

Becoming an effective collaborator with government: some background notes and ideas

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1. Introduction

The organic food and farming sector is missing opportunities to advance development of the sector, in part because it has not effectively worked with governments, especially at the federal level. As with any relationship that doesn't work effectively, both parties bear some responsibility for the current situation. The organic sector has not organized itself in a way that makes it easy to engage with the federal government, and the federal government has yet to understand the potential of organic agriculture to solve multiple policy problems.

Most agricultural sectors in Canada have benefited significantly from federal government support over the years, and the relationships built between commodity sectors and federal officials have been critical to both positive developments and averting implementation of initiatives to the detriment of the commodity sector. It is a basic premise of this briefing paper that there are advantages to collaboration. Thus, it explores what the organic sector might do to make itself a better partner with the federal government.

2. Where is organic agriculture currently situated in the federal government?

Organic agriculture and food processing are viewed as niche markets, without it appears much broader interest or understanding of the current agricultural policy challenges that organic production can help solve. There appear to be the following reasons for this situation:

- despite high growth rates, organic food and farming is currently a niche market and will remain one for several more years
- due to the current state of profitability for some producers, regulatory developments in the US, Europe and Japan, and export market demand, it is easy to frame organic as primarily a marketing issue
- it is viewed in some policy circles as less productive, therefore not worth making significant investments in
- it is not part of the discussion between AAFC and most of its current clients
- organic farming does challenge some of the dominant ideas of agricultural development within government circles.

Consistent with being viewed as a niche market, most current work on organic food and farming resides in the AAFC Marketing and Industry Services Branch (MISB). The Environment Bureau, part of the Policy Branch, has no one on staff with any significant knowledge of organic, nor does there appear to be much interest in acquiring such expertise. Organic is not explicitly part of the new Agricultural Policy Framework (APF), although consistent with some programming over the past few years, organic farmers remain eligible for many programs, even though such programs are not specifically tailored to their needs. The Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development (CARD) program has provided some grant funds for market development, for strategic planning and for activities of the OACC. The Research Branch has some scientists with interests in the area, but it is difficult to secure funding for organic projects, especially from the

non-governmental sector as part of fund matching requirements. The current deputy minister of AAFC is rumoured to have some interest in organic, but not sufficient to make it much of a priority. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has little expertise in the field, although they will likely play a role in standards enforcement.

The implication is that advancing a broader agenda is partly constrained by where interest and expertise currently rests in the federal system.

3. The institutional context

A number of other forces constrain the ability of the federal government to work on organic food and farming issues. Some of these are broad forces affecting how the federal government operates, others are more specific to organic food and farming.

The broad context in which elected and permanent officials (the civil service) operate

Related to parliament

- In our political system, the government makes policy and Parliament holds government to account for its activities. But Parliament's capacity to do this has eroded. The combination of: increasing issue complexity; limited experience of MPs; insufficient MP, opposition party and Parliamentary staff resources; limited parliamentary instruments of scrutiny; the enhanced role of the Auditor General; televised question period; and changes to media scrutiny mean that Parliament focuses primarily on "gotchas" and less on substantive policy critiques and solutions. Government, in turn, spends an inordinate amount of time protecting against "gotchas" and consequently less time on substantive policy positions.
- Parliament's historical power over government came from its ability to review proposed government expenditures. But since the late 60s, it's ability to do this has been seriously reduced by changes to the rules around debates, timing, and construction of expenditure budgets. Now it is rare for Parliament to significantly alter government expenditure proposals.
- Individual MPs and even governing party backbenchers have little influence over policy development
- Bills must be reviewed by parliamentary committees before being passed by Parliament, but it is rare that such committee reviews produce substantial changes to bills, unless the government has decided to allow them. Committee capacity to review is compromised by the complexity of most bills and the limited resources of the committee and committee members. This, however, provides opportunities for interest groups to assist committee members with research and analysis.
- There has been a collapse of deference to legislative and administrative authority, particularly on the part of media
- Globalization and trade agreements have curtailed the tools available to policy makers
- Relations between public servants and elected officials are generally strained because many elected officials believe public servants now have too much influence over policy development and public servants question the competence of many elected officials and view many of them as

adversaries, given civil service loyalty to the government of the day.

