

A Food Policy for Canada: Finding Common Ground Discussion Paper



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Introduction

“Few Canadians give their daily food a lot of thought. Our abundance has allowed this luxury for many, but not all Canadians. Few Canadians understand what goes into bringing food to our plates and how the choices we make at the grocery store affect our food chain and our health. Perhaps because of our abundance we have not, as a nation, comprehensively planned to ensure an adequate and wholesome food supply for future generations.”¹

These sentences highlight the need for a National Food Strategy at the outset of the CFA’s 2011 report [Towards a National Food Strategy](#), which was published following an extensive, collaborative discussion with a broad range of contributors, from input suppliers through processors, distributors, retailers and consumers. Industry sought a National Food Strategy to align all orders of government, across departments, as well as the many players in the agri-food sector around a long-term, unified vision that would identify clear objectives for the sector while providing clarity and focus for short-term policy. This discussion paper will refer to a National Food Strategy, which CFA continues to advocate for instead of a food *policy*. This support is grounded in the belief that a strategy is inherently more action-oriented, flexible and focused, while a policy suggests a more passive approach and rigid direction. This strategy would then provide a framework to align the specific policies and initiatives adopted by all stakeholders, provincial governments and individual federal departments, around a common vision and ensure these actions are moving towards common objectives.

Six years have passed since that time, and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) and its members are pleased to see the Government of Canada taking concrete steps toward its development, through consultations on the development of *A Food Policy for Canada*. However, the disconnect between Canadians and how their food is produced, as noted in the above quote, continues to hold true today and reflects a critical challenge and potential opportunity facing the development of a National Food Strategy – creating a common understanding that bridges the widening divide between consumer expectations and modern food production practices.

Establishing Common Understanding: An Opportunity & Challenge

The pillars highlighted in the government’s recent announcement regarding consultations on *A Food Policy for Canada* help demonstrate why this common understanding is both an opportunity and a challenge,

- increasing access to affordable food;
- improving health and food safety;
- conserving our soil, water, and air; and
- growing more high-quality food.

Each of these pillars represent non-specific, high level objectives that most Canadians would agree are desirable in a National Food Strategy. It is when the details of the actions required to achieve each objective are considered more closely that a range of opinions inevitably exists. No strategy will address each and every individual’s concerns, but a National Food Strategy presents a unique opportunity to establish dialogue and find common ground across a diversity of stakeholders. It is this common ground that enables an aligned approach to identifying more specific outcomes, and the subsequent short and long-term actions required to achieve them.

¹ Towards a National Food Strategy: A framework for securing the future of food (2011). Available at: <http://www.cfa-fca.ca/programs-projects/national-food-strategy/>

As governments look to identify areas of common ground, it is important to note that the CFA, the Canadian Agri-food Policy Institute, Food Secure Canada, and the Conference Board of Canada developed food policy or strategy proposals over the past seven years that largely align in their identified objectives and suggested actions. All four proposals were based on comprehensive and broad-based consultative processes which resulted in similar goals and objectives, demonstrating a significant level of consensus and support from stakeholders across the food system in terms of key objectives and suggested actions. Recognizing the extensive work that has already been done, the Food Policy consultation should draw heavily on these previous works, which represent hundreds of hours of consultation across the entire food system.

Whole of Government Approach

A National Food Strategy must not only seek outcomes within each specific policy domain, it must also align perspectives and decision-making across traditionally siloed policy areas. To truly align stakeholders and enable a whole-of-government approach, a National Food Strategy must capture synergies between these siloes, providing a unique forum to identify and leverage Canada's existing strengths. At the same time, it must also establish a common understanding capable of addressing the trade-offs that can arise from such interdependencies. These trade-offs have real world consequences and often immediate impacts, particularly for those whose livelihoods are dependent on the competitiveness of the Canadian agri-food value chain, the farmers, ranchers, fish harvesters and processors of Canadian food products.

A number of examples of siloed decision making exist, where trade-offs and unintended consequences are either seemingly unacknowledged or given limited consideration. Rather than focusing on specific instances or initiatives, a National Food Strategy provides a unique opportunity to directly address the root cause of these siloes and take a concerted effort to consider the synergies, trade-offs, and importantly, the cumulative impact of concurrent initiatives upon the agri-food value chain. Proposed initiatives relating to food safety, animal welfare, and health-related food labels, amongst others, all place additional financial burdens on the sector, with direct ramifications for competitiveness and public trust. The cumulative impact of these proposed regulatory, program and policy changes to the agri-food value chain must be a core consideration when assessing the impact of a given initiative. Overcoming the chronic challenge of siloed decision-making requires a cross-cabinet committee or directorate focused on enabling a whole-of-government approach through a National Food Strategy and aligning it with existing policy initiatives. Through a cross-cabinet directorate, the federal government could consider the potential trade-offs, unintended consequences, and cumulative impact of proposed initiatives and determine how to best achieve their desired objectives without undermining existing agendas.

