



Edmonton Metropolitan
Region Board



Regional Agriculture Master Plan

RAMP STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

What We Heard Report

December 2020

Purpose of this document

This report is a compilation of the input received from stakeholders by the RAMP Stakeholder Engagement team. This input has been summarized, collated, and presented thematically.

The stakeholder quotes and comments selected were chosen because they were illustrative of the themes and reflected the input of the stakeholders.

This report is meant to be a reflection of what we heard – it is not intended to draw conclusions, assign value or judgement to this input. In cases where stakeholders did not agree on certain questions, these differing perspectives are stated.

This report has been presented, in summary form, to participants in four roundtable validation sessions and updated with their feedback.

We would like to sincerely thank everyone who contributed their time, thoughts, and perspectives in this process.

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Executive Summary

The Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board (EMRB) is currently developing the **Regional Agriculture Master Plan (RAMP)**, which will help counties, towns and cities in our Region effectively plan for the future of agriculture and the agriculture sector in this Region. The RAMP Task Force undertook a stakeholder engagement process to hear perspectives and insights to help inform the development of land-use policies in the RAMP and included a broad range of regional stakeholders with a vested interest in the future of agriculture and the food economy in our Region. The majority of participants¹ were agricultural producers, followed by developers and policy specialists.

Overall, participants expressed strong support for RAMP and saw value in having a regional plan for agriculture. They agreed with the objectives presented in RAMP and recognized how these could strengthen and redefine agriculture as a valued, respected sector. They felt, however, that RAMP needed to focus on the significance of agriculture, noting that the definition of agriculture needs to take into consideration the complexity of the sector so that this Region can continue to create a strong culture for the sector and better reflect the needs of the next generation of farmers.

Participants had doubts about RAMP's "teeth" and wondered how and if policies would be effectively implemented once it went to the local level to be interpreted. Participants also agreed that the work on RAMP and for the agriculture sector in general would require true regional collaboration and cooperation.

Some of the most important challenges participants felt RAMP could address were the "lack of a voice" and "low priority" given to the agriculture and food sector, the "disrespect" shown agriculture producers, and ongoing "urban-rural friction", all of which would impede achieving the objectives in RAMP, including land use planning where they felt developers are setting the agenda. They emphasized that realizing the true significance of agriculture would require a change in mindset by the urban population, the business community, elected officials and administrators. This perception shift could be achieved through increased education and better communication with the public, all levels of government, and municipal administrators. This would help raise awareness of the important and valuable role agriculture and agricultural producers play in our Region, our economy, and local food sovereignty.

Participants expressed strong support for the geographical approach to developing policies, and that it may even fix "the mess" in land use planning to date by bringing a strong regional approach. Considerable discussion centred on recent development decisions and annexations by several counties and municipalities which seemed to disregard prime agricultural lands. Participants emphasized the importance of flexibility and need to take a "quarter section by quarter section" approach to identifying

¹ For the purposes of this report, we have used the terms "stakeholders" and "participants" to describe all those who participated in providing input, including those who submitted written responses.

prime agricultural lands. This approach would take into account other factors specific to each parcel of land in addition to soil classification.

Participants felt that there should be a greater emphasis on the Urban Agriculture Policy Area, as it is important and needs support if it is to become a major plank in the RAMP platform. They urged the Task Force to think outside the box and consider integrating farmlands and food production into the urban environments. Some defined agriculture as “anything that grows or produces food”, noting that this would include food production in an urban context.

Participants strongly agreed that prime agricultural land should be protected and preserved for agricultural use, urging consideration of large contiguous lands as prime agricultural areas, as well as specialty and intensive crop areas, pastureland, and open spaces for wildlife. Many highlighted the significance of the rich soils in this Region, making it unique from anywhere else in Canada, and not well understood by decision makers and the public given its importance to the future of the agricultural sector.

The discussion of fragmentation and conversion caused the most angst and unease on the part of participants, who recognized that the concepts are complex, and need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, allowing for flexibility for farmers to adapt to evolving agriculture practises and to better integrate into a community. The most common example of fragmentation was the need to divide the home and yard when wanting to purchase additional lands for farming. Many spoke of the need to respect the rights of property owners to divide and convert the land as they needed, whether it was for retirement or to pursue different economic opportunities.

Participants also felt that municipalities were the “worst offenders” when it came to fragmentation and conversion, often ignoring their own agricultural polices in order to develop areas. This has created mistrust and skepticism on the ability to achieve the minimization of either practise. Fragmentation and conversion to country residential was also another issue, which led to friction between the new residents and farmers in the area. Some participants were adamant that this type of development should be stopped, with no additional prime agricultural lands converted to country residential. Many of these comments regarding country residential development were aligned with policies already outlined within the EMRB Regional Growth Plan.

Participants also highlighted the outdated, overlapping, and complex regulatory environment within all levels of government that made it difficult to navigate and there was a call for RAMP to advocate for changes to these processes, making them simpler and streamlined.

