

## 4. Elevating Food Security to National Security Status

### Description

Canada's food system faces growing threats from climate change, supply chain disruptions, labour shortages, and global tensions. Despite these critical challenges, there's no single national strategy that prioritizes food security as it truly should be, an essential service fundamental to the health, economic stability, and overall well-being of all Canadians, much like universal healthcare or access to clean water and reliable electricity. Recognizing food security as such a vital pillar of our society is crucial to ensure every Canadian has consistent access to safe and nutritious food.

### Background

Food security and national security are intrinsically linked. A reliable, resilient food supply underpins a nation's stability by ensuring the physical health of its population, the viability of its economy, and the strength of its global alliances. When food systems falter due to climate disasters, trade disputes, or geopolitical shocks, there is a national security impact as governments are forced to redirect security and emergency resources to address hunger, inflation, and civil unrest.

Nations around the world — including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia — have increasingly integrated food security into their national security strategies. These strategies emphasize safeguarding domestic production capacity, protecting critical agricultural infrastructure, and securing supply chains. Canada has not yet matched this level of integration, despite growing risks to its food system.

The B.C. Premier's Taskforce on Food Security outlines that Agriculture is a major sector of the economy, providing employment for over 63,000 people in B.C.<sup>13</sup> However, even as the province is cultivating an international reputation for safe and sustainable food and agricultural products, the full potential of the agricultural sector remains unrealized. Experts see an opportunity with bold thinking and a strategic roadmap, to increase the value of agricultural exports, create new economic growth opportunities within the sector, and improve Canada's food security.

The 2021 floods in British Columbia and pandemic-related border closures exposed how rapidly disruptions can escalate into national emergencies when food transport, production, and access are compromised. The interdependence of food, energy, transportation, and communication systems underscores the need for an all-hazards approach to food security — one that is proactive rather than reactive.

Nowhere is this connection more visible than in Abbotsford, British Columbia, the agricultural capital of Canada. With 1,254 farms across 61,586 acres.<sup>14</sup> Abbotsford has the highest farm sales per hectare in the country. The city generated approximately \$3.83 billion in economic activity from agriculture in 2022 and supports nearly 17,000 local jobs.<sup>15</sup> Abbotsford supplies 50% of all dairy, chicken, turkey, and eggs

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<sup>13</sup> B.C. Food Security Task Force, "The Future of B.C.'s Food System," January 30, 2020, <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/app/uploads/sites/121/2020/01/FSTF-Report-2020-The-Future-of-Food.pdf>, 27.

<sup>14</sup> City of Abbotsford, "Business & Development – Agriculture," accessed August 18, 2025, <https://www.abbotsford.ca/business-development/agriculture>.

<sup>15</sup> Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce, "Canada's 2022 Agricultural Hub Report," May 25, 2022, <https://www.abbotsfordchamber.com/canadas-agricultural-hub-report-2022/>.

consumed in B.C., and leads the country in raspberry production while contributing significantly to blueberry output.<sup>16</sup>

Abbotsford's role as a national food hub makes it a critical asset in Canada's domestic food security infrastructure. Yet, it remains vulnerable to flooding, transportation breakdowns, and workforce shortages. Strengthening such high-output regions is a matter of national security, not just regional development.

A coordinated, whole-of-government Food Security Strategy would, support rural economies, improve emergency preparedness, and build trust in Canada's ability to feed its people under all conditions.

#### *Canada's Food Security Vulnerability*

One in eight households in Canada was food insecure in 2018, amounting to roughly 4.4 million people, including more than 1.2 million children living in food-insecure households.<sup>17</sup>

Food insecurity is not only an issue for those without housing or employment, in fact, more than 65% of those experiencing food insecurity are working.<sup>18</sup> With the gap between wages and the costs of living growing immensely, many individuals are left unable to afford food.

#### *Health Care*

Food insecurity places a substantial burden on Canada's health sector, directly translating into increased healthcare costs. When one in eight Canadian households, including over 1.2 million children, lack consistent access to nutritious food, the result is a rise in diet-related illnesses, chronic diseases, and mental health issues. This directly impacts emergency room visits, hospital admissions, and the need for long-term care, diverting essential resources and funding from other critical areas of the healthcare system. Prioritizing food security through a comprehensive national strategy would not only improve the well-being of millions of Canadians but also significantly alleviate the financial strain on our healthcare infrastructure.

