

Rules forcing farmers to degrade environment

Current food regulations are forcing Canadian farmers to stay away from environmentally safe farming methods.

In a series of recommendations presented to a government committee on sustainable farming, Friends of the Earth outlined reforms that could save Canadian farmland and federal government funds.

The brief is based on recommendations contained in the Greenprint for Canada, an agenda for government action on the environment that was presented to the Prime Minister in June 1989.

After extensive meetings with farm organizations, government officials, conservation and public interest groups, scientists and agriculture industry leaders, FoE drafted an agenda for changes to the food grading system, the Canadian Wheat Board, and the Pest Control Products Act and Fertilizers Act. FoE argues that under the current system, farmers who want to switch to sound environmental methods are discriminated against and can't compete. For example, farmers have to use pesticides in order to meet the grading system's cosmetic criteria. The brief, called Nurture Sustainable Farming, contends these criteria should emphasize nutritional quality and environmental impact, not just appearance, so that farmers using alternatives to pesticides are not discriminated against. "The meaning of food quality in the public's eye will also have to change before real progress can be made," says Jack Coulson, FoE's Sustainable Agriculture and Food Campaigner. "Food processors and retailers will be reluctant to change unless they know their product will sell."

Crop insurance is another area in need of reform, and changes could save the government money. Farms that have adopted environmentally sound practices are not as risky to insure. The land is healthier and not as susceptible to natural disasters like drought or insect attack. If the insurance system were geared to encourage sustainable farming, insurance claims would drop and federal and provincial governments would save money.

Environmental problems arise when only one crop is planted in an area year after year. A crop insurance system that encourages sustainable farming would result in greater crop diversity because farmers must rely on crop rotation if they stop using chemicals. Another way to increase crop diversity, the FoE report says, would be for the Canadian Wheat Board to start marketing a greater variety of crops. Farmers would be more willing to produce different crops if they were assured of reliable markets.

"Reform of both the Pest Control and Fertilizer Acts is critical if we are to develop a healthy and sustainable food production system in Canada" Coulson says. The badly flawed legislation should emphasize developing non-chemical pest control and soil fertility, he explains.

Also, the federal government's new National Soil Conservation Policy is a step in the right direction, but is under-funded and is designed only for the short-term.

"The federal government is spending \$75 million on a Soil Conservation Policy and it has no way of monitoring its success," Coulson says.

The government is making progress in some areas. For example, it is setting national guidelines to define organic food and farming techniques. But a comprehensive program is needed to convert Canada's farms into more sustainable lands. Source: Earthwords, August, 1990.

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