



The British Columbia Fruit Growers' Association

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House of Commons

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

April 24, 2010

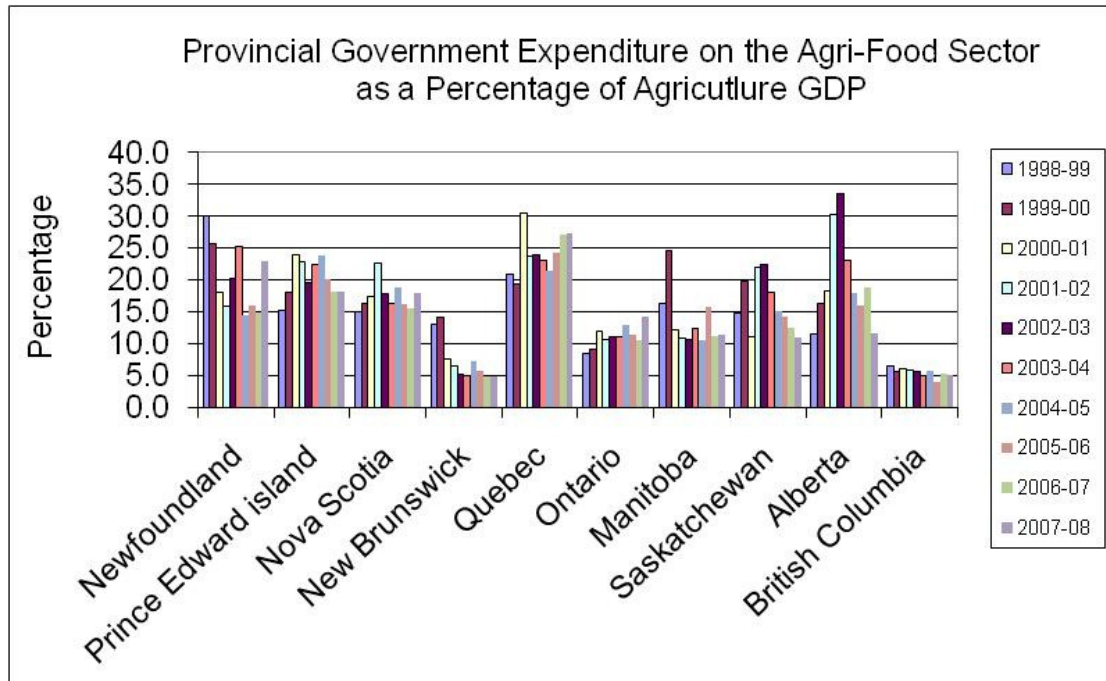
Introduction

The BC Fruit Growers' Association appreciates the opportunity for input into Young Farmers and the Future of Farming in Canada. We need young farmers to enter the agriculture industry to provide it with a future. We also need a vibrant and profitable future for the agriculture industry to attract young farmers.

In the Okanagan, we have seen four years of serious downturns in industry revenue out of the past six years. Our current approach is to request the province for financial help to sustain our industry. We are awaiting an answer from the Minister of Agriculture, though he has ruled out a direct payment to growers.

Current government fiscal challenges are making it difficult to address current, let alone future challenges for farming. While there is much that government can do with minimal impact on agriculture budgets; however, investing in horticulture should be a top priority for government if healthy eating habits, based on local production is to be successful.

Here in BC, our producers have suffered from the lowest ratio of agriculture program expenditure to agriculture GDP in the country, though New Brunswick is also in the race to the bottom. This impacts our investment in agriculture and diminishes our future prospects. This is discouraging to both current and new farmers. How can the federal government turn this situation around?



Entry into the Industries

Many young farmers enter the agriculture sector because their parents operate a farm. The other primary way to enter the industry is through being employed as a farm worker and manager. Many of the growers who are farm workers and managers first lease a property to operate on their own, then eventually purchase a property though they many also continue to lease other properties.

Encouraging Young Farmers and New Entrants

The best way to encourage young farmers and other new entrants into the agriculture sector is to make agriculture economically attractive. Canada and BC have many competitive advantages. We need to remove the other serious barriers, or protect our farm sector from the unfair competition. We also need to build a positive, winning attitude that attracts the best performers.