Related to the Prime Minister (PM)

- Bold policy strokes are rare, unless inspired by the PM or a crisis; bold strokes do not come from parliament or cabinet; most efforts are incremental.
- The Prime Minister's power has become more presidential in scope and without the checks and balances of the US system. Cabinet participation in policy making has generally been eroded, in part by Prime Ministers.

Related to ministers

- A shift to the centre of government structures has taken place: ministers have less ability to influence policy and line departments are less able to implement agendas without central agency approval (Privy Council Office, Treasury Board, Ministry of Finance)
- Ministers are rewarded for protecting the government, or for generating positive press; deputy ministers are rewarded for protecting ministers

Related to the civil service

- Bureaucracies are increasingly in the service of the PM; line ministers have less ability to be bold, and deputy minister loyalties are split between their department and the central agencies
- Bureaucracies will effectively subvert ministerial policy directives if they fall outside their dominant analytical frame; subversion is expressed in the name of "it can't be done" or "it can't be properly done"; most ministers essentially follow the lead of the department as a result
- Much of central agency function is goattending, trying to keep line departments from over spending and attempting to block insipient political crises; central agencies are not usually strategic, don't provide strategic direction and are not particularly imaginative.
- Some parts of the civil service are under siege for being political liabilities; their actions are perceived by elected officials as politically problematic.
- Senior management has management skills, but not necessarily strong content knowledge as was the case in previous eras.
- Cutbacks have affected staffing levels, and this may have impacts on quality of programming
- The Privy Council Office (PCO) essentially manages all the matters that the PM doesn't really spend time on, but wants crises avoided. So to move an agenda along requires that it stay in the line department at a low level of visibility to the centre, or that someone apply pressure to the line department and the PCO to make it happen (especially if it involves significant money and then it also includes the Treasury Board).
- Financial resources are generally insufficient to properly support programs.
- There are problems working across departments when it is required for effective program design and implementation; rewards for staff are more focussed vertically than horizontally so there are few incentives for working horizontally. More attention is paid to avoiding mistakes than getting policy right.
- Since monitoring capacity is weak, it's hard to show definitely what works and is effective.
- Secrecy and confidentiality are essential features of bureaucratic organization because they protect governments from parliamentary scrutiny; this limits what officials are willing to reveal,

in turn making it more difficult to create a relationship based on shared information; the flip side of secrecy and confidentiality is that bureaucrats are often not well connected to the best sources of information.

- The number of client groups has expanded remarkably in the past 30 years, reflecting in part frustration with degrees of access to decision making; this creates difficulty sorting through disparate voices within a sector.
- All these forces tend to support staying with the status quo.
- Managing cross-departmental issues is problematic but increasingly time consuming.

And more specific to organic

These broad forces have some more specific implications for the organic sector:

1. Organic is not likely to be the subject of a legislative agenda. This would be inconsistent with recent Canadian legislative tradition in which enacting broad and enabling legislation is enacted. Legislation was more prescriptive 50 years ago, but now is very general. Current agriculturally related legislation provides room for organic sector development, but programs, regulations, protocols and regulatory directives have not been put in place to take advantage of the existing legislative framework. Consequently, it is unlikely that any parliamentary advocates (if they exist) would be able to advance a legislative agenda specific to organic food and farming. Parliamentary committees often apply pressure to get central agencies to control line departments or apply it directly to line departments, but it's hard to imagine that the organic sector could generate that kind of political heat to advance organic food and farming. Such heat is usually reserved for scandals or media blowups.

2. The Canadian federal government is not moving as boldly as other jurisdictions to solve environmental problems in the agriculture sector. Europe is moving towards an era of post-productionism, multifunctionality, and cross compliance, policy instruments that have generally served well the development of organic agriculture. The US uses cross-compliance as a lever in environmental programming. However, Canada's agricultural policy, as expressed through the APF and other federal policy, is not rooted in these concepts. The general thrust in Canada is to maintain or increase value added production, especially related to export markets, while attempting to enhance environmental sustainability. Policies around agricultural and rural sustainability have been diverging (in contrast to the European multifunctionality approach), although eventually (not likely in this round) the APF may produce greater convergence. The significant exception is Quebec, where government has more a focus on distributive justice than the self-regulation that dominates much of the policy making in the rest of the country. Also, PEI is employing cross compliance and may be on the verge of embracing multifunctionality. The absence of these bold policy commitments at the federal level makes organic development more difficult.

