

What price sustainability

Commentary

by Hugh Maynard

At a time when a survey conducted by Agriculture Canada itself shows that farmers have a greater awareness of and concern for the environment, federal government actions seem to be mere shadow boxing.

In the 1992 National Survey of Farmers, carried out last spring for Agriculture Canada by the Angus Reid Group, Inc., 61% of the 3,819 farmers who responded said that, in response to concerns about the environment, they had made some sort of change in their farming practices during the last year. This was a five percent increase from the same survey two years ago.

The number one change was a reduction in the use of crop chemicals, followed by reduced summerfallow/tillage and changed practices to reduce soil degradation. Other notable areas were changes in the methods of handling manure, disposal of chemical containers and other materials, as well as taking training courses for spraying and handling activities. Even 3% of farmers said they had switched to organic methods of production.

Meanwhile, farmers' actions towards a more sustainable agriculture are being met by words and budget cuts from the federal government. In Agriculture Canada's "Government response to the Report of the Standing Committee on Agriculture: The Path to Sustainable Agriculture," the motherhood and maple syrup statements of principle receive endorsement, the ones proposing concrete action - especially with funding attached - are politely declined.

Yes, sustainable agriculture is to be recognized as an essential part of Canadian life, with the development of long-term goals - a secure and well-managed resource base of agricultural land, etc., etc. - and a long-term policy for agriculture that also recognizes the intrinsic value of food production.

Yes, yes, yes, the government endorses everything from integrated research to sustainable agriculture criteria for agri-food policies and programs, the same jingle of words that are also used to promote the competitive capabilities of agriculture and redefine the term food security as emanating from "improved access to markets and better terms of competition."

Yes, farmers will be assisted in their stewardship role through "significant on-farm incentives to develop effective sustainable practices," although the references to this initiative only include existing funding, some of which has already been cutback. The December, 1992 federal mini-budget slashed \$172 million out of the Green Plan over the next three years, a sum representing \$2 million more than the amount allocated for sustainable agriculture initiatives over the next five; the significance of the on-farm initiatives are now cast in doubt.

And then there's the nay's. Many innovative farmers have suggested that tax breaks should be given to farmers who adopt more sustainable farming practices. A recommendation by the standing committee to do just that through an increase in the capital cost allowance to help farmers purchase approved conservation technology was turned down flat by the federal government.

The reason: only high income farmers would benefit from the tax reduction measure and would therefore be unfair. Viewed in isolation, this could be the case. But on the other hand, such a measure would be an incentive to get new and likely more expensive technology into operation; the increase in sales would eventually help to bring the unit price down and make it more affordable for all farmers. Secondly, the alternative suggestions of low interest loans or capital grants are still being "considered through the process of stakeholder consultation," the very thing that the Standing Committee did in the first place.

There's a nay also for a long-term funding commitment for the National Soil Conservation Program, especially to "maintain the momentum already achieved" by the Permanent Cover Crop Program." Once again, vacuous words replace hard commitment with programs and funding; the long-term goal of sustainable agriculture will be "achieved by providing a positive and stable economic and social climate within which the agri-food industry can prosper."

To top it all off, the federal government also refuses to endorse the idea of an independent auditor to monitor the progress of Canadian agriculture's move toward sustainability. There's no better mover and shaker than having a mirror held up to reflect the true state of affairs. Internal monitoring of programs is not an arm's length alternative (as suggested), nor is a purely financial examination by the Office of the Comptroller-General any better. Sustainability has always suffered at the hands of the bottom line and nothing in the governments pronouncements appears to be convincing otherwise.

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