



The gift that keeps on giving

It's time for a new Senate study on Canada's soil health

Canadians are a lucky lot, but if a poll were conducted to ask reasons why, "soil health" might not be in many of the answers.

It should be. Soil is truly the gift that keeps on giving. According to the Canadian Agri-Food Trade Alliance, agri-food exports account for about \$56 billion annually, an 11 per cent contribution to our GDP. Soil helps clean our water and air and is a weapon against climate change. Biodiversity and wildlife depend on healthy soil. Farmers and their families know that healthy soils are the foundation of their productivity and profitability. The list could go on, but soil is clearly a precious gift to all Canadians.

So what's the problem? Are our soils still at risk? The short answer is yes! It's been well documented that past tillage and crop-management practices have reduced organic matter, destroyed soil structure and increased its exposure to erosion. As good stewards of the land, we have done a great job in changing many of those practices and stabilizing our soils — to some extent. The problem is we do not live in a static environment.

Risks to our soils will continue to change. Factors such as a growing global population, shifting climate, changing consumer demands, the introduction of new crops, and new insects and diseases will all put pressure on soil management. But recently there has been less emphasis on our soil resource. That may be the result of a misconception that soil health and conservation have been fully dealt with and fixed forever. That is simply not true! The pressure on our soil resources will continue and we need to monitor, adapt and react to the changes.

Because our soil remains at risk, it's time to again review the state of soil health across Canada. The last thorough study was done by the Senate Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry in 1984.



Fields and ditches covered in "snirt" (snow and dirt) were a common sight in Manitoba in 2018.

Now is the time for the Senate to launch a new study to prepare for the challenges ahead.

What do we need in the future? Here are a few high-priority issues.

- Science must be nimble and solution-oriented, with direct links to producer needs.
- Investment is needed in new technologies and equipment.
- The system of knowledge transfer (extension) must be rebuilt to reflect current needs. Past leadership through local farm organizations has declined. Restoring it

could cause good things to happen on the landscape.

- If we in the business of agriculture continue to only talk among ourselves about soil health, we are not likely to get much further. If we want to make healthy soil as important as clean air and water, it will take the voices and collaborative actions of many more Canadians. National leadership that engages all Canadians in sustaining our soil resources is the key.

To quote long-time soil crusader Don Lobb, "We have work to do!"

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