4. A related challenge is insufficient understanding on the part of federal officials of what really makes farm level adoption of environmental systems happen. This is a broad challenge that

affects organic as much as other environmentally friendly farming systems.

5. Policies and programmes requiring significant cash investments can be generated by the civil service, but success will generally require approval of the minister and central agencies. It is likely a difficult process to engage the central agencies, and their knowledge of organic will be lower than in AAFC. Success could result from the PM's commitment, but an issue like organic food and farming is unlikely to catch the PM's attention unless it's part of a green budget process, one that the PM promoted as finance minister.

6. In the current environment, policy makers are mostly preoccupied with shorter term issues, and have trouble focussing on longer term policy matters, a category into which organic falls. However, the APF has some remarkable 5 and 6-year funding commitments associated with it, so it's now feasible to imagine a long-term commitment to this area.

7. Horizontal (across departments) policy making is a requirement now, but it makes policy making even more incremental than in the past. It is unusual to see large jumps from the status quo on horizontal policy matters. Organic falls into this category because it has implications for ministry's of agriculture, health, environment, and natural resources, plus central agencies.

8. This explains in part why there is no coherent food policy in Canada. Canada has agricultural policy and some nutrition policy, but little that could be labelled a coherent and integrated food policy. If one existed, organic agriculture would likely receive a more favourable reception because of the multiple policy benefits associated with its adoption (see companion briefing paper [Does the adoption of organic food and farming systems solve multiple policy problems? A review of the existing literature](#)).

4. The information context

Most interactions with the federal government require provision of useful information and analysis. Good information is a valuable currency that non-governmental organizations and sectors can provide. In fact, the number of players in policy analysis and formulation has increased dramatically in the past decade, requiring that politicians and now civil servants actively engage stakeholders to set new policy directions. To effectively participate in that process and to provide suitable information and analysis requires an understanding of the information context for federal officials. Here are some of the key features.

Elected officials

Depending on their relationship to government, elected officials are usually interested in either crisis/incompetence information (opposition MPs) or success stories highlighting positive government contributions or initiatives that could readily lead to success stories (MPs of the governing party). There is a tendency for elected officials to react to "noise" - the issues generating the highest political volume - so they seek information and actions that will reduce the noise.

Permanent officials

Permanent officials are generally guided by other kinds of information needs.

Regulatory science

The policy system relies extensively on “sound science”. In reality, this term means “regulatory science. “[T]he science [policy makers] seek is one that is capable of being justified and explained to a wide variety of publics It must facilitate clear choices. It must represent a body of evidence on which decisions can rest and be seen to be rational.”¹ One important aspect of this is that regulators attempt to minimize the likelihood of concluding there is an effect when one doesn’t exist, resulting in “unnecessary” regulation (known in statistics as minimizing the possibility of a type I error). However this approach to regulation increases the likelihood of creating a different kind of error - believing there is no effect when one actually exists (or a type II error)². The likelihood of a type II error can be high, in some kinds of studies up to a 50% possibility³. Stated another way, it would be more scientifically “sound” to claim that an effect doesn’t exist when it does, than the other way around.

This means policy makers seek a high level of certainty before acting. But, “basing regulations on scientific data is not always clear-cut since it may take years before scientists generally agree about results of controversial studies.”⁴ Rather than work with scientific ambiguity, regulators generally treat the absence of evidence as evidence that there is no relationship. In this way, much of “policy science” is predicated on the assumption that if a phenomenon has yet to be observed, then it does not exist. With this approach, there is little room for the possibility that the effect has yet to be observed because we do not know how to “see” it⁵, or that we have improperly studied it.

Limited assessment of societal benefit (and societal costs)

Any assessments of the value of organic food and farming are compromised in the federal system by limited capacity and interest in assessing both societal benefit and costs. Certain kinds of economic risks are part of the current evaluation. Economic risks associated with trading relations are part of what determines how resources are allocated. The economic risks of a potential hazard to a commodity sector may be taken into account. The economic costs of various inspection options are considered. However, all these are much narrower assessments than determining whether society benefits from specific agricultural technologies (and whether such benefits are worth the risk associated with the hazards they generate).

