

The Conservation of Agricultural Land and Farm Activities in Canada

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One of the issues in dealing with Food Security in many parts of the world is related to the need to conserve good quality agricultural land, and farm and food production activities on this land, especially near urban agglomerations.

Many jurisdictions have left this task to land use planning. Unfortunately, while land use planning often identifies agricultural zones in a community's land use plan (e.g. in Canada), it has been quite common for municipalities, regions and even provincial governments to remove land from agricultural land use zones to accommodate the development of residential subdivisions or industrial parks, or other uses.

The situation began to change during the 1970s when the provinces of British Columbia (1973) and Québec (1978) developed legislation to protect and conserve good quality agricultural land. However, the situation in these 2 provinces was still far from perfect. Consequently, in the 1990's the Province of Québec modified this legislation to include the conservation or protection of farm activities, a first in Canada. However, there were still problems. As well, the preoccupations about productivist agriculture and its negative effects on the environment and human health began to make people and even some governments concerned about the conditions of sustainability of agricultural activities.

Then, in the early years of the 21st Century the Province of Québec strongly suggested (rather than using the top-down approach to development) that the Regional County Municipalities (RCM) should organize the development of Development Plans for Agriculture in the Agricultural Zones. Such development plans can be thought of as strategic development plans for an economic sector such as agriculture. Such plans ideally should take account of the various stressors that agriculture has to come to terms with as well as with opportunities so that agriculture should

become sustainable. This implies that more than just the farming community should be involved in preparing such development plans, and in many MRC's a whole range of actors from different sectors (e.g. tourism) and segments of the population (e.g. non-farm residents) became involved. In some MRC's however, this broad range of actors was not encouraged!

Subsequently, the MRCs were encouraged to ensure that the development plans took account of the stressor of climate change and variability, truly a first in Canada... and in many other territories in Canada and in many countries around the world. Thus, Quebec has probably become the most innovative province in relation to agriculture in Canada, and remember, what has been happening is not a top-down approach but an approach that involves upper levels of government (the province) and regional and local municipalities, as well as many other types of actors. It is also possible to argue that the various functions, other than agricultural ones, supported by agriculture, such as conserving heritage landscapes, can lead to many other actors, including citizens, desiring to maintain agriculture and its activities [1-3].

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