Manitoba Agriculture and Resource Development 2019 Winter Engagement Report

Overview:

The 2019 Ministerial Winter Engagement session was held December 11, 2019 at the RBC Convention Centre in Winnipeg. The event was an opportunity for industry stakeholders to meet with Minister Blaine Pedersen and be updated on departmental changes. The session supported industry-led dialogue on the topic of disruption in agriculture, specifically current and predicted future disruption, and government's role in mitigating risk and capturing opportunities.

An industry panel, representing the science community, agri-products industry and producers, spoke about disruption from their unique perspectives. Following the panel, industry members were asked to break down the conversation further. Deputy Minister Dori Gingera-Beauchemin and Minister Pedersen encouraged participants to engage with one another and share their feedback to the room. Discussion was facilitated and captured by department staff. A number of key themes emerged.

Public Trust:

Public trust is identified as a disruptor to current operational practices, as well as the adoption of new technologies and processes. Consumer preferences and demands influence production decisions, regulatory requirements and environmental policy. Influencers are driving public perceptions on social media and labelling practices. These need to be balanced by science-based dialogues.

Science-based education and communication were identified as the best tools to address public trust. Education programs in the classroom that raise awareness about agriculture, technology and food production, will influence future consumers to be flexible and open-minded when making food decisions. Technology leaders need to educate governments, producers and the public. Holistic education strategies addressing all value chain members, including consumers, may lead to greater acceptance and public approval of new and impactful technologies.

> *'Being proactive in reaching out to the public to introduce them to real farms and extending scientific work will improve perceptions and build trust.'*

Climate Change:

Producers, agri-retailers and consumers are being impacted by climate change and need effective, proactive strategies. Changes in once predictable climatic patterns now require different approaches to traditional operations, including new crop species, equipment to support shifting seeding and harvesting techniques, and research into alternative feed options. Agri-processors are experiencing a narrowed window for sales and distribution of inputs and agro-chemicals, challenging traditional logistics. Producers identified the

need for long-term research investments in alternative crop types, such as winter cereals to address climatic changes.

Producers are being taxed for their ‘carbon use,’ but are not being remunerated for environmental services. Effective policy to address climate challenges will focus on bridging solutions across the entire sector. Investment is being made to ensure that the environment is protected, but there is a need to maintain agriculture boundaries to ensure that agriculture activities can continue.

> *‘Carbon tax is increasing; farmers are paying for this without having appropriate mitigation tools.’*

Infrastructure:

The availability of basic and reliable cellular and Internet services continues to lag in rural areas. The use of automation, autonomous technologies and data application depends on consistent and reliable connectivity. These technologies have the potential to support the next agricultural revolution by increasing productivity, decreasing environmental footprint and shifting rural employment opportunities into high-tech jobs. Limited broadband access may become a bottleneck for adopting newer technologies or investigating alternative marketing strategies, such as the use of online cattle auctions to address disease control issues.

Skills Development and Labour:

Low supply of adequately trained and technology enabled employees may hinder future growth, particularly in rural regions. As technology adoption increases, academia and employers need to update job profiles and increase career awareness. Academia needs to partner with industry to ensure an adequate and qualified labour pool and develop a talent pipeline that is aligned with future industry needs.

Effective labour and skill development strategies should work across governments. Strategies must be holistic, with a focus on Indigenous engagement and recruitment, early dialogue during industry attraction to build an effective talent pipeline, and effective funding to rural educational institutions. Government, industry and organizations need to participate in funding, programming and infrastructure development. Partnerships will support building targeted, work integrated learning programs.

Agricultural workers need to have certification standards similar to other industries to support professional development and skill recognition. Mentorship programming for rural and Indigenous youth may increase awareness of opportunity in the sector and support new entrants.

'Government needs increased cross-departmental functions, polices and relationships. This collaboration must happen between departments and at multiple tiers simultaneously.'

Emergency Planning:

Foreign animal disease and disaster planning is essential. Government and industry need to enable early strategy development and infrastructure investments that will only be used in the event of an outbreak. Preparedness is critical to containment and management. Manitoba industry identifies that all levels of governments (both domestic and foreign) and cross-jurisdictional partners must work together in developing effective, proactive approaches to management and risk mitigation.

'African Swine Fever is currently the greatest disruptive threat to our sector.'

Trade:

Manitoba has an export based agricultural economy. Trade markets are influenced by political decisions and actions (e.g., China). Political relationships impact industry stability. These types of trade obstacles highlight the need for research focused on alternative crops and products, diversification strategies and new markets.

Policy must enable Canadian producers to have access to the same tools available in other countries. Inconsistent rules and regulations between provinces prevent trade and introduce artificial hurdles or advantages. Recent free trade deals and negotiations have negatively affected income of supply management stakeholders through increased Canadian market access from competing imported goods.

Data and Automation:

Software development is unregulated. Big data collected on farm is not protected for privacy, autonomy or security. This exposes producers to a wide swath of risks, including loss of data to equipment manufacturers, and to hacking by animal activists. Manitoba's agriculture sector needs to drive the data conversation. Agriculture is undergoing a revolution and we need to engage with technology leaders, such as Google and NASA.

The application and management of data is integral to the successful use of alternative production techniques (e.g., OCN Smart farm). This technology supports healthy local food production in remote and northern communities, while creating high tech jobs.

'We need to marry technology and agriculture. This is becoming a high-tech industry.'

Rural Crime:

On-farm trespassing is a growing concern and has the potential to disrupt farming practices, impact animal welfare and create biosecurity risks. Trespassing may take multiple forms, including unpermitted entry onto properties and into barns.

Producers feel that the current policy or the enforcement of trespassing laws are ineffective in addressing this challenge. Organizations have begun to develop policy to support members, including guidance focused on farm and family protection, and training to support effective reactions to trespassers. Effective government policy should ensure the safety of both farmers and their animals.

> *'Trespassing laws should be simple and applicable to real farm situations.'*

Other Action Areas:

Manitoba must continue to advance reconciliation. Indigenous peoples need to be seen as integral partners in economic growth. This includes increased inclusivity when evaluating Indigenous projects that operate between multiple government objectives such as the production of traditional medicines to address both health and food priorities.

Business Risk Management (BRM) programming needs to be enhanced with flexible and enhanced programming to enable industry to prepare for and react to predicted and unknown disruption events. Young producers face increased risk and BRM programs are key policy tools that will enable long-term success. Greater consideration needs to be given to insurance coverage for non-traditional crops, fruit and vegetable production, and small-scale production models.

> *'Enhanced BRM programming will improve the producer's ability to navigate disruptions and ongoing trade disputes.'*

The funding frameworks need to work beyond five-year cycles to ensure long-term, sustainable programs and planning, and bridge with other sector and non-sector specific research. Industry suggested that programming such as the Canadian Agriculture Partnership program, be streamlined at the federal level, with provincial input rather then focussing on regional programs. Funding models must consider how to grow small sectors and enable targeted research in the absence of cost shares to support diversified production and new market entry, for speciality crops such as hemp and flax.

Organic producers face unique market access barriers from traditional commodities. Government needs to work with non-traditional production models and 'farm to table' growers to ensure effective research programming, and that commodities are moved to the correct market space to meet consumer demands.

> *'Election cycle thinking limits long-term, sustainable programming. Election black out periods limit disaster management communication.'*

New transportation regulations in response to animal welfare concerns (in effect February 2020) have the potential to negatively impact the livestock industry. Government needs to ensure that regulations are science based. Multiple provincial standards create contradictory regulations and may increase red tape, delaying innovation, which may slow or prevent bringing new products to market.