Consequently, status quo approaches are viewed more favourably and alternatives are not properly examined. The federal government view of societal assessment was captured in this remark from 1994 by federal government officials when commenting on the potential licensing of genetically engineered recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rbGH):

“The standard procedure in Canada and other industrialized countries is to regulate products based on scientific principles...Once safety and effectiveness have been reviewed, it is the marketplace in Canada which then decides on the market acceptance of the product, based on benefits such as price and individual values and preferences”⁶.

The Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA), responsible for evaluating and approving pesticide uses, does not evaluate whether society will benefit more from the approval of a new product or from implementation of cultural practices that are part of an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) or organic farming framework. It determines only whether a new product is efficacious, whether it does effectively what the applicant claims. There are some proposals to broaden the assessment process, associated with the new Pest Control Products Act, but these have yet to be presented for public comment so their merits are unknown. Similarly, the CFIA, when assessing an application for unconfined release of a GE crop, does not determine whether the technology will impose societal costs through economic losses at the farm level, or repairing environmental damage associated with the technology.

Information isolation

Policy makers are frequently not connected to the most recent information. In an emerging field like organic food and farming, they are not hooked into information networks and are often not aware of who the significant players are, especially in other jurisdictions. Literature on organic food and farming often appears in new peer - reviewed journals devoted to such subjects, ones that policy makers may not read. Also, with new fields, pertinent information is often found in grey literature and such information is often most accessible through networks of practitioners and researchers, the very networks to which policy makers are not often connected.

Different degrees of commitment to policy positions

Permanent officials have varying degrees of commitment to policy positions. Some positions are long-time cornerstones of departmental policy and programming, and it's unlikely that information from external organizations will result in any changes to that position. The departmental commitment to a position may also be buttressed by the dominant positions of the scientific and economic disciplines in which departmental staff have been trained. In other cases, however, the policy position is a pragmatic response to a particular set of conditions and as those conditions change there is an openness to rethinking the policy. New information can be important for the rethinking process.

Implications:

The organic sector must:

- increase it's capacity to carry out policy research that suits a regulatory science framework; this generally means using peer-reviewed literature and documents from other government jurisdictions.

- use or commission research on benefits, particularly those related to policy dilemmas
- develop a full plan of policy and programmatic interventions that need to be put in place and how to accomplish them within the federal context; it is not sufficient to lay out a general agenda as this usually does not provide sufficient information and analysis to permit permanent officials to further advance the agenda internally.
- have the capacity to regularly interact with federal officials, developing relationships of mutual trust, identifying their needs and making offers to help fill them.

5. What to work on with government to advance organic food and farming

The goals for the organic sector established in the National Organic Strategic Plan will ultimately require significant policy change to be achieved. How the organic sector will organize itself to better work with government is still under discussion, focussing particularly on the two significant organizing proposals in the National Organic Strategic Plan - a type of coalition, and the creation of an Organic Foods Council that has multisectoral representation (see section 5). The ideas presented below do not presume the outcome of these discussions, as they could be implemented through a variety of organizational structures and processes.

Generally, significant policy proposals come from 3 places in the system:

- Policies defined by the party in power, usually developed as part of an electoral campaign by a smaller group of electoral strategists but sometimes the product of broader deliberations within a party. Departments are required to implement what survives the election. Such policies may or may not require legislation and parliamentary debate.
- Policies defined by the prime minister and his/her advisors. This process is usually a bypass of the traditional policy development process, designed to avoid its complications. But with the PM behind an issue, it usually gets implemented. These proposals often bypass parliament as well.
- Policies that bubble up through a department or a number of departments. The vast majority fall into this category. At the end of the process, these usually don't look much like how they started, after interdepartmental, central agency and stakeholder scrutiny. Depending on the scope of the policy and how it relates to existing legislation, such proposals may not result in significant Cabinet discussion or require parliamentary debate.

Parliament does not generate policy, but sometimes reports from Parliamentary Committees will receive sufficient attention that the government will feel compelled to act on some parts of them. Private members bills of substance rarely are adopted by Parliament. With this as backdrop, here are some possible areas for work by the organic sector.

