

## **Opinion: Canadian agriculture in the age of COVID-19**

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Senator Rob Black

The past 12 months have been anything but ordinary. Challenging, unprecedented, and uncertain have all been terms we have heard time and time again since the novel coronavirus was first recorded in Canada. Many of us have also likely become a little too familiar with the phrases “you’re on mute” and “the new normal” during this time as well.

Industries across Canada, and around the world, have felt the impacts of COVID-19, just as much as we all have in our homes. The agricultural sector is no different. In many ways, the sector has stepped up to the plate to continue feeding our country and the world without the real fear of food shortages. However, agriculture had to quickly adapt to ensure that the industry continued operating safely and securely.

Many of us will recall the fear during the first few months of the pandemic that shelves in grocery stores would go empty. However, this proved not to be the case as farmers, producers, and processors accepted the challenge and proved themselves not only to be able to feed Canadians, but also to feed the world, which in turn has resulted in greater trust and confidence in our food system.

The pandemic also forced all of us to be online more than ever. Suddenly, our computer screens became our offices, our schools, our gyms, and our social gatherings. Many agricultural organizations at the local, provincial, and national level had to reschedule annual general meetings to one of the various online platforms that are now commonplace today. While it was certainly challenging at first, it has enabled these organizations to have both the infrastructure to meet in-person and virtually in the future.

The option of connecting virtually presents a more cost-effective and sometimes easier way to gather with large audiences and meet with representatives of the agricultural community from remote communities, other provinces, or even other countries. It also allows individual farmers or larger agricultural associations, societies, and organizations to connect with government and other elected officials more regularly, instead of scheduling a trip across Canada once a year.

Although technological advances have made connecting easier during this challenging time, the greater dependency on internet connectivity to work, learn, and play has also highlighted disparities between urban and rural communities. Unfortunately, this is an ongoing issue that must be addressed sooner, rather than later by both government and the telecommunications industry. Throwing more money into the pot for broadband isn’t the answer. It is evident that we need shovels in the ground now, not in 2030. It is unfathomable that in 2021, rural communities across Canada are unable to access reliable high-speed internet.

While the pandemic highlighted the importance and strength of Canada’s food supply system, it also called attention to other issues in the agricultural sector—in particular, issues related to temporary foreign workers (TFWs) and food security. There were some unfortunate instances where TFWs found

themselves in working environments which put them at increased risk of contracting COVID-19. While the government provided the industry with financial assistance to protect the health of TFWs during this crisis, these issues must be resolved. However, we can be assured the agriculture industry will continue stepping up to the challenge to safeguard their farms and workers. Canada's agricultural industry, in collaboration with government and other stakeholders, continues to work to address these gaps in the labour force and to discuss the need for a national labour strategy.

I am proud of Canadian agriculture for its resiliency and adaptability over these past months, and indeed over many years. I truly believe that agriculture can come out of this crisis stronger than ever, and that the industry can be the economic driver to help Canada through this pandemic. Despite its many downsides, the pandemic has given us all reason to reexamine our priorities, develop back-up plans, and ensure that we're ready for anything. The opportunity to recognize the progress being made and the good work being done in our communities and within the agricultural sector is now.

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