

SUPPORTING B.C.'S GROWING AGRITECH SECTOR

Issue

Agriculture is rapidly changing, and the realities of climate change and a growing population mean the years to come will be a time of great challenge in the systems that feed us every day. As the recent COVID-19 global pandemic and flooding have highlighted even further, the need to ensure food security and for a reliable local supply chain and consumer base for the food and beverages in B.C. continues to grow. Amid the challenges of inconsistent access to global agriculture products and markets are also great opportunities, especially here in British Columbia. Innovation and technology are already transforming our agriculture industries to help us rise to the challenges with which we are faced. With land reserved for agriculture, strong industrial sectors, access to ports and highways, and a growing tech sector, B.C. is uniquely positioned to become a leader in the agriculture technology (agritech) sector that will shape our global food systems in the coming decades.

Since this policy was first introduced and adopted in 2020, we have seen multiple steps taken by government which address recommendations included in the original version of the policy, including the following:

- Launching a Regenerative Agriculture and Agriculture Network (RANN)¹ to help farmers adopt the latest technology that will increase both profitability and environmental sustainability in-province;
- Developing and implementing an Agritech Concierge program² paired with a \$7.5 million agritech-specific grant program³ and Agritech Ramp-Up Pilot Program⁴ to support agritech businesses in starting, growing, and diversifying their businesses, and in accessing new markets;
- Updating Agricultural Land Reserve use regulations⁵ to support vertical farming;
- Creating the Agriculture Minister's Advisory Group on Regenerative Agriculture and Agritech⁶ which includes subject matter experts and business leaders from across the province;
- Signing an agreement between the Province of B.C. and the Netherlands to develop international agritech opportunities between the jurisdictions⁷;
- Launching the BC Centre of Agritech Innovation (BCCA)⁸ in Surrey and a federal investment of \$10 million into the AFU Agtech Innovation Sandbox (AGIS)⁹ program for post-pandemic recovery for SMEs scaling and commercializing agricultural technology in B.C.

B.C. must continue, however, to take the next steps in establishing our province as a global agritech leader that enables and supports the innovation, development, demonstration, and deployment of novel technologies. As B.C. moves forward, strengthening agriculture and agritech education and research to drive excellence in priority areas and deepen the knowledge base and talent pool for the agriculture

¹ <https://news.gov.BC.ca/releases/2021AFF0049-001493>

² <https://www2.gov.BC.ca/gov/content/industry/agriculture-seafood/programs/agritech-concierge?keyword=agritech&keyword=concierge>

³ <https://news.gov.BC.ca/releases/2021PREM0022-000556>

⁴ <https://iafBC.ca/agritech-ramp-up-program/>

⁵ <https://www.abbynews.com/news/province-revises-alr-regulations-to-make-room-for-vertical-farming/>

⁶ <https://www.BCpublicsectorboardapplications.gov.BC.ca/s/tribunalDetail?boardNum=A-25409>

⁷ <https://news.gov.BC.ca/releases/2022JERI0024-000801>

⁸ <https://www.sfu.ca/agritech-innovation/about-us/about-the-centre.html>

⁹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/pacific-economic-development/news/2022/03/the-honourable-harjit-s-sajjan-outlines-his-vision-for-pacific-and-announces-118-million-in-federal-support-for-local-innovators.html>



innovation agenda, and with business, government and academia working together, we can ensure that there is a place to grow food and support emerging agritech industries by examining land use policies and other regulatory considerations to make the best decisions which help invest in B.C.'s growing agritech sector.

Background

Technology already plays a major role in the food system. From the adoption of mechanized farm equipment to the recent rise of cloud-based online food ordering services, technology has shifted industrial methods and social practices around food production, distribution and consumption. Today, agricultural technology is redefining what it means to be a farmer. A new generation of farmers is adapting traditional growing and harvesting practices to greenhouses, urban rooftops, shipping containers and other unconventional sites. These new farms often utilize innovative new technologies, such as robotics, drones, LED lighting, monitoring sensors and farm management software.

Agritech supports all stages of food production, processing, and distribution. Farmers are increasingly driving research into seed genomics, climate-controlled greenhouses, sensor monitored growing technologies, advanced refrigeration and dehydration systems, and numerous other agritech solutions. They are often at the forefront of meeting shifting consumer demands such as for plant-based alternatives, locally-grown or locally-made food, health food products and environmentally sustainable, traceable protein sources.

B.C. also has an opportunity to build on its position as a leader in protecting the environment and mitigating greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Our province is already home to more than 150 companies that are active in the agritech sector. We have the advantage of land reserved for agriculture that can help to support the development of new growing strategies and demonstrate the agricultural applications of emerging technologies. To share a future where B.C. is a preferred jurisdiction for farmers, food processors/manufacturers, agritech innovators and investment in agricultural businesses, decisive and coordinated action is needed by industry, academia and government¹⁰.

In 2020, the BC Food Security Task Force made recommendations to support food security and the economic growth of the agricultural sector in British Columbia, focusing on the following three areas:

- Increasing the competitiveness, efficiency and profitability of the agricultural sector of British Columbia, through technology and innovation;
- Growing the agritech industry as a standalone economic sector capable of developing technologies that will be applicable both locally and globally; and
- Supporting the development and application of technologies that can protect the agricultural sector against the effects of climate change and support environmentally sustainable agricultural practices.¹¹

Since this policy was adopted in 2020, initiatives such as the provincially and federally funded B.C. Centre for Agritech Innovation have been launched to strengthen our innovation ecosystem across academia, government, and industry, and to position the province as a world leader in agricultural technology.

¹⁰ <https://engage.gov.BC.ca/app/uploads/sites/121/2020/01/FSTF-Report-2020-The-Future-of-Food.pdf>, page 6

¹¹ *Ibid*, page 9



MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD

Across B.C., innovative companies are using technology to maximize efficiency and profitability while developing environmentally sustainable practices.

For innovators and entrepreneurs to succeed, continued support and investment is needed; both privately and through the government in terms of education, funding, and strategic land use policies which facilitate their work. This includes investments into research & development of agritech incubators and accelerators¹² and the development of a new zoning type for up to 0.25% of Agricultural Land Reserve land (specifically land of low soil quality, ill-suited for farming but with good transportation connectivity)¹³ specifically for agricultural-industrial activity to support the growing agritech sector.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government:

1. Establish B.C. as a global agritech leader by increasing support for the innovation pathway including the development, demonstration, and deployment of novel technologies;
2. Encourage and support collaboration across post-secondary institutions to drive excellence in priority areas and deepen the knowledge base and talent pool for agricultural innovation;
3. Ensure that there is a place to grow food and support emerging agritech industries by examining land use policies and other regulatory considerations; and
4. Establish a Commissioner for Agri-Industrial Lands.
5. Work to create stable, predictable, and hospitable “hosting conditions” for private sector led investments in agritech and the agricultural innovation ecosystem and encourage municipal governments to do the same.

¹² *Ibid*, page 66

¹³ *Ibid*, page 7