Participants felt that the future of the agriculture sector and value-added agriculture has significant potential and generated a great deal of enthusiasm about the near limitless opportunities for producers. They listed several examples of infrastructure, including rural broadband, as critical, as well as the belief that value-added processing should be supported and incentivized by local governments, since it creates a significant increase in tax base and jobs. They suggested that the value-added objective was an important area of focus for RAMP and would provide many opportunities for cooperation, collaboration and growth across the Region.

Participants made a number of other suggestions for RAMP, including that agricultural land must be conserved for the future, and to protect farmland, we need to prevent urban sprawl. They felt that the conservation of farmland is an act of environmental stewardship, and that municipal governments need to be accountable for certainty and consistency across the Region. They also thought that food security is essential to the future of the Region and an opportunity to grow regional agriculture. Participants noted the importance of Indigenous food sovereignty and Indigenous land-use systems, and the importance of engagement with and inclusion of Indigenous groups in the Region to contribute to RAMP. Some felt that our Region should explore and embrace emerging trends in other countries where there is a shift to regenerative farming, agroecology, and the ecological relationships that farming has with the environment, including biodiversity. Others felt that many of these ideas, like regenerative farming, were already happening in the Region, but there may be a lack of awareness of these practises.

Participants emphasized that strong relationships need to bridge the divides between food producers and the public, and that the work of RAMP should be clearly communicated and championed. And they felt that the best understanding and firsthand knowledge of the land is held by farmers and other producers, who should be the primary group consulted for RAMP and agriculture discussions in general.

All systems need a supportive culture, environment, and ecosystem to survive. Participants felt that agriculture was not valued, respected, or considered integral to the regional and provincial economy. How agriculture is viewed, valued, and how decisions are made going forward to support the sector will play an essential role in the success of RAMP. Participants emphasized that RAMP would be successful if it could address the 'us vs. them' mindset, and create respectful, collaborative relations.

Education, communication, collaboration and ongoing dialogue will create an environment where stakeholders can 'celebrate what we can achieve with Agriculture by working together, collectively and for the good of all.'

1. Introduction

Agriculture is both our legacy and our future.

The Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board (EMRB)² is currently developing a critical piece of our Region's 2044 Growth Plan *Reimagine. Plan. Build*. This important body of work, called the **Regional Agriculture Master Plan (RAMP)**, will help counties, towns and cities in the Edmonton Metropolitan Region effectively plan for the future of agriculture and the agriculture sector.

Agriculture has important historical, cultural, and economic roots in this Region, and is foundational to our Region's future prosperity. The RAMP is intended to provide consistent policy direction to help manage land use for the future of the agriculture sector, ensure food security, attract investment and talent, create jobs, and build on our history to create even more economic potential for this Region with the growth of the agri-foods industry.

The RAMP Task Force (a committee of elected officials from the EMRB directing the development of RAMP) undertook a stakeholder engagement process to hear perspectives and insights to help inform the development of land-use policies for RAMP.

The Task Force wanted to hear from stakeholders in the Region who would be affected or impacted by land use policies in support of the agriculture sector. Stakeholder engagement provided an opportunity to converse with those who have a vested interest in the future of agriculture and the food economy in our Region. The goals of the stakeholder engagement sessions were to:

- Seek perspectives on how to enable the growth of the agricultural sector.
- Understand what kinds of opportunities and challenges the agriculture sector and landowners are facing.
- Seek input on an approach to developing RAMP and addressing the policy objectives.
- Gather feedback to contribute to provincial plans for investment in agri-food and other value-added agriculture initiatives.

A broad range of regional stakeholders including farmers, ranchers, landowners, small business owners, government officials, agriculture and food organizations, land developers, and research institutions were invited to provide input through virtual and in person sessions as well as written submissions. Stakeholders were invited to participate through direct emails and letters from EMRB and the thirteen member municipalities, newspaper ads, notices on member municipalities and EMRB websites, road signs, and social media.

The RAMP Stakeholder Engagement team is also in the process of engaging Indigenous councils in the Region. These conversations are being conducted in a virtual session with Indigenous leaders as their schedules and process allows.

² For more information about RAMP and the EMRB, please visit letstalkRAMP.ca

The input stakeholders provided into this work will shape our Region for years to come – it is a legacy for future generations and for the future of agriculture in this Region.



Engagement Highlights



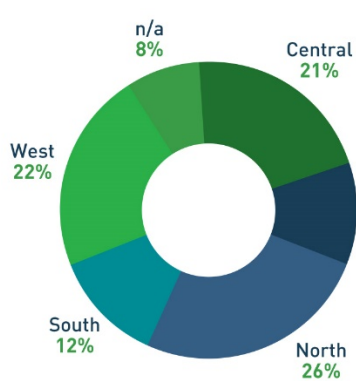
97
total responses
(including 21 written submissions)



