

Engaging Manitobans on our Agri-food Industry - Focus Group Session

The Manitoba government is committed to working collaboratively with stakeholders to build the public's knowledge and trust of the agri-food system in Manitoba. Manitoba Agriculture coordinates Manitoba's annual Farm and Food Awareness Week, which takes place the third week of September. A virtual focus group session was held as part of events and communications planned for the week.

The focus group was phase 3 of the multi-phased public engagement on public trust, '[Engaging Manitobans on our Agri-food System](#)'. Participants were provided with the results from phase 1, the [Engaging Manitobans on our Agri-food Industry - Survey Results](#), and phase 2, the *Building Agri-Food Connections Ideas Board*. The event provided the opportunity to discuss key themes and options going forward for potential public trust programming that connects consumers to industry in a meaningful way, while supporting continued economic growth.

Engagement Overview

The *Engaging Manitobans on our Agri-food System* virtual focus group was held on September 21, 2021. Key public trust stakeholders were invited to attend presentations and participate in a discussion on public trust.

Approximately 75 individuals participated on the virtual call. The Canadian Centre for Food Integrity (CCFI) provided a presentation on national public trust. Manitoba Agriculture presented *What We Heard* from phase 1 and 2 of the agri-food engagement initiatives. Participants were directed into breakout rooms for small group discussions on options for public trust programming.



70+ participants



2 presentations



6 virtual breakout rooms

What We Heard

The following is a summary of the key themes that emerged on each question discussed in the breakout room session.

"Public trust in agriculture and food production is much bigger than Manitoba."

We have heard from Manitobans that there is a need to create connections between Manitoba producers and consumers. One key message we have heard through engagement is the idea of creating a website that connects the public directly with food producers to build knowledge, understanding and relationships.

Question: Who should lead the development and management of this website?

Key themes:

1. Website development and management

- Consider having the website managed by Manitoba Agriculture or a neutral, professional organization.
- Consider having the website managed by a trusted source that is science- and fact-based, and values agriculture in Canada.
- Ensure the website is a consortium that is broad (global) based and has a layered approach to engagement. It should offer a holistic view and not be focused on any one subsector.
- Ensure the website's purpose and audience are defined before development starts, as it is difficult to create one website that would serve all purposes.

2. Website content

- Include a dashboard of information with priority topics from a science and farmer perspective, partnerships and links to commodity groups.
- Ensure messages are positive and content is current and relevant.
- Give producers the opportunity to occasionally drive content.
- Avoid content that duplicates other sites.

3. Tools to reach consumers

- Consider the website as a way to reach consumers, not as an aggressive way to increase public trust.
- Consider how consumers currently receive misinformation relating to agriculture and food production (such as through social media) and counteract the misinformation through a similar channel.
- Consider making significant investments in marketing.

Question: How can we ensure that the website broadly supports the industry?

Key themes:

1. Consumer Views

- Consider that sustainability is not only about farmers; it is an issue for all Manitobans.

- Consider that consumers do not think of agriculture as commodities; they think of agriculture as food they consume and meals they prepare for their family.
 - Consider the mindset change in industry and what consumers care about: what is affordable for them and how the food connects them back to farmers.
2. Inclusion of the full agri-food system
 - Share a range of stories, not only about or from commodity associations, but also food processors.
 - Create a unified voice about what is being done well and what requires improvement.
 3. Risks
 - Consider risks of a commodity group event advertised as it could result in livestock protesting, farms being compromised.
 4. Website Development and Management
 - Remember that a website is not a way to increase public trust; rather, it is a source of information.
 - Use a coordinated approach.
 - Be inclusive; don't list some consumers and producers, but leave others out.
 - Remember that "small," "local," and "sustainable" are terms that are defined and interpreted differently.
 - Decide on a generic format and have each commodity approve its content.
 - Ensure the website has dedicated support — more than volunteer/committee effort.
 - Ensure confidentiality is maintained.
 - Consider including influences of a dietitian.
 5. Transparency
 - Use the website as a hub that connects Manitoba producers
 - Include a calendar of events to advertise them.
 - Be strategic with content.

