

Sustainability is, apparently, the in thing

by Hugh Maynard

There's nothing like a study proclaiming what should be done when what's really needed is definitive recommendations on how to get it done. Every year another study or report comes forth with more analysis, usually quite correct, on all the problems - economic, environmental, social - in the farming sector. The number of suggestions, however, of how to correct the situation, and the means to do it with, are disproportionately fewer. The number of recommendations that are actually implemented diminishes yet again.

Canadian farmers were saddled with two more of these studies this past spring and are, sadly, none the wiser since Senator Herb Sparrow and his committee set off alarm bells regarding the environmental state of Canadian farmland in the mid-1980s.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and the Science Council of Canada (in its last report before being permanently dismantled through budget cuts) both issued reports on sustainable agriculture, titled respectively "The Path to Sustainable Agriculture" and "Sustainable Agriculture: The Research Challenge."

Both reports give a good overview of the problems facing agriculture in Canada concerning economic and environmental sustainability. This is to be expected, since they both consulted a wide range of organizations and institutions involved in promoting their brand of sustainability within their own constituencies, whether it be directly with farmers (as in the case of REAP), or through research at a university or ministry of agriculture. Indeed, Clay Gilson, chairperson of the Science Council's committee on sustainable agriculture even made a submission to the Standing Committee's hearings. Sustaining sustainability in extremis.

Again, a repetitive problem reoccurs with these two reports. They are too full of what is wrong and there is too little on how to fix it all. The Science Council makes 27 recommendations, of which 13 suggest some other organization should "review" the topic in question or set up a committee or task force for more study.

"The deans of agriculture and veterinary medicine should review hiring and promotion criteria to encourage the appointment and promotion of staff whose teaching and research furthers the understanding of agricultural systems," is the Council's eighth recommendation, so much motherhood and maple syrup that one has to wonder whether there is any hope of furthering understanding.

The Standing Committee fares no better. While recommending that "the federal government develop long-term national goals for a sustainable agri-food system," whatever that means, the section on conservation farm plans, while noting that "Such types of grass-roots initiatives are very encouraging and, from what the committee has heard, have the greatest chance of success," has no recommendation given at all!

Action not words

Which is precisely the most frustrating thing about these reports: even when recommendations are made, they lack muster because they don't say anything about how it should be done, who's best suited to do it and how it should be paid for. There is no designation of responsibility nor tracking of accountability.

The Science Council makes an excellent suggestion in its 16th recommendation: "The deans of agriculture and veterinary medicine should explore ways to include performance of extension activities as a necessary criterion in the selection, promotion and tenure of their academic staff." Excellent, except that it is so far removed from reality as to be unattainable without a complete overhaul of post-secondary institutions.

Today, universities earn their money on the number of warm bodies in a classroom and pick up whatever extra they can by conducting (mostly) short-term research contracts for whoever is willing to pay for it. The problem of a lack of extension activity in universities has been well understood for sometime, the Science Council's study is not a revelation; more appropriate would have been a discussion about how this major and potentially beneficial change is to come about.

Other recommendations are down-right dangerous. The Standing Committee suggests that cross-compliance be instituted for government programs. For the uninitiated, this means that farmers who don't meet the government's definition of sustainability will not receive any government program funding. Dangerous because in most instances it means dealing with two or more government ministries, with farmers caught in the cross-fire of competing objectives. Secondly, cross-compliance implies that all other preferable avenues of promoting change, such as education and incentive, have been tried and failed; since the agricultural community is a long way away from having even tried some solutions, cross-compliance should be left until all else fails. Besides, since when was General Motors ever subjected to cross-compliance in matters of sustainability?

Meanwhile farmers have been getting on with the job on their own. Preliminary analysis of 1991 census data shows that more and more farmers have been changing the way they manage their crops and adopting more environmentally sustainable practices. Conservation tillage and no-till cropping practices are now carried out on almost one-third of

Canadian farms. Tree shelterbelts used as windbreaks for soil conservation are now present on 33,000 farms. Nearly 40% of farmers are using crop rotation to control soil erosion while usage of both fertilizers and herbicides dropped on Canadian farms by 7% and 10% respectively since 1985.

Canadian farmers need fewer reports on what needs to be done and more suggestions on how they can get it done.

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