



How can **consumers** influence the **agricultural economy**?

Organic, free range, environmentally friendly, locally produced, gluten free, heritage — descriptors such as these are used on food products to appeal to current consumer trends.

Additionally, questions such as What is in my food? Where does it come from? and How was it made? are more frequently asked by consumers.

contributing to a food policy

Consumers and producers have both called for a national food policy for Canada. In 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau asked Minister of Agriculture Lawrence MacAulay to develop a food policy that “promotes healthy living and safe food by putting more healthy, high-quality food, produced by Canadian ranchers and farmers, on the tables of families across the country.”

The following points provided background for consultations that were held across Canada through an online survey, a National Food Policy Summit, regional consultation sessions, local townhall events organized by Members of Parliament, community events held by civil society organizations, and self-led engagement by National Indigenous Representative Organizations.



National food policy consultations

- ◆ The agriculture, fisheries, and food sectors are vital parts of the Canadian economy. They have the potential to make more high-quality food available domestically and internationally, contributing to economic growth and job creation.



How is participation in organized meetings, town halls and surveys a form of consumer action? To what extent do you think this type of participation is necessary?

- Although Canada produces more food than its people can consume, not all Canadians have sufficient access to safe and nutritious food. Some groups such as children, Canadians living in poverty, Indigenous peoples, and those in isolated northern communities, remain particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.
- While Canadians benefit from one of the best food safety systems in the world, rates of diet-related chronic disease are increasing, with associated health care costs. Canadians sometimes face challenges in making nutritious food choices in support of their health.
- The way food is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed can have implications for soil, water, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity. While much is being done to protect natural resources in the production of food, to continue to meet growing demand, environmental conservation is a priority.

Government of Canada (2018). What We Heard: Consultations on a Food Policy for Canada. www.canada.ca/content/dam/aafc-aac/documents/20181025-en.pdf

Agricultural organizations and consumer groups participated in the consultation process. Close to 45 000 people shared their thoughts on what a food policy should do in an online survey and hundreds participated in face-to-face discussions.

Agricultural organizations and consumer groups have continued their own advocacy. Many have identified their own ideas about what should be part of a food policy and Canada's food system.

Food Secure Canada described the need for a food policy "because our food system is disconnected in too many ways." Some of their reasons for continuing to advocate for a food policy include the following example.



This issue of food security in Canada

Canada is a leading agricultural exporter, yet four million Canadians struggle to put food on the table. Rates of food insecurity are twice as high among Indigenous populations, and catastrophic levels of hunger prevail in parts of northern Canada.



What factors prevent Canadians from making nutritious food choices? Other than cost, what might be some other barriers that prevent healthy food decisions?



Food Secure Canada (2017). Five Ideas for a Better Food system: Online. <https://foodsecurecanada.org/policy-advocacy/five-big-ideas-better-food-system>

We import 30 percent of our food despite the fact that we know that growing and processing our own food has many economic benefits, in addition to delivering the fresh, local food Canadians want to eat.

Why do we need a national food policy? Food Secure Canada: Online. <https://foodsecurecanada.org/resources-news/news-media/national-food-policy-primer#1>

Canada now has its first-ever food policy. A vision for the *Food Policy for Canada* was developed from the consultations and priorities that people identified. This vision states that “all people in Canada are able to access a sufficient amount of safe, nutritious and culturally diverse food. Canada’s food system is resilient and innovative, sustains our environment, and supports our economy.”

Government of Canada. (2019). Food Policy for Canada. Online. www.canada.ca/en/campaign/food-policy.html

consumer confidence and perceptions

Consumer confidence refers to the degree of optimism that consumers feel toward the economy or an area of the economy. Consumer confidence can affect the decisions that consumers make about food.

What affects consumer confidence? Food trends, the media, politics, trade and the health of the economy can influence how individuals perceive the food they choose to buy.

In some cases, however, media can provide misleading messages. Take for example, the following message about misleading marketing techniques from the Chicken Farmers of Canada.



