

January 27, 2021

Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6

Via e-mail: INDU@parl.gc.ca

Dear Members of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology:

The Canadian Canola Growers Association (CCGA) appreciates the opportunity to comment on your study regarding accessibility and affordability of telecommunications services in Canada. CCGA represents 43,000 canola farmers from Ontario to British Columbia on national and international issues, policies, and programs that impact farm profitability. The canola sector contributes \$26.7 billion to the Canadian economy annually and supports 250,000 jobs across the country. Canadian canola is an export driven commodity and is shipped to over 50 markets around the world, with exports valued at \$9.3 billion in 2019.

CCGA supports the government's commitment from the Fall Economic Statement 2020, Budget 2019 and Canada's Connectivity Strategy to bring universal access to high-speed internet, and enhance mobile connectivity in Canada, particularly in rural and remote communities. More than ever, today's farmers depend on reliable telecommunications services to successfully and efficiently operate their farm. It is central to farm management, used to operate and maintain precision agriculture technologies and farm equipment, to access sales opportunities and market crops, and to manage transportation logistics to get product shipped for processing and eventually export. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the coverage gap in rural Canada as government restrictions resulted in additional strain to the network.

Rural and remote communities need to be prioritized

Despite its importance to rural livelihoods and farm operations, many farmers struggle with reliable internet service and adequate mobile coverage. According to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), only 45.6% of households in rural communities have access to broadband coverage of 50/10 Mbps, the federal government's benchmark for universal internet.¹ For those that do, disruptions in their internet service can occur daily, and adding additional tools such as a booster tend to not solve connectivity problems. As farmers live outside of rural towns, obtaining access to reliable internet and mobile coverage can be even more of a challenge. Additionally, rural communities have less options for telecommunications service providers, with some areas only having one, leaving no opportunity to obtain lower pricing elsewhere. Now with

¹ Broadband Fund: Closing the digital divide in Canada. Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission. Accessed January 25, 2021: <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/internet/internet.htm>

COVID-19 causing more people to work and learn from home, internet service has become even worse for many rural residents, as found in a recent survey by the Agriculture Producers Association of Saskatchewan.²

The government needs to continue to prioritize universal internet and mobile coverage for rural and remote communities, and ensure affordable, competitive options are put in place for these areas. Lack of or unreliable access creates various barriers in the farm economy such as the inability to access new technology, programs to manage risk, labour, and most importantly, threatens the health and safety on farms.

Health and safety are threatened

A lack of reliable internet and mobile coverage can have dire effects on the mental and physical health of farmers, their employees and their families. In a recent survey by the Keystone Agricultural Producers (KAP), many respondents expressed concerns about the ability to access emergency services when needed, obtaining weather and road condition reports, or the reliability of their alarm systems and security cameras on their property. Mental health can also be strained, with the inability to connect with friends and family on a regular basis via phone or online.³

Adopting technology on farm

Unreliable internet results in inefficiencies and threatens the adoption of new technologies. Simple tasks such as loading internet pages or downloading software for farm equipment can take hours resulting in lost precious time particularly in busy periods of the crop year. More broadly, connectivity issues slow the adoption of technology on the farm and the pace of innovation within the sector, threatening Canada's competitiveness as a world leader in agricultural exports. For example, precision agriculture technologies provide the ability to farm smarter and use less crop inputs but requires access to large quantities of data and analysis to fully incorporate into farming activities.

Maintaining farm operations

A lack of internet and mobile access also threatens farmers competitiveness and the ability to expand their operations. For example, the ability for farmers to access government programs that help them manage cash flow and risks outside of their control, such as business risk management programs, or advance payment loans are put at risk. Without the ability to readily apply for these programs or research these opportunities, inadequate risk coverage and cash flow issues could result in reduced capacity or the closure of farms.

A lack of internet and mobile access could have dire consequences for careers and jobs in farming. Without the ability to adopt new technologies that drive efficiencies, it may disincentivize careers in farming at a time when many farmers are set to retire. According to a recent Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council study (CAHRC), 39% of grains and oilseed farmers are expected to retire over the next 10 years⁴. In the short-term,

² Discussion Paper. Rural Connectivity Task Force. Agriculture Producers Association of Saskatchewan. December 2020. <https://apas.foleon.com/rural-connectivity-task-force/rural-connectivity-task-force/rural-connectivity-survey/>

³ Survey Report. Rural Cell and Internet Service in Manitoba. The Keystone Agricultural Producers of Manitoba. April 2020. <https://www.kap.ca/news-media/kap-news-release-kap-releases-results-of-rural-cell-and-internet-survey/>

⁴ Report. How Labour Challenges Will Shape the Future of the 'Grain and Oilseed' Industry: Agriculture Forecast to 2029. Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council. 2019. <https://cahrc-cchr.ca/programs/agrismi/commodity-data/grain-and-oilseed>

without adequate mobile and internet service, finding seasonal labour becomes increasingly difficult, leading to more inefficiencies and lack of economic growth on farms.

Conclusion

A lack of reliable internet and mobile coverage in rural Canada poses various challenges for canola farmers that impact the safety and prosperity of their farms. As the world becomes more reliant on online services, particularly during this pandemic, the need for reliable, affordable internet and mobile coverage are more important than ever. For the reasons mentioned above, CCGA stresses the importance of enhancing and extending rural broadband technology as quickly as possible for better pandemic preparedness moving forward, and to ensure the success of Canadian farms for years to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave Carey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dave Carey
Vice-President, Government and Industry Relations
Canadian Canola Growers Association