

sustainability. This process is a cooperative one, bringing together the knowledge, skills, and experience of governments, farm and environmental groups, farmers and farm suppliers, other rural residents, scientists, educators, and the interested public.

The Role of Government

The Federal Government

The concept of agriculture's environmental sustainability in Canada dates back to the 1930s, when severe drought conditions in the western prairies led to the development of soil conservation programs. Since then, numerous conservation programs have been aimed at improving soil and water quality related to farming. Despite these efforts, the sector continues to face environmental challenges as it works with new technologies and responds to changing market pressures and growing societal concern about the environment. Policies of the 1990s broadened agriculture's environmental agenda, and one of the greatest successes of Canada's Green Plan in the early to mid-1990s was the agricultural programs carried out under agreements with the provinces to promote environmental sustainability in the sector.

In 1997 the federal agriculture department released its first sustainable development strategy and action plan for agriculture and agri-food production, built on four pillars: increasing understanding, promoting environmental and resource stewardship, developing innovations and solutions, and seizing market opportunities. Sustainable agriculture is also featured in the federal health department's sustainable development strategy, which commits Canada to developing and adopting sustainable pest management systems.

Increasing understanding aims at providing better information to improve the capacity of departmental and sectoral decision makers to integrate environmental factors into day-to-day decision making. Such information includes ecological and resource data (e.g., the Canadian Soil Information System and biodiversity inventories) and analytical information.

Performance measures are needed to assess the success in carrying out these strategies and in achieving the overall goal of environmentally sustainable agriculture in Canada. One type of performance measure is agri-environmental indicators, which estimate key environmental conditions, risks, and changes resulting from agriculture and assess management practices used by producers. The federal agriculture department has developed 14 agri-environmental indicators in six

Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan

Today, almost 93 percent of the Prairie ecozone is agricultural land. All that remains of its original native vegetation is about 1 percent of tall grass prairie, 19 percent of mixed grass prairie, and 16 percent of aspen parkland. In the late 1980s, the governments of Canada's three Prairie provinces and the World Wildlife Fund cooperated in developing the first Prairie Conservation Action Plan, a blueprint for conserving native prairie ecosystems in western Canada. To extend the benefits of this initiative, in 1997 Saskatchewan began its own Prairie Conservation Action Plan, building on the first plan and mirroring similar work in Alberta and Manitoba. The result of a partnership among 16 government and nongovernment agencies, the plan recognizes that conservation of native prairie can happen only if it is based on an ecosystem approach. The new plan, which addresses some special elements demanded by prairie society, land tenure, agricultural development, and fragmentation of native prairie, is being carried out with the involvement of private land-owners and renters, rural and urban municipalities, the provincial and federal government, First Nations, and a host of interest groups.