Question: How can we ensure transparency is built into the design of a website?

Key themes:

- Know the website's audience, be transparent and avoid industry language.
- Consider having a two-way dialogue where the public can ask questions and get answers at the same time.
- Make farmers the face of the website; provide the opportunity for a broad spectrum of farmers (from small, medium-sized and big farms) to tell their stories.
- Clearly state and identify information sources.
- List funders on every page.
- Connect science to agriculture.

Question: How can we make a website engaging to all user groups?

Key themes:

- Make it visually appealing and interactive, and use current design standards to ensure the site is accessible across devices.
- Include a wide variety of content: photos, videos, question and answer posts, discussion forums, articles, reports and links to other resources.
- Include recipes for specific commodities.

- Ensure content is authentic, current and tailored to the site's audience. Keep the site simple, and avoid scientific and technical jargon.
- Provide support to farmers so they want to participate.
- Do not make the website the focus of a public trust strategy.

Question: How could a website support sales of locally produced and processed food?

Key themes:

- Ensure that small-, medium- and large-scale farmers and producers are represented.
- Explain that locally produced food is exported internationally; not only do Manitoba producers feed Manitobans, they feed the world.
- Share some of the economic benefits of a sector— for example, that Manitoba is the second largest exporter of pigs in Canada.
- Eliminate the word "locally" or clearly define what is meant by local, as it is a vague term. Consider that buy local and eat local movements and farmers' markets run against affordability and what agriculture in Canada is about; consider avoiding this messaging.
- Consider that consumers are price-conscious — they may eat at restaurants on the weekend, but want affordability during the week — and can be fickle in regards to the issue of local food.
- Avoid using the "little red barn" image when producing videos or resources, as it reinforces a romantic notion of a farm and can negatively affect commercial agriculture.

Question: Should a website provide a listing of farms available for farm tours?

Key themes:

- Do not provide a list — farms are complex commercial undertakings; they are not tourist attractions
- Use caution in providing a list, as tours can lead to inconsistent or conflicting messages. Instead, invest in public agricultural research centres which could have a public access component.
- Do not provide a list, for privacy reasons and the risk that comes with increased activity
- Ensure any farms that are listed are recommended by Manitoba Agriculture as good representatives of the industry.

Question: What else could this website offer related to public trust, agriculture and food production?

Key themes:

- Use the website as a source of information, not a public trust strategy.
- Include statistics from Statistics Canada.
- Include balanced information about plant- and animal-based protein products.
- Consider if the website will fill the need, before committing to developing it.

"A website alone cannot build public trust; it can be used as a source of information."

Manitobans have shared that there is a need to promote and support Manitoba farmers and further engage and educate the public on Manitoba's food system and sustainable farming practices. There has been discussion around the idea of a website as being one way to support education.

Question: What other educational events, tools and resources will support building public awareness of food production systems, sustainability and existing regulations?

Key themes:

- Include agriculture, and the science of agriculture, as a mandatory part of the academic curriculum.
- Advertise events.
- Consider other learning resources and centres.

"A trusted source , non-partisan, with science based information."

Question: How can we address misinformation? (GMOs, antibiotic use, food labelling, food fraud, etc.).

Key themes:

- Acknowledge that cultural appropriation of Indigenous foods is an issue. It is important to understand how much is actually Indigenous, not just the food, but also the information. Provide accurate, culturally-sensitive information.
- Ensure information is science-based and the source is credible. For example, consider disseminating through universities.
- Use organizations that are nonpartisan.

Question: How can we ensure key influencers (producers, doctors, health professionals and dieticians, agriculture organizations, etc.) disseminate science-based information related to food and food production?

Key themes:

- Communicate that science is important and it is the pillar on which decisions are made.
- Ensure key influencers listed feel confident that they will be supported when they disseminate the information and will not be exposed on their own. Ensure the government publicly supports their views.
- Build relationships with organizations.

"People are busy. Reach them where they are at; find ways to work in tidbits of information into their everyday lives. A website alone is not the answer, however a well planned marketing campaign could be key."

