

HUNGER

Liberal win sets table for food policy

Prime minister-designate has a full plate of priorities to dig into

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VANCOUVER SUN

Food activists, farmers and food industry players have every reason to be optimistic that the newly elected federal Liberal government will finally produce a long-sought national food policy.

The Liberals put food policy on their platform in 2010 when then-leader Michael Ignatieff championed food as a tool for public health and economic growth.

Such a policy would have to encompass a whole range of issues, not all of which lie comfortably together, from food safety, aging farmers and environmental stewardship to child hunger, local procurement and international free trade agreements.

However, The Western Producer recently quoted prime minister-designate Justin Trudeau as saying, "The classic joke around Liberals is that there is no problem we don't think can be solved by a national strategy, but the fact of the matter is that it boggles my mind that we don't actually have a comprehensive long-term responsible vision for how we feed our country."

We asked experts to offer suggestions for the new government's top food policy priorities.

Support for new farmers

As farmers age and retire — the average farmer is 56 in B.C. — the need to attract new farmers intensifies. But poor access to capital makes farming a difficult business to break into, when land and equipment for even a modest farm can quickly run into millions of dollars.

Improved risk management tools for farmers and especially new entrants would do double duty for agriculture, according



RIC ERNST/PNG

Stafford Richter, left, is a young farmer who grows vegetables on a piece of farm land he leases in the Township of Langley. As farmers age and retire — the average farmer in B.C. is 56 — the need to attract new farmers intensifies. A national initiative to deal with local school meal programs would go a long way toward ending child hunger and educating young minds on how to eat better.



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to Reg Ens, executive director of the B.C. Agriculture Council. Farmers increasingly need a holistic strategy that helps them manage expenses related to climate change, livestock disease and crop failure.

"When you reduce the risks associated with farming, access to capital (for young farmers) becomes much easier," said Ens.

Healthy school food

"We have an explosion of diet-related chronic disease in this country," said Diana Bronson, executive director of Food Secure Canada, the national organization of food activist and anti-poverty groups. "A huge part of the problem is too much processed food and not enough fruits and vegetables."

A national initiative to deal with the incomplete patchwork of local school meal programs would go a long way toward ending child hunger and educating young minds on how to eat better. Child hunger and poor

nutrition "fills hospitals and prisons," Bronson said.

The Liberals can look south for inspiration, specifically the Hunger-Free Kids Act championed by First Lady Michelle Obama.

Local procurement

Encouraging public institutions — schools, universities, hospitals and prisons — to buy food from local farmers and suppliers creates new markets for farmers and helps to grow processing and distribution businesses that populate the value chain between farmers and consumers.

Many institutions contract large multinational firms for food services that gravitate to the lowest price for supplies, regardless of origin. A handful of universities have negotiated local procurement into their contracts, which may be a template for other institutions to follow.

Market access guarantees to trading partners enshrined in free trade agreements can be an impediment to local procurement, something the Liberals

should consider when deciding whether to ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact, according to Brent Mansfield, director of the B.C. Food Systems Network.

A national food policy council

A national advisory body that brings together all the disparate players in the industry, including arms of the government that seldom communicate with each other, would foster a comprehensive approach to food policy. Past Liberal governments have created similar bodies to advise them on other policy areas, such as the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy and the International Institute for Sustainable Development.

Vancouver's Food Policy Council worked with city staff to draft the Vancouver Food Strategy, which involves every relevant city department in a single set of goals and actions, said Coun. Heather Deal. The process has

been so successful that it is being applied to Vancouver's Greenest City and Healthy City strategies. Deal sees a federal version of the council as an excellent tool for developing a coherent national food policy.

International trade

Farmers will need the support of government to enter new foreign markets opened up by new trade agreements. The Liberal platform is strong on trade as a path to economic growth. Some of the products produced in Canada are the best in the world and farmers need access to those markets, but producers say there is a knowledge gap and uneven regulation and taxation, such as B.C.'s carbon tax.

"What do we need to do to develop capacity within the industry to take advantage of this opportunity?" asked Ens. "It's great to have doors opened, but we need to train farmers, facilitate trade and create the necessary infrastructure to exploit those opportunities."