### **Economic Rationale**

#### *Strengthening a Pillar of the Economy*

Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector is a significant contributor to the national economy, employing 2.1 million people and generating \$149.2.9 billion (approximately 7% of Canada's GDP) in 2024. In 2022, Canadian farmers generated cash receipts of \$97.9 billion, compared with \$99.5 billion in 2023, marking the first decline since 2010. At the same time, operating expenses rose by nearly two percent in 2024 from the previous year, lowering net income and increasing uncertainty in the sector. These increased costs are primarily due to disruptions to global supply chains for critical inputs like seed, fertilizer, and more.

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<sup>16</sup> City of Abbotsford, "AgRefresh: Background Research Report," September 2016, <https://www.abbotsford.ca/sites/default/files/2021-02/AgRefresh%20Background%20Research%20Report%20%26%20Appendices.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Archway Community Services, "The Food Justice Program," accessed August 18, 2025, <https://archway.ca/program/food-justice/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

### *Enhancing Global Competitiveness*

Canada is among the top global exporters of agricultural and agri-food products, with exports reaching a record \$67 billion in 2020.<sup>19</sup> With the right investments, Canada can increase its global share from 3.7% to 4.8%, potentially adding \$44 billion to agriculture and agri-food's export value by 2035.<sup>20</sup>

### *Diversifying Trade and Reducing Vulnerabilities*

Over 60% of Canada's agriculture and agri-food exports go to the U.S., making the sector vulnerable to trade tensions. Recent U.S. tariffs on Canadian imports have highlighted the need for diversification. A National Food Security Strategy would support efforts to expand into new international markets, reducing dependency on a single trading partner and enhancing economic resilience.

### *Addressing Labour Shortages*

The agriculture and agri-food sector faces chronic labour shortages, with a projected shortfall growing from 63,000 to as many as 123,000 workers by 2029.<sup>21</sup> Investments in workforce development, training programs, and immigration policies tailored to the sector are essential components of a comprehensive food security strategy.

### *Leveraging Technological Innovation*

Canada's commitment to agtech leadership is evident in its investment in cutting-edge agricultural technologies, including robotics, blockchain, Internet of Things (IoT) applications, and big data analytics. These innovations are transforming Canadian agriculture as well as food processing and delivery making it more efficient, sustainable, and productive, thereby enhancing global competitiveness. However, these technologies can be expensive and Canadian farms already carry a combined total of \$146 billion in debt. Incentivising the adoption of these technologies is critical.<sup>22</sup>

## **Recommendations**

That the Government of Canada:

1. Develop and implement a National Food Security Strategy that elevates food security to the status of national security, emphasizing resilience and emergency preparedness across Canada's food system, developed in close consultation with industry and ensuring coordinated efforts across federal, provincial, and territorial governments.
2. Empower Agriculture and Agri-Food to play a role in national food security through robust and reliable funding, including investment in the next Canadian Agricultural Partnership agreement and ensure alignment with Canada's trade obligations and competitiveness goals.
3. Recognize farms as critical infrastructure, including buildings, land, and the food supply chain, throughout government policies, programs, and planning, especially in an emergency response context.

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<sup>19</sup> Northbridge Consultants, "Agricultural Technology at a Glance," March 8, 2023, <https://northbridgeconsultants.com/2023/03/08/agricultural-technology-at-a-glance/>.

<sup>20</sup> Statistics Canada, "Farm income, 2022 (revised data)," last modified November 29, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/231128/dq231128b-eng.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Trevor Bacque, "Re-thinking the future of labour in Canadian agriculture," Farm Credit Canada (FCC), May 27, 2020, <https://www.fcc-fac.ca/en/knowledge/re-thinking-the-future-of-labour-in-canadian-agriculture>.

<sup>22</sup> Lisa Ashton, "Food first: How agriculture can lead a new era for Canadian exports," Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), February 25, 2025, <https://www.rbc.com/en/thought-leadership/the-trade-hub/food-first-how-agriculture-can-lead-a-new-era-for-canadian-exports/>.

4. Invest in agri-food infrastructure and innovation, particularly in high-output regions, to enhance resilience against climate change and other disruptions.
5. Integrate food system risk assessments into national security and emergency planning, including protections for agricultural supply chains, workers, and transport corridors.
6. Promote education and workforce development in the agricultural sector to address labor shortages and ensure the industry's long-term viability.