Misleading media messages

Canada banned the use of hormones in Canadian poultry on March 4, 1963. Though it is rare, some marketers still classify their chicken as “hormone-free.” This is used as a marketing tactic, since all chickens raised in Canada have been raised without added hormones. Every piece of chicken sold in Canada can include the phrase “no added hormones”, but they don’t, because allowing it to be included in packaging or on a label would create concern with consumers, when none should exist.

Chicken Farmers of Canada. What We Heard: Hormone Use Banned in Canadian Chickens. Online. www.chickenfarmers.ca/hormone-use-banned-in-canadian-chickens/



Vast majority of Canadians say they will avoid US goods

Seventy per cent of Canadians say they will start looking for ways to avoid buying U.S.-made goods in a threat to ratchet up a trade dispute between Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and U.S. President Donald Trump, an Ipsos Poll showed on Friday....

While the poll showed support for a boycott of U.S. goods in Canada, pulling it off could be difficult in a country that reveres U.S. popular culture and consumer goods over all others. Canada is the largest market for U.S. goods.

Quote from Hopkins, A. (2018). Vast majority of Canadians say they will avoid U.S. goods, new poll shows. *Globe and Mail*: Online. www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-vast-majority-of-canadians-say-they-will-avoid-us-goods-new-poll/

Consumer perceptions are not only shaped by media messages, but also by the images used to communicate what farming and farmers are all about. These images colour the beliefs that consumers have about farmers, their practices and the food they produce. Explore the ideas in the following excerpt.



Farm and farming imagery

When Canadian grocery buyers think about farmers, what images come to mind?

Do they see a trustworthy, tractor-driving character who wears a straw hat, striped coveralls and a red flannel shirt to work every day?

Or do they see low-income wage earners, working on a massive factory farm, where values such as environmental stewardship and animal welfare play second fiddle to more important motives like efficiency and profitability?

Is the consumer's typical farmer someone who carries a pitchfork to work, picks free-range eggs by hand, and wakes up at day-break to care for animals that live in a red, hip-roofed barn?

Or is their typical farmer someone who produces hundreds of tonnes of unprocessed food every year and sells his product to a multinational processor or a globally integrated export company?

...When it comes to food production and food marketing, imagery can be a powerful tool. But in many cases, the images conveyed on food packages and supermarket shelves create a false perception of how many modern farms operate.

Similarly, the images and claims available to consumers through the internet and social media can be equally misleading, leading to a relationship of distrust and misunderstanding between the people who buy food and the people who grow it.

Agriculture has changed dramatically during the past few decades. But have consumer attitudes toward farmers and food production changed at the same pace?

Cross, B. (January 5, 2017). Farmers play important role in building consumer trust. The Western Producer: Online. www.producer.com/2017/01/farmers-play-important-role-in-building-consumer-trust/



How effective do you think a Canadian boycott of US goods would be? Why do you think this?



What stereotypes can you identify in the misleading media messages excerpt? How would you correct these stereotypes?

Do consumers always depend on evidence-based information? Think about the example discussed by Crystal Mackay, president of the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity, in the excerpt that follows.

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Evidence-based messaging

[Consider the idea that a] “segment of the public may want chickens kept outside 365 days of the year, Mackay said.

“We know that’s wrong. It’s bad for the birds.... It’s bad for human health and food safety,” she said. “But if someone says I’m going to pay \$25 per pound for free-range birds that live outside year-round, somebody may want to make that happen.”

That’s an extreme example, but there are cases where consumer expectations don’t make sense.

One such case is free-run laying hens. Egg farmers and scientists have told consumer groups that birds are probably better off in enriched cages because there is more fighting, injuries and death in free-run barns.

Those arguments had no impact.

In 2016, major grocery chains in Canada, including Loblaw’s and Walmart, announced they will only buy cage-free eggs by 2025.

While scientific arguments and social media outlets have limitations, people in Canada’s ag industry should keep talking to consumers.

The public needs the best possible information about farming practices so they can make the best choices for themselves and their family.

Arnason, R. (February 21, 2019). Why won’t consumers listen? The Western Producer: Online. www.producer.com/2019/02/why-wont-consumers-listen/

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How should consumers participate in the food system? What responsibilities should consumers have?