Question: Who should partner on this initiative and what collaborative efforts should be explored?

Key themes:

- Combine efforts with the federal government and industry.

- Ensure everyone who has a stake in agriculture, starting with primary producers to food processors, equipment manufacturers and crop inputs companies, is investing in public trust initiatives.

Question: How can we be innovative to connect producers and consumers using digital or in-person opportunities?

Key themes:

- Use a national, coordinated effort. Tools of a coordinated campaign could include producers interacting digitally or in-person with consumers.
- Facilitate opportunities for consumers to interact with farmers, such as through Facebook Live events or Twitter parties.
- Offer meal kits featuring local products.

Question: What educational resources are needed to increase public trust in sustainable protein production?

Key themes:

- Provide a clear definition of what is considered a sustainable protein.
- Find ways to promote both plant-based and animal-based proteins. Share the stories of all the good things that are happening in both of these industries.
- Consider that the volume of production directed to protein processing is, and likely always will be, dwarfed by the volumes of other commodities that are processed or exported.
- Use infographics — for example, show past vs. present uses of water and energy.

Through engagement, we heard the importance of increased opportunities to buy local, both through markets and retail chains. Manitoba communities currently host robust farmers' markets.

Question: How can we expand these opportunities and, looking forward, increase the sales of local foods at retail locations?

Key themes:

- Consider what other international markets are doing, such as multiple labels on packages that provide information. For example, create a Manitoba label to drive folks to the website (such as an Eco label; ensure logo is not duplicated elsewhere).
- Create a website with links to other websites.
- Establish relationships with grocers.
- Focus efforts on increasing awareness that some foods not labeled as local are actually grown in Manitoba.
- Develop a "Manitoba brand."
- Ensure we are tracking local and national initiatives before putting too much effort into something new.
- Develop short videos and infographics — for example, to promote "This month is Chicken Month."
- Develop a "Good food boxes" concept with a local twist; provide a recipe suggestion and all required (locally produced) ingredients.

- Partner with schools and doctors' offices to display or have information available to the public.
- Have Manitoba Agriculture collaborate with Manitoba Education and Early Learning.
- Host a massive tradeshow with Manitoba producers, local products, educational resources, workshops and information sessions.

Question: What “buy local” initiatives are already in place in Manitoba and Canada? Are these initiatives working? If not, what needs to change, what needs to be kept and what needs to be expanded?

Key themes:

- Consider that “local” does not always mean better, as there can be fewer checks and balances related to food safety and animal welfare.
- Create a clear definition of “local.”
- Consider that "Buy Local" campaigns can be controversial — some individuals like them, while others believe they're not good business because they negatively affect our exporting producers
- Consider if there is merit to listing farm tours.
- Consider other organizations to watch and then model what they are doing.

Question: How can we make local food more accessible to all Manitobans?

Key themes:

- Recognize that the focus of public trust cannot be limited to a website or “buy local” campaigns.
- Create a clear definition of “local.”
- Consider promoting locally processed foods
- Consider that most individuals make food choices based on price. Communicate that those local foods that can be found at your regular supermarket are just as safe, healthy, and oftentimes, sustainable. This is an important step to building public trust.

Question: How can we encourage and promote buying local in retail? Are there other local food promotion models that are successful that we can replicate?

Key themes:

- Look to other models that are working well.
- Create a clear definition of “local” to prevent confusion and ensure transparency — for example, using imported ingredients to make local products.
- Consider there may be fatigue with promoting locally.
- Recognize that consumers need to trust what they are already looking at.
- Increase funding to promote the ability of micro-producers to access stores.
- Regulate food handling and safety for primary products and items processed locally.
- Consider improving rural internet connections and provide synergy with global, national and provincial markets.

Next Steps

Thank you to those that participated. Results of this engagement will inform the development of provincial public trust initiatives in the agri-food sector. For more information on local food in Manitoba, please visit www.manitoba.ca/agriculture/local-food/index.html.



Questions?

If you have any questions regarding this report, please contact Manitoba Agriculture's Public Engagement Unit at engageAg@gov.mb.ca.

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