

Good morning

The 1984 Senate report on Soil health titled, *Soil at Risk: Canada's Eroding Future*, led to huge changes in understanding of the soil health across Canada for all Canadians and, most importantly- to huge adoption rates of no-till and low-till practices on farms across Canada. We appreciate the committee's and specifically Senator Black's focus since the beginning of his appointment to this committee, on an updated study on soil health. FVGC is humbled to appear during this new Senate study on soil health - thank you for the opportunity.

I am Rebecca Lee, Executive Director of the Fruit and Vegetable Growers of Canada. FVGC represents represent growers across the country involved in the production of over 120 different types of crops on over 14,000 farms.

As climate change impacts the globe and issues surrounding food security continue to grow, Canada can and must play an even more important role in feeding the world. Growers are at the forefront of battling climate change and developing innovative practices to improve their sustainability on farm, both as good stewards of the land and as intelligent business practices. Growers don't believe in waste - it costs too much. There are initiatives such as the Potato Sustainability Alliance that was developed by industry fifteen years ago and acts as a national umbrella for research and information to growers on best practices. As new things are learned they are adapted by the industry.

Soil health is an important part of the conversation around climate change adaptation and sustainable agricultural practices. While in Canada most of the land used for growing food is privately owned, improved soil management is a public good. Healthy soil also has many nonagricultural benefits that become even more important considering climate change. For instance, healthy soil holds water better, which helps limit flooding and damage to homes and aids in temperature regulation for our delicate climate. Canada might look to the UK for a model on how to reward this contribution to producers. The UK government has worked with farmers to design programs to pay them for actions they take to manage their land in an environmentally sustainable way, above regulatory requirements. The standards are asset-based, which means they are based on specific features a farmer may have such as grassland, soil or hedgerows. The program structure is intended to make it as easy as possible for farmers to identify the actions that are best suited to them.

The upfront costs to implement sustainable farming are significant, and especially so for horticulture when compared per square meter to other field crops. The potential for initial yield loss during the transition process represents a significant barrier, especially since current inflation conditions have vastly increased the number of farms operating on razor-thin margins. As has been said before, we can't go green if we are in the red. In the fall of 2022 FVGC conducted a survey among our growers to understand what barriers they were facing to adopting clean agricultural practices- 67% of respondents said they had to delay plans to implement smart ag practices because they had to reallocate resources. For many growers, making those changes simply isn't possible. While the Canadian government does offer support, this support lags well behind the need of Canadian producers and behind our main trading partners. A report from RBC released very recently showed that US climate funding represents 1.7% of its farm gate receipts and the EU's climate funding totals 1.8% of farm gate receipts while Canada lags at 0.5%, far behind the industry's needs.

Canadian growers would benefit from a national soil strategy- developed in partnership with producers to explore and research the best ways to manage soil health targets and explore technological challenges of implementing new methods of measuring soil and developing advice for growers based on regionality. The government's support could include assisting farmers with the upfront costs of soil sampling, which would help establish accurate baselines from which to measure improvement. A national soil data sharing program, with proper consultation with producers regarding data sharing and privacy concerns addressed, could be developed with growers to identify which practices work best in each region.

Canadian growers also need increased extension services to guide that implementation. Another area where Canada lags far behind our American counterparts is in extension services. American programs offer support for planning and implementation along with coordination of the various grants and benefits eligible to producers. Canadian growers must pay for expensive consultants to develop plans who aren't necessarily aware of funding opportunities for growers and able to give them the specialized guidance they need to develop plans to take best advantage of support programs that exist. They lack support as well during the application process- wait times are incredibly long and don't they often don't receive feedback or updates.

Another issue we want to bring to the attention of the committee is the issue of land conversion. In British Columbia, Heppell Farm- run by the Heppell family, who has been farming in the region for 103 years, is currently being considered by the federal government for disposition, which could see the area developed. Ontario is losing approximately 70 hectares of farmland per day, according to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

Canada needs to engage its policy makers, public, politicians and city planners to end exploitation of the best food land for non-agriculture development. According to the FAO less than 5% of Canada's land is suitable for arable agriculture, and with climate change that percentage is likely to shift, making this already very limited resource even more unpredictable.

The growers of Canada need your support to make sure they can continue to grow healthy food for Canadians, and for people around the world. Thank you.