needs to consider a targeted approach including reduced insurance premiums and targeted advance AgriStability payments to beef and pork producers.

- Establish an industry-government technical working group that allows farm groups to participate in BRM data and impact analysis. It is essential that government work with producers in developing, reviewing and finalizing a new program

Topic: Resiliency

Introduction: COVID-19 affected all Manitobans in different ways. It also taught us how a global crisis can affect our entire food supply chain. COVID-19 highlighted the need to increase the sector's resilience to emergencies or mass disruptions, whether due to pandemics, climate events or trade barriers.

Question: What actions and policy were effective and what do we need now to ensure that our sector continues to be resilient in the face of future disruptions or crisis?

Key Themes:

- COVID response programming, including support for local food production and delivery models (Direct Farm MB); and the student wage subsidy played an important role in the sector's recovery processes.
- The limited availability of labour, specifically in rural areas, continues to hamper industry advancement. Delays in Temporary Foreign Worker arrival due to COVID -19 highlighted this vulnerability. Educational institutions, although able to provide rapid response training, lack funding to be responsive in meeting evolving workforce needs.
- Agriculture production and processing, and the supporting supply chains and services, must continue to be essential activities.
- Promotion of land stewardship practices supports resiliency and sustainability.

Messages for government action:

- Increase support to build supply chain diversity, including funding for alternative production systems such as indoor food propagation, to reduce the reliance on imports.
- There must be early and effective engagement with impacted stakeholders prior to making public policy decisions.
- Review incentives and programs to understand how to support non-family farm succession plans and to explore innovative models for new farmers to access capital. New entrants bring diversity into production models that builds greater sector resilience.

Topic: Innovation and Technology

Introduction: Technology has the capacity to prepare for and mitigate risk, address labour shortages, improve animal health and welfare and build increased sustainability into our sector. Ag Action Manitoba programs are one tool to support industry in becoming innovation leaders.

Question: Where should we focus future policy and programming to ensure our industry has access to the technology and work force required for continued resiliency, sustainability and risk mitigation?

Key themes:

- New entrants are innovation leaders in alternative production practices such as regenerative agriculture and the application of social innovation platforms; but are often unable to enter the production chain due to high start up costs.

- The development of rural programming options for secondary education institutions will ensure trained people are available in rural regions; currently higher education is focused in urban centers when the labour need is rural.
- Improved rural connectivity is critical for economic recovery, technology adoption, working and learning from home, virtual health care and quality of life.

Messages for government action:

- Government must lead the dialogues that will build support for new technologies such as gene editing. These tools have the potential to provide paradigm shifting positive change for farmers, consumers, food production, and the environment. Sound public policy and strong international trade relationships are required to realize the potential technology can bring.
- MARD must continue to coordinate broad industry engagement annually to generate innovative ideas and projects that build synergy and advance agriculture in Manitoba. These events leverage diversity to build unique and valuable research projects. Further government led collaboration through an ARD website that lists ongoing research initiatives, equipment, and assets to improve research coordination will support innovation.
- Manitoba should consider models that support research-funding extension beyond the prescribed five-year window.

What We Heard

In Person:

In-person dialogues allowed for informal discussions on topics of interest to attendees. There were a number of conversations focused on BRM Programs, potential changes and future considerations. The following are some key messages:

- AgrilInsurance programs continue to meet producers' needs.
- Producers are concerned that changes to AgriInvest will negatively affect the program. Changes that are supported include:
 - increase maximum contribution amount
 - reducing time frame for building account value (focus on young farmers)
- AgriStability is unresponsive, penalizes diversity and is not bankable.
- Improved communication of the forage insurance program will increase producer understanding and uptake.

In addition to BRM program discussions, the participants also identified the need for:

- policy and programs, including programming under the Canadian Agriculture Partnership and future framework agreements, which support new entrants and young farmers.
- evaluation of driver licensing policy for Temporary Foreign Workers.
- development of a provincial water management strategy.