Short - term

Current program - related opportunities (excluding standards and accreditation)

In addition to the general programs that organic farmers and processors have used over the past number of years to advance their operations and the sector, there are some possibilities within the existing envelope of APF-related programs to gather supports for the organic sector.

A. Pesticide risk reduction and minor use

AAFC has created a new Pest Management Centre to direct their participation in pesticide risk reduction and minor use programming. PMRA is also a significant partner in this enterprise. These federal units are collaborating with the provinces, farm and commodity organizations, and the pesticide industry to advance registration of pesticides used in minor crops, and to develop broader industry wide strategies to reduce risks and use of pesticides. As part of these efforts, governments are providing research, technical support and some financing to gather sectoral players together to set risk reduction strategies in place.

There are two main opportunities in these processes. The first is the registration of pesticides that comply with organic production materials lists. A national process, with its roots in provincial consultations undertaken by Pesticide Minor Use Coordinators (PMUCs), is used to determine which crops and which pest problems receive priority attention. Some provincial PMUCs are holding a spot in their priorities lists for pesticides identified by the organic sector. Other pesticides seen as priorities by conventional producers may also have formulations acceptable under organic standards. If the organic sector can organize itself to participate in these consultations, it may accelerate availability of some acceptable pesticides.

The second opportunity lies within the pesticide risk reduction strategy process. Sectors are organized to identify the tools needed to further reduce pesticide use in their commodity. Since organic agriculture is a pesticide risk reduction system, it is sensibly part of these commodity discussions. Where organic farming organizations have good relations with the conventional sector, there may be opportunities to participate in the strategy sessions and identify pest management needs (both cultural and pesticidal) that are important for the sector.

B. Food Safety

Similarly, commodity groups have developed on-farm food safety assessments with support from the federal government through first the Canadian On-farm Food Safety Program and now the Canadian Food Safety and Quality Program. The federal government and industry cost share the development of national commodity specific on-farm food safety initiatives, including:

- a national strategy or strategic plan;
- research, development, and communication of a national on-farm food safety initiative;
- delivery of a national on-farm food safety initiative; and

- research and development of accreditation mechanism based on established audit protocols for producers who have implemented a food safety system.

Eligible organizations include:

- national commodity organizations;
- other national organizations representing commodities or commodity groups; and
- commodity groups not represented by national organizations providing the proposal can be applied nationally and that other groups representing that commodity have approved the proposal prior to it being submitted.

Organic organizations would appear to qualify under class two or three, if they wanted to participate outside of the conventional commodity organizations.

On-farm quality and traceability initiatives, off-farm initiatives covering all other components of the food chain and HACCP - based programs, largely for processors and distributors, have also been supported. These appear to have similar eligibility criteria and might require an organic processors organization to access funds. Alternately, organic processors might participate through conventional organizations if relations were positive.

C. Environmental farm planning (EFP)

Under the AAF, all provinces are investing in EFP, with financial support from the federal government. To help farmers implement new practices that solve problems identified in the EFP process, the National Farm Stewardship and Greencover Programs have been established to provide incentive money on a cost shared basis for implementation. Once farmers have completed their EFP, they are eligible to apply, especially when these practices have been identified as priorities within the region. Of interest to organic farmers, the incentive programs provide up to \$2000 on a 50% cost share basis for consultants to help with planning for nutrient management, for new grazing management systems, and for IPM adoption. An argument can be elaborated that planning for organic transition be considered eligible under these categories.

D. Marketing / branding under the APF

A central purpose of the APF is to brand Canadian food as safe and environmentally sustainable in domestic and world markets. AAFC is still sorting out how to do this, but certain pieces are emerging, particularly support for traceability. As organic food already represents a significant achievement in product certification, the sector is in a good position to share its knowledge and expertise on standards, certification, accreditation, and generic marketing with the rest of the food industry.

E. Information gathering

As part of the APF, significant commitments have been made to gathering agri-environmental information. Currently, only the Census of Agriculture collects data on organic farming and there is no other systemic data collection on the industry. But Canada is attempting to gather agri-environmental data in ways that are somewhat consistent with OECD countries and many OECD states collect more consistent data on the organic sector as part of efforts to monitor environmental improvements. Most of Canada's new data collection measures have been set out for a 2003-2008 implementation time line, but post 2008 there may be opportunities to gather more data of use to the sector.

