



Submission to the Standing Committee on
Agriculture and Agri-Food: Strengthening Canada's
Agricultural Sector - A Canadian Network for Farmer
Mental Health

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Preamble:

The current state of mental health among Canadian farmers represents both a serious threat to the well-being of this community and to the overall health and sustainability of the agricultural sector in Canada. Canadian farmers are a minority population that face a myriad of challenges associated with their mental health, including numerous occupational stressors, agricultural social stigmas, social isolation, and lacking services to meet their individual needs. Research from the University of Guelph (U of G), led by Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton, has confirmed that farmers face higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and a higher risk of burnout than the general population. Complicating matters, Canadian farmers also have lower than average resilience levels, which leaves them highly vulnerable to consequences from high occupational stressors.

Farmers experience a huge range of stresses from weather, animal disease outbreaks, social isolation, public scrutiny, limited access to care, and cultural barriers. This situation threatens Canadian agriculture via lower on-farm production, barriers to growth, threats to animal welfare, impact to Canada's strong agricultural reputation, low retention of farm help, and on-going attrition of Canadian farmers.

The stresses that farmers experience cannot be eliminated completely, but we can develop and deliver evidence-based programming to assist farmers during times of need and to help them build resilience, so that they can better thrive in the face of those stresses. Programs designed for the general population will fail in the agricultural context; agriculture is a unique culture with unique barriers to accepting and accessing services. Accessible and culturally relevant research and training programs are needed to improve farmer wellness and resilience, so farmers are better equipped to withstand the enormous occupational stressors they face.

National Survey of Farmer Mental Health:

From September 2015 to February 2016, researchers at the U of G, led by Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton, conducted a national survey on farmer mental health. The survey measured five mental health outcomes using validated psychometric scales; responses were received from over 1,100 farmers representing all commodities in the agricultural sector. This national survey found that across Canada, there are multiple mental health complications facing farmers. Roughly 45% of farmer respondents had high stress, and 58% and 35% met the classifications for anxiety and depression.

Additionally, the results indicated a high risk for burnout in our farmers. Burnout is measured on three sub-scales: high emotional exhaustion, high cynicism, and low professional efficacy. Furthermore, 67% of respondents scored lower than population norms in terms of resilience, which leaves them vulnerable to the consequences of chronic stresses, including physical and mental illnesses.

These results are concerning and represent a major risk to the Canadian agricultural sector as poor mental health and well-being has negative implications for the individual farmer, as well as their families, livestock, production, and financial bottom lines.



Recommendation 1: *Create a National Strategy for Farmer Mental Health*

Currently, Canada does not have a coordinated national strategy for farmer mental health, and this leaves farmers and our agricultural sector highly vulnerable. The lack of a coordinated approach to farmer mental wellness is a major detriment to the growth of Canadian agriculture and a contributing factor to the ongoing attrition of farmers. We recommend that the Federal Government establish a Canadian Network for Farmer Mental Health. The proposed network offers a tremendous opportunity to build a long-term, sustainable approach to research, evidence-based mental health programming, and awareness and support for farmer wellness and resilience. This national network would engage all provinces and territories, as well as the agricultural community, to bring together expertise from across the country and maximize resources, coordinate and conduct participatory action research on farmer mental health, deliver mental health literacy training customized to Canadian agriculture, and create and deliver evidence-informed peer-to-peer training programs for farmers.

Recommendation 2: *Develop Supports and Services Tailored for the Farming Community*

Canada's agricultural industry needs accessible mental health resources and training to promote wellness and resilience, so that they are better equipped to withstand the occupational stresses they face. We recommend that the Federal Government support and develop appropriate mental health services for the farming community. A more specific approach tailored to the needs and realities of the agriculture community would improve the relevance of the support for farmers and improve uptake. A major component of services should be focusing on building resilience as it helps protect against stress, depression, anxiety, and burnout.

An example of a tailored support that is being piloted at the University of Guelph is titled "In the Know", a mental health literacy training program developed specifically for the Canadian agricultural community. This pilot course provides education on topics such as stress, depression, anxiety, and substance use, and helps people develop skills to recognize when someone is struggling and to initiate a safe conversation with them. A 4-hour face-to-face version is currently being piloted and data is being collected to evaluate effectiveness. A more in-depth 8-hour version, as well as an online version, will also be developed to provide flexible access to the farming community.

Going forward, more accessible supports and services need to be deployed that meet the needs of the farming community. This will include building on existing collaborations with complimentary organizations, such as the Do More Agricultural Foundation, as this will be essential to optimize delivery to the agricultural community.

Recommendation 3: *Establish a National Centre of Excellence at the University of Guelph*

The University of Guelph is a natural fit for a National Centre of Excellence that focuses on farmer mental health research and developing mental wellness resources and training for the sector. To



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properly coordinate resources and achieve results, a Centre of Excellence provides the best mechanism for mental health research to be conducted in an evidence-informed manner over the long term. The Centre of Excellence would develop customized mental health and wellness training for the agricultural industry, develop curriculum for both the Ontario Veterinary College and Ontario Agricultural College to train students early, and conduct leading research into the mental health and wellness issues faced by the agricultural sector. The University of Guelph is an ideal location given its rich agricultural and veterinary history, strong reputation and extensive networks in agriculture, food and veterinary medicine, the Arrell Food Institute, and the groundbreaking work on farmer mental health already being conducted.

Overview of the University of Guelph:

The U of G is one of Canada's top comprehensive universities, both research intensive and learner focused. Across our three campuses, we have more than 30,000 students, with ninety-four percent of our graduates finding employment within two years of graduation.

Widely known as Canada's food university, we have a 150-year legacy in agri-food and a reputation for innovation. With expertise in developing the sector's highly skilled workforce and leading discoveries, research and development, and commercialization, the U of G is the driving force behind Canada's agriculture and agri-food cluster. Food research spans the University's seven colleges and seeks to solve the complex challenges facing society, underpinned and leveraged by strong partnerships with government and industry, and the desire to improve life.