

Canada's food system needs environmental overhaul

The environmental impact of Canada's food system needs closer scrutiny, according to a Conference Board of Canada report. In addition, governments at all levels in Canada need to play a lead role in managing environmental risks in the food sector through the use of hard and soft measures. Both are essential to ensure the environmental sustainability of the food system, according to the report released by the Centre for Food in Canada, an initiative of the Conference Board.

Hard measures include laws and regulations that mandate minimum environmental standards, backed up by compliance monitoring and enforcement. Soft measures include technical assistance and cost-sharing programs that create incentives for businesses to change behavior, as well as public education and awareness campaigns.

“Every meal eaten in Canada leaves an environmental footprint,” said Michael Bloom, vice-president, organizational effectiveness and learning. “At each stage of the production, distribution, and preparation of food, something is taken from or added to the environment. If we are to conserve Canada's environment and guarantee food security in the years to come, it is essential that the food system be as sustainable as possible. That entails environmental stewardship by governments, industry and consumers.”

Report highlights

• Canada, as a major food exporter, will be looked upon to satisfy rising global food demand, but must do so without jeopardizing the environment.

• Agriculture accounts for almost 10 per cent of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions.

• As much as 40 per cent of all food is wasted in Canada, and the problem is not being adequately addressed.

• Only 43 per cent of Canada's producers have implemented specific management practices to benefit the environment.

The Canadian food industry, governments and consumers have done much to improve the environmental performance of the food system over the past decades. Yet the overall, results are still mixed, leaving significant problems with water pollution, air pollution, soil quality and generation of waste. Changes in climate also continue to pose a risk to Canadian agriculture and the food system.

The report, *Reducing the Risk: Addressing the Environmental Impacts of the Food System*, provides six recommendations to manage risk and improve environmental performance:

• Governments should motivate and support business environmental performance. Only 43 per cent of Canada's producers have fully implemented some form of beneficial management practice (BMP), one that benefits the environment. Cost is the main concern, yet a majority of producers adopting BMPs found that the financial benefits exceed the costs. Add “green” thinking to agricultural policy and link it to income support programs • agricultural policy has focused largely on supporting producer incomes without integrating environmental objectives.

• Improve education about household food waste. As much as 40 per cent of all food, equivalent to \$27.7 billion annually, is wasted in Canada, mostly in households. Education and awareness campaigns could help consumers reduce their food waste.

• Develop food eco-labels for retail products. More widespread use of labels that outline the environmental practices related to food production would improve consumers' ability to make environmentally-friendly purchasing decisions.

• Develop concrete and measurable food sustainability objectives. Benchmarks and objectives, against which environmental performance can be objectively measured and assessed, would enable all stakeholders to take meaningful actions.

• Create a Canadian agri-food environmental governance system. A coordinated and overarching farm-to-fork approach to risk governance would improve on the current plethora of systems organized around sector, environmental cause, geographical region, and political jurisdiction.

The principal goal of the Centre for Food in Canada is to engage stakeholders from business, government, academia, associations, and communities in creating a Canadian Food Strategy, one that will meet the country's need for a coordinated, long-term strategy on industry prosperity, healthy and safe food, household food security and environmental sustainability.