Minister-related opportunities

Before becoming minister, Bob Speller chaired a Prime Minister's Task Force on Future Opportunities in Farming. The task force was asked to examine 4 issues, all of which organic has a bearing upon:

- the effectiveness and future direction of safety net programs;
 - farm products that can attract a premium price;
 - rural economic opportunities, particularly for value-added agri-food activities;
- and
- opportunities for farm operations to contribute to a healthy environment and increase Canadians' confidence in food safety.

The task force did receive submissions from organic farming groups and the interim report of the task force did make one recommendation related to organic.

The federal government provide targeted assistance to organic farmers in the areas of research, pest control, the certification process and exploration of export markets.

Implementation of such a recommendation would advance certain parts of the National Organic Strategic Plan. The final report of the Task Force suggested that it will be important for Canada to follow the EU and Europe in developing programs that recognize the multifunctional nature of agriculture, a policy approach that has been helpful to organic sector development.

Some in the farm papers are wondering if the task force report will form the basis for the new Minister's agenda. Another member of the task force, Mark Eyking, is now Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture with special emphasis on Agri-food. Mr Eyking represents a riding in Cape Breton, NS and his family runs a large vegetable operation that apparently has been practising IPM for many years. There are also rumours that the family may

launch an organic vegetable enterprise.

Given possible interest from Mr. Speller and Mr. Eyking, the organic sector may have an opportunity to present information and ideas to them and their staff.

Parliament - related opportunities

Although Parliament does not make policy, Committees sometimes encourage departments to create new policy. It might be worthwhile to encourage the House of Commons Agriculture and Agri-food Committee (or even the House of Commons Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development which has looked at organic in the past in the context of pesticide issues) to do a study of organic agriculture's potential for solving multiple policy problems.

A number of things need to be in place to make this a success:

- a supportive chair of the committee (Paul Steckle, an Ontario Liberal, chairs the Agriculture Committee of the House and Charles Caccia, also an Ontario Liberal, returns as chair of the Environment and Sustainable Development Committee)
- some significant support from all the parties since each will have members sitting on the committee
- good relations with the chair's and the committee's staff who help set the agenda for these kinds of hearings
- some good timing as these "discretionary" hearings are always bumped by consideration of legislation; so it's good to know something about the upcoming legislative agenda
- a positive approach to the subject, with some significant testimony on implementation of measures to support organic food and farming; important because the civil service may rebuff such hearings if they feel the approach will be critical or if they feel they won't have some capacity to enact the recommendations [note that a critical approach is usually only possible when a department has received considerable bad press about what it's doing and the MPs view the department as a political liability]

The timing may be right because there is growing farmer and farm organization interest in environmental payments, and department officials appear open to new thinking. A post-productivist stance is beginning to emerge among civil servants and delivery agents.

Longer-term: building momentum for significant policy change

Time period: the next AAF agreement 2008-2012

Objective: Government adopts acreage and market targets for the organic sector as outlined in the National Organic Strategic Plan, and devotes resources and programming to make it happen

Activities:

Generally, significant policy change takes 3-10 years of work to achieve, so a long term plan must be put in place. Regardless of the policies targeted for action, there are some general activities that need to be implemented.

- regular tours of Ottawa with briefings of MPs, and permanent officials
- regular participation in formal AAFC consultations
- regular promotional work with organic eaters to reinforce the need for policy changes that will support the Canadian organic sector and ultimately make more Canadian organic food available to eaters
- regular meetings with general farm organizations and commodity groups to build support for organic as a solution for many farmers; resolutions where possible
- unusual alliances need creating - farm groups, environmentalists and industry - with the putting forward of some common positions
- regular program of articles in the farm media
- provision of briefing materials to permanent officials, especially in the run up to the negotiations on the next round of AAF agreements
- economic modelling of organic systems adoption, possibly using the Canadian Regional Agriculture Model (CRAM); AAFC is using this model to develop scenarios for iathe next round of APF negotiations.
- build the case of organic farming as a Best Management Practice within the National Farm Stewardship and Climate Change Mitigation initiatives.

Additional reading:

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