

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Next Federal Budget

Funding for Organizations Advocating for Farmers' Mental Health

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List of Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** That the government implement the 10 recommendations from the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food's report, "Mental Health: A Priority for Our Farmers," in order to improve farmers' mental health.
- **Recommendation 2:** That the federal government, in partnership with its provincial and territorial counterparts, consult the various organizations and committees to ascertain their funding needs so that it can quickly implement recommendation 8 from the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food's report, "Mental Health: A Priority for Our Farmers."
- **Recommendation 3:** That the federal government, in partnership with its provincial and territorial counterparts, financially support the various initiatives and organizations across the country in the short term by providing adequate, ongoing funding.

Background

Farmers deal with a huge number of stress factors on a daily basis, including unpredictable weather, debt, price fluctuations, isolation, government regulations, trade deals, long hours, fatigue and physical exhaustion, lack of public recognition and stigma. Many studies have quantified the impact of these stress factors on farmers' mental health. The numbers are alarming.

A study of Quebec farmers (Lafleur and Allard 2006) revealed that 75% were regularly stressed and that 50% had a high level of psychological distress, compared with 20% in the general population. Furthermore, 5.7% had seriously considered suicide in the past year, compared with 3.9% in the general population.

A more recent study (Jones-Bitton 2016) surveying 1,100 Canadian farmers found that 35% met the classification for depression, 58% met the classification for anxiety, and 45% had elevated levels of perceived stress. These studies also showed that 40% of Canadian farmers felt uneasy seeking professional help, even though more than 75% thought they would benefit from professional support.

In Quebec, barely 20% of farmers had consulted a mental health professional. Not only are farmers grappling with mental health challenges, but very few of them are getting help when they need it.

Écoute agricole des Laurentides

Since 2015, Écoute agricole des Laurentides has been offering a farm outreach service in the Laurentians region of Quebec. A farm outreach worker is a psychosocial professional who specializes in support relationships and has a thorough understanding of agricultural issues.

This free, confidential, personalized service is provided to farmers where they live, as well as to their families, employees and agriculture sector stakeholders. It meets the needs identified in studies and on the ground that revealed high levels of psychological distress in the agricultural community. Farm outreach workers guide clients through problem solving and liaise with existing specialized support resources in the area. When needed, a farm outreach worker travels to farms to meet with farmers where they live, in order to accommodate their busy schedules. The issues they encounter are numerous and varied, including mental health problems, financial stress, problems with partners or with family members and successors, and suicidal thoughts.

Écoute agricole des Laurentides can attest to the urgent need for mental health supports in the agricultural community. The farm outreach workers are never short of work. In 2019–20, a single farm outreach worker helped 117 farmers and family members. In the past five years, hundreds of people have used the service offered by our organization.

This specific service is the only one of its kind in the Laurentians, but several other regions nearby, such as the Outaouais, Laval and Montreal regions, desperately need something similar. Statistics aside, the suffering is apparent on the ground. Four Outaouais farmers killed themselves in 2019. For the past year, our organization has been working intensively with agricultural and health stakeholders, as well as with municipal officials, to secure funding so that this region can get its own dedicated farm outreach workers.

Aside from one- to three-year plans, securing stable, ongoing funding remains an issue. Various partners are currently being approached, such as the provincial government, the regional county municipalities (RCMs), regional businesses and the agricultural community. The Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food's 2019 report, "Mental Health: A Priority for Our Farmers," also highlights and increases the federal government's role in funding organizations like ours.

Recommendations

In May 2019, a federal report entitled "Mental Health: A Priority for Our Farmers," prepared by the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, was tabled in the House of Commons. To summarize, in light of the distress being experienced by Canadian farmers, the report recommended that the government provide better support to farmers, who are especially vulnerable to mental health issues.

In conclusion, the committee wrote: "The mental health of farmers is a troubling issue that has been overlooked for a long time. Many agricultural stakeholders stated that the human dimensions of agriculture are still not given the same attention as the economic and financial dimensions. However, many awareness and intervention activities have been developed to address mental health problems in the agricultural sector and rural areas. In short, 'Canada cannot expect its agricultural sector to grow and expand if it does not invest in farmers' foundational well-being.'"

Écoute agricole des Laurentides believes that all of the recommendations in this report are worthwhile and should be implemented as soon as possible.

We particularly want to highlight recommendation 8: "The Committee recommends that the Government of Canada, in cooperation with its provincial and territorial counterparts, fund the activities of recognized and accredited organizations that provide mental health assistance to farmers and their families."

Providing ongoing basic funding to existing initiatives across the country is vital for ensuring the continuity of services that are already well established in their communities. It would therefore be important to consult organizations in order to ascertain their needs and provide them with adequate funding.

Since our services are provided free of charge, funding sources are limited for organizations like ours. The report also stresses the importance of making services available to farmers free of charge. Working in the community, Écoute agricole des Laurentides has seen that financial stress is a very real problem. It is unrealistic to ask farmers to pay for psychological support services when their distress is literally caused by financial troubles. That is why it is very important for the government to financially support organizations so they can maintain and develop their services in order to provide services to farmers free of charge.

Conclusion

The service offered by Écoute agricole des Laurentides meets the needs observed on the ground and identified in various studies that have shown high levels of psychological distress in the agricultural community. The year 2020 is especially hard for all types of agriculture due to successive crises with the energy supply, COVID-19, the foreign worker shortage, drought, etc.

However, even though the service has been available since 2015, it is still not receiving ongoing funding from governments. In order to strengthen funding for organizations like ours, **stable, ongoing funding must be provided** by the federal and provincial governments, to be added to local contributions.

In the longer term, such federal assistance would enable us to do much more than educate farmers on the importance of tending to their mental health, increase psychological and social support services, and break down taboos around mental health to prevent distress and suffering.

It goes without saying that the pressures caused by climate change, debt, and social upheaval stemming from the pandemic will leave a mark on every sphere of society.

Since agriculture is key to meeting one of humanity's basic needs, namely the need to eat three meals a day, agricultural professionals at all levels could be affected. We must not let them down.

That is why Écoute agricole des Laurentides would like the federal government to allocate substantial funds for providing psychological support to farmers, so that farm outreach workers can intercede to the best of their ability.

Bibliography

Ginette Lafleur and Marie-Alexia Allard. Report presented to the Coop Fédérée. 2006.

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