



POLICY BRIEF

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CULTIVATING CHANGE: HOW THE AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECTOR CAN RECLAIM THE NARRATIVE ON SUSTAINABILITY



Image credit: [Warner Bros./Getty Images](#)

For those attuned to the agricultural and food sector, the documentary [“Kiss the Ground,”](#) narrated by Woody Harrelson, is an essential watch. This film, featuring a host of global celebrities, underscores the critical importance of soil health in combating climate change. It contends that modern agriculture’s reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides has led to significant soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, and heightened carbon emissions.

The documentary has resonated broadly, influencing public sentiment toward agriculture and sustainability. Corporations such as McCain Foods, Maple Leaf Foods, Nutrien, and McDonald’s Canada have begun to integrate these themes into their business models and public relations strategies, recognizing the shifting tide of consumer awareness and concern.

Not long ago, Federal Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre [chastised business groups](#) for an over reliance on what might be termed “old school” lobbying, saying that businesses should “fire [their] lobbyists, stop talking with politicians and start trying to win the support of the population.” The key point here is that the world of politics has

changed and those with an interest in shaping public policy need to be engaging directly with the public as governments become more influenced by the shifting public sentiments on everything from booze at the corner store to highways and healthcare.

The impact of “Kiss the Ground” offers a case study in this regard. As public and consumer expectations evolve, the agricultural sector grapples with reconciling business sustainability with the growing demand for more environmentally sustainable practices.

It is in this context that we have recently been thinking about the rise of “Regenerative Agriculture” as an increasingly dominant narrative in the public discourse on Agri-food. Indeed, at a recent industry summit we heard someone ask with genuine perplexity “what even is Regenerative Agriculture?”¹ It’s a common refrain within the industry, but one that is contrasted starkly with a growing chorus of non-typical stakeholders and the public at large who are intensely interested in the concept.

While the term is new’ish, in reality it merely reflects practices that farmers have employed for decades, focusing on long-term soil health and sustainable stewardship of resources.

However, there exists a chasm between the environmental ethos of external activists and the economic imperatives faced by farmers. Bridging this divide will be vital for leveraging public interest into workable actionable, policy-driven initiatives.

The challenge for the sector lies not in the concept itself, but in the agricultural community’s need to more effectively communicate its relevance and importance and avoid policy and regulation at odds with the business of farming and food production.

As governments focus more on addressing public concerns, both the risks and opportunities

associated with engaging in this discourse grow. As some of our recent policy briefs ([here](#) and [here](#)) have suggested the agriculture sector is navigating an increasingly complex landscape, with economic pressures intensifying at home and abroad. But, as one industry veteran aptly noted, “we can’t be green if we’re in the red,” emphasizing the need for a more holistic approach to sustainability that encompasses people, planet, AND profit.

To effectively reshape the public narrative around sustainability and regenerative agriculture, the sector might consider the following strategic steps:

1. UNIFIED NARRATIVE AND VISION: The Canadian agri-food sector already has a firm footing in sustainable practices. Emphasizing both existing values and practices, such as the sophisticated portfolio of Beneficial Management Practices (BMPs), and engaging with a proactive narrative that aligns with the values of the public, consumer and broader range of stakeholder will better resonate with influential public figures and decision-makers. Say what you will about the underlying economic viability of a premium retail outlet for most consumers in the world, but the [Whole Foods](#) vision and brand – “To nourish people and the planet” – is one that resonates and aligns with influential citizens and public policy decision-makers alike.

2. ENGAGEMENT: Building relationships with historically antagonistic stakeholders, including environmental organizations, can help to cultivate a common ground for public policy. For example, the Australian Meat & Livestock Association launched an [advertising campaign](#) that effectively invites the public into the agricultural conversation, making the sector relatable and appealing.

3. ADVOCACY FOR INTEGRATED PUBLIC POLICY: Taking a global perspective is crucial. By positioning Canadian agriculture as a leader in sustainable practices, the sector can

1. We are paraphrasing. Indeed, the individual, to our recollection, did use more colourful language.

enhance its competitiveness domestically and internationally. A concerted effort to increase the global consumption of Canadian products (as well as Canadian knowledge and technology) could elevate both our agricultural and food production practices and global sustainability efforts.

Regulatory frameworks must also remain a part of the conversation to ensure accountability and maintain public trust. Actively engaging the public and demonstrating a commitment to transparency are not just options; they are essential strategies in today's landscape.

Better leveraging government attention and resources across the whole of government is another key imperative. Current public programs often operate in silos, failing to reflect the realities of business in agriculture. Policies that work against domestic production undermine both economic potential and environmental sustainability. The sector must work more effectively with governments to strike a better balance by promoting a competitive business climate at home and abroad.

As figures like Mr. Harrelson vocally advocate for change, the agricultural and food sector must ensure that those voices are not the only narrative and work to better capture the public's interest. If the agricultural and food sector can articulate its vision clearly, and engage more effectively in this new information environment, it may not only shift perceptions but also foster an environment in which constructive dialogue flourishes.

In this evolving public policy environment, the agricultural and food sector holds the key to shaping its future—one that could very well thrive on the growing public interest in sustainability. An agenda that looks like the one above could conceivably even see the unlikely breaking of bread between disparate political camps such as Mr. Poilievre and Mr. Harrelson. Indeed, if you forgive the pun, they'd eat it up.