The second report of the Advisory Council on Economic Growth (the Barton Report) articulates the potential benefits of such a cross-cutting, whole-of-government approach to Canada's agri-food sector, noting that "the agfood sector represents a distinctive opportunity for Canada to boost inclusive economic growth based on a rich natural endowment". At the same time, the report articulates a common vision around which government and agri-food stakeholders must coalesce, where "Canada will become the trusted leader in safe, nutritious, and sustainable food for the 21st century".² The CFA was pleased to see the 2017 federal Budget align with this vision and acknowledge the sector's potential, with the agri-food sector identified as one of six dynamic, highly innovative industries with potential

² Advisory Council on Economic Growth. Unleashing the Growth Potential of Key Sectors. Available at: <http://www.budget.gc.ca/aceg-ccce/home-accueil-en.html>

to expand growth and create good, well-paying jobs. This is most clearly illustrated in the Budget’s ambitious growth target, looking to increase agri-food exports to \$75 billion by 2025.

This growth agenda for the sector represents a critical example of the whole-of-government approach around which a National Food Strategy must be built. The vision outlined in the Barton Report actually mirrors the mission statement identified in the 2011 [Towards a National Food Strategy](#) report – “Canada will be a leader in providing safe and nutritious food through a vibrant, competitive, responsive and sustainable farming, processing, distribution and sales sector.” By incorporating environmental sustainability, nutrition, food safety, and growth in the sector, this vision not only presents an opportunity to promote inclusive growth and create further economic opportunities in regions across Canada, it also provides a cross-cutting policy initiative around which a National Food Strategy can build critical momentum.

Achieving this growth in the sector is not limited to any one segment of the value chain, requiring innovation and investments on the part of stakeholders across the entire agri-food value chain. This will involve an array of industries, academic fields and government departments, at all levels. By aligning with this existing initiative from the outset, a National Food Strategy can build critical momentum by formalizing a more comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to boosting inclusive economic growth through the entire agri-food value chain. To truly achieve this vision, this whole-of-government approach must work in partnership with the entire value-chain, to mobilize leadership across the private sector.

Shared Understanding

Diverse stakeholders bring diverse backgrounds, perceptions, and knowledge bases with them, from which their perspectives are formed. This diversity can be a source of strength and forward-looking innovation to address emerging issues through new collaborations and multi-disciplinary dialogue. Yet if not properly grounded in a common understanding of issues, this diversity can challenge the process by creating division and ultimately undermine the capacity to develop and implement an aligned strategy.

The only way to achieve such common understanding is through evidence-based dialogue that brings together representatives from across the entire value chain. This dialogue provides a unique platform to build multi-disciplinary collaborations, but also presents an opportunity to engage Canadians and share information that would help bridge the widening divide between consumer expectations and modern food production practices. Over the past decade, consumers have demonstrated an increased interest in the gastronomic and cultural facets of food, particularly evident through an ongoing desire to eat more Canadian food. Throughout this dialogue, consideration must be given to how this increased interest can be leveraged to improve understanding of modern agri-food production practices and thus contribute to improving public trust in the Canadian agri-food system.

The consultations undertaken by the government represent the beginning of this discussion and present an opportunity to clarify the values, principles, and high-level objectives of a National Food Strategy. However, senior governmental officials across multiple departments must then agree on the strategies required to address these objectives, while industry and other nongovernmental stakeholders must also play a leadership role in developing and implementing such strategies. This requires moving beyond high-level objectives and identifying specific targets, actions, and priorities.

Finding Common Ground

To this end, the CFA brought diverse stakeholders together, with expertise from across these varied policy domains, at a session on June 5th, 2017 entitled ‘Finding Common Ground: A collaborative discussion on shaping Canada’s National Food Strategy’. The focus of this discussion was to build understanding around the range of perspectives that exist and to identify those areas of common ground around which stakeholders could coalesce. Throughout these discussions, common ground emerged through a number of cross-cutting policy outcomes, such as:

- ❖ Reducing food waste;
- ❖ Promoting food literacy;
- ❖ Reducing the cost of diet-related disease; and
- ❖ Positioning Canada as a trusted global leader in safe, nutritious and sustainable food.