In recent BC Fruit Growers' Association activity, we have noticed the broad public appeal of producing locally grown product and in promoting the healthfulness of fruit and vegetables. In the words of the Canadian Broadcast Corporation, "Most top performing countries achieved better health outcomes by acting on the *determinants of health*, such as environmental stewardship and health promotion". In the report, BC is identified for its ActNow program:

BC's internationally lauded Act Now program, which encourages citizens to exercise more and eat healthier food, is a particularly promising model of intra-government collaboration to develop health policy.¹

Thus, the School Fruit and Vegetable Nutrition Program is a key investment for the Ministry of Health. The province is having trouble addressing chronic health care costs, let alone the costs of promoting good nutrition. We feel that federal government financial support for a national School Fruit and Vegetable Nutrition Program will achieve two goals:

- Introduce our impressionable youth to healthy eating choices.
- Make our industry a positive contributor to health and therefore a more attractive industry to participate in for youth and new entrants.

Renewal Program

The BCFGAs and the other apple producing provinces have developed an AgriFlex proposal to renew our industry through strategic investment in replant, integrated pest management, and researching and promoting best horticultural management practices. This program will benefit other provinces most, as BC has had a provincial replant program for about 15 years. We hope that the committee will, in its review of our industry, recognize the benefit of the renewal of the production base for tree fruit and encourage the approval of the federal AgriFlex proposal.

Labour

The most significant expense in producing tree fruit is labour – pruning in the winter, thinning fruit, and harvest require the bulk of the hired labour in our industry. The Seasonal Agriculture Worker Program (SAWP) has benefitted agriculture and made it possible for many growers to turn a difficult labour supply situation into a positive, business-building asset for the farm, as foreign workers become integrated into the farm and the community and take pride in their contribution to the success of the farm operation.

¹ www.conferenceboard.ca/HCP/Details/Health.aspx#performer

We continue to work with the Mexican government and Service Canada to improve the program.

Trade and International Competition

Tree fruit products are generally freely traded. There are minimal phytosanitary requirements that do not impede trade in apples and cherries, except for exports to Japan. This trade sometimes introduces new, invasive pests and diseases to the tree fruit industry. We would like to see more effort directed to inspection, especially for those areas of the world that are not on the same level of integrated pest management as North America. A national plant health strategy for Canadian horticulture has been promised but not developed.

While the regulation of crop protection products in Canada has improved vastly in the past 5 years, with the Pest Management Centre of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada playing an important role, and with the Pest Management Regulatory Agency of Health Canada working more closely with the US on joint registrations, there is still a substantial difference between Canada and the US in access to new, safer and more effective products. In our view, the remaining differences between Canadian and US registrations should be eliminated – if we are importing products treated with those crop protection products, then our growers need access to those products. Adding regulatory cost and diminishing the availability of crop protection products hurts our competitiveness and it does not protect our consumers from the use of these products on imported crops. We need to wake up to this reality and take the final step of harmonizing our pesticide regulation system with the US.

Another trade issue is treatment of labour. We have very high standards for labour, including the previously mentioned SAWP program. Our competitors to the South are not under the same compunction, where according to US industry itself, about 60 – 70% of the workforce is illegal immigrant labour. These illegal immigrants are not treated well – they are threatened with deportation if they complain about work conditions and practices. We are in direct competition with an economic system based on abuse of its labour force.

A final trade issue we wish to raise is the level of government subsidies in other nations. In particular, the US Farm Bill governs tens of billions of dollars in spending that includes land stewardship, public and school nutrition, biofuel, institutional procurement, export and agricultural research programs. The current \$289 billion Farm Bill was enacted in 2008 and plans are underway to renew the Farm Bill after it expires in fall 2012. Canada has decided not to compete with the US Farm Bills. This places our industry and our young farmers at a competitive disadvantage that the Doha Round of trade negotiations will not rectify. If we cannot compete with the US Farm Bill, then perhaps Canada needs to expand the list of sensitive products and allow broader access to orderly marketing powers.

Summary

The BCFGA appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food with respect to Young Farmers and the Future of Farming in Canada.

The BCFGA recommends:

- Encouraging Young Farmers and new entrants by making the industry competitive.
- Investing in industry through programs such as AgriFlex.
- Providing national funding for school fruit and vegetable nutrition programs, as an important part of health budget.
- Continuing to support the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program.
- Develop and implement a national plant health strategy.
- Implementing true harmonization in pesticide registration with the US.
- Consider expanding the list of sensitive products and allow broader access to orderly marketing powers.

We appreciate the effort and the attention of the committee in its work to improve Canadian Agriculture and to encourage new entrants to the industry.