However, the discussion also further emphasized that a National Food Strategy must first establish a foundation for decision-making through science-based indicators. A successful National Food Strategy must dedicate resources to compiling relevant data from across departments to establish a common framework of baseline information to identify areas of strength, opportunities for improvement, and to agree on next steps.

Realizing this Vision through a National Food Strategy

A National Food Strategy represents a unique opportunity to bring stakeholders from all orders of government, the agri-food value chain, and other nongovernmental stakeholders together around a common, action-oriented vision for Canada’s food system. Canadian farmers are ready to play their role in a National Food Strategy by providing safe, nutritious and affordable food for citizens of Canada as well as contributing to international food security.

As such, the CFA proposes that any approach adopted within a National Food Strategy must reflect seven key elements, including recommendations specific to governance and the early actions required for successful implementation.

Governance:

- 1. Adopt a Whole-of-Government Approach:** A National Food Strategy must be founded on a vision that is shared by all government departments and explicitly articulated in the mandates for all departments. While CFA supports AAFC’s leadership role on this initiative, ensuring the department’s experience and knowledge of the agri-food system continues to inform decision-making, senior decision-makers across government departments must be brought together under a formal body that reports directly to the Prime Minister’s Office.
- 2. Contribution from All Levels of Government:** A national food strategy cannot be restricted to the federal government. The involvement of the provincial, territorial, municipal governments is critical if we are to realize the benefits of a holistic vision for Canada’s food system. With leadership from respective agriculture and agri-food departments, the strategy must also establish clear roles for provincial, municipal, and indigenous leaders from all departments that lay out specific, coordinated actions required by all parties. To overcome potential sources of tension and disconnect, the framers of the strategy must commit to developing a common vision that lays out the specific ways that all levels of government can contribute, thus optimizing resources by reducing duplication and counterproductive measures.

- 3. Find Common Ground through Ongoing Dialogue:** Buy-in to any strategies can only be established through ongoing dialogue across departments within all orders of government, the entire agri-food value chain, and other nongovernmental stakeholders. This ongoing dialogue also ensures that the National Food Strategy remains responsive to emerging science, consumer trends, and global market conditions. The best way to achieve this would be to focus early on areas of agreement, rather than to hold off because of areas of discord.
- 4. Clarify Roles & Responsibilities:** This dialogue is needed to establish accountability through defined roles and responsibilities, coordinate actions required across all parties, identify appropriate policy mechanisms, clarify priorities, and ultimately optimize available resources. Establishing distinct roles with respect to each objective and subsequent action will help engage and mobilize what is a very diverse stakeholder base, while ensuring focus is maintained across all four objectives. Improving access to affordable food presents a clear example, where agricultural policies and programs play a critical role in contributing to the efficient production of affordable food, while other policy domains are better targeted to address the complex socioeconomic issues that contribute to food insecurity in Canada. Canada's agri-food value chain continues to excel in the production of affordable food, and the sector's strength in providing affordable food represents a success story that a National Food Strategy can build upon through socioeconomic policies without undermining the vibrancy and sustainability of Canada's food production.

Early Actions:

- 5. Establish A Common Evidence-Based Framework:** For this to be realized, governments must dedicate sufficient resources to compile and collect relevant data across government departments and establish a common, evidence-based framework with specific metrics and suitable targets. This will ensure that ongoing dialogue is evidence-based, providing the foundation needed to establish common indicators and targets for further action. This evidence-based framework is required to inform the specific actions and targets that enable a National Food Strategy to move from high-level objectives to specific actions and outcomes.
- 6. Address Unintended Consequences:** A common framework would enable stakeholders to model and better understand the potential synergies and trade-offs that might arise from subsequent actions. This improved understanding of interdependencies lies at the heart of a truly integrated, whole-of-government approach. Unintended consequences should be considered before implementing any specific strategies or actions, to ensure decision-making reflects a clear understanding of the synergies and trade-offs that arise from a particular course of action.
- 7. Align with Existing Policy Initiatives:** Building momentum behind a National Food Strategy is also critical to ensuring buy-in from all parties, with short-term successes providing a foundation upon which longer-term objectives can then be built. The agri-food growth agenda articulated through measures and targets in Budget 2017 provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate the value of a whole-of-government approach, while integrating elements of the four pillars identified as prospective elements of a National Food Strategy.



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NATIONAL OFFICE:
21 Florence Street
Ottawa, ON
K2P 0W6

Phone: 613-236-3633

Fax: 613-236-5749

General Inquiries: info@canadian-farmers.ca

Web site: www.cfa-fca.ca