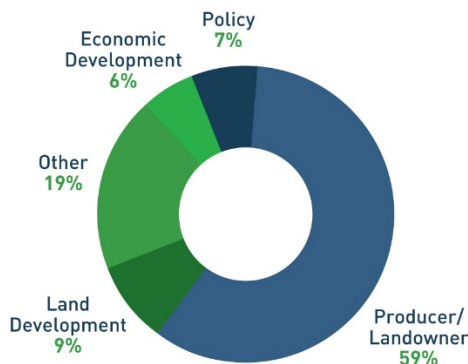
15
virtual engagement sessions



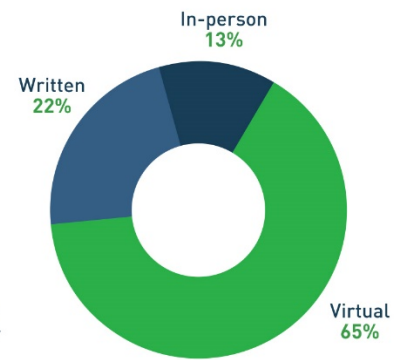
3
in-person engagement sessions
(2 in Parkland County and 1 in Sturgeon County)



Participants by sub-region



Participants by stakeholder type



Participation Method

LEGEND

- East** - Strathcona County, Fort Saskatchewan
- South** - Leduc County, Beaumont, City of Leduc, Devon
- North** - Sturgeon County, Morinville, St. Albert
- West** - Parkland County, Spruce Grove, Stony Plain
- Central** - Edmonton

2. Participant Profile

Participants had several characteristics that led to the richness of the conversation and provided depth and breadth to the data collected. The consistent, underlying thread was a feeling of being deeply tied to the land. **Participants were passionate about agriculture, and deeply rooted in the land and farming.** This was also true of non-producers. They valued agriculture and expressed dismay at recent developments in the Region that saw agricultural lands used for developments that were non-agricultural uses.

- **Most participants were agriculture producers,** followed by policy specialists and developers.
- **There was great diversity among the producers:** cow and calf operations, mixed farming, crop producers, potato farmers, market gardeners, organic farm operators, egg producers (including quail), tree and landscape gardeners, seed cleaning operators, and those interested in value-added agriculture.
- **Producers were proud multigenerational farmers,** with operations going back 3 or more generations. Many had been farming the land more than 50 years, some over 100 years.
- The majority of participants were new and younger farmers, and planning on passing the farm operations to their children and family members. Others have already started the process to continue the family farm for another generation or are nearing the end of their career and transitioning out of farming. (The age of participants is notable. This age group is notoriously difficult to engage. For this stakeholder exercise, they showed up and tried to encourage others to attend.)

3. What We Heard – Findings from RAMP Stakeholder Engagement

The Growth Plan specifically directs the EMRB to develop a RAMP and to develop consistent, regional policies to address the following three objectives for agriculture:

1. Identify and conserve an adequate supply of prime agricultural lands to provide a secure local food source for future generations.
2. Minimize the fragmentation and conversion of prime agricultural lands for non-agricultural uses.
3. Promote diversification and value-added agriculture production and plan infrastructure to support the agricultural sector and regional food system.

The objectives recognize all forms of agriculture are critically important, including primary production, processing, and value-added agri-foods.

These three objectives and how to achieve them were the basis of the discussions with stakeholders. A [PowerPoint presentation](#) exploring the objectives and policy approach for RAMP was interspersed with facilitated discussion questions with the participants. The PowerPoint presentation was delivered “live” during the virtual and in-person sessions, and through video posted on the letstalkRAMP.ca website for

written submissions. The findings outlined in the following sections reflect what was learned from the live sessions as well as the written submissions.

3.1 Overall Reactions to a Regional Plan for Agriculture

Participants in all sessions expressed overall strong support for RAMP and saw value in having a Regional Agriculture Master Plan. In particular, they agreed with the objectives presented in the EMRB Regional Growth Plan and recognized how those objectives, if realized, would strengthen agriculture in the Region and redefine agriculture as a valued, respected sector.

Sticking to the goals is paramount.

I like this. Agricultural land, once you convert it, is next to impossible to get back. Once you lose the agricultural families it's hard to get them back. This [RAMP] protects what we have.

I was very happy to hear about RAMP and the goal to pay greater attention to our Region's food and farming system. Food and farming are critically important and have long been undervalued and underappreciated in Alberta; this has meant not only missed economic opportunities, but also risk to our food security.

While participants supported RAMP and the ideas behind the initiative, they wanted to see more detail on how it would be implemented. Participants thought the underlying policy areas of the plan need to be more fully defined, detailed, and adjusted to fit the objectives presented.

Participants agreed with the objectives and focused on key words and phrases in the objectives. For example, the phrase “provide secure local food source for future generations” drew considerable discussion on food sovereignty, and the importance of people understanding where their food came from. Maintaining local food security was a top priority for participants.



I think it goes back to the objectives, securing local food sources. Do we want local food sources only for citizens of the Edmonton Region? Do we want community enrichment and quality of life? Do we want economic output? That all has different answers. You can select and chose what you are growing and how you classify land; certain types of agriculture are more economically valuable versus the value of being able to feed ourselves.

Participants were skeptical of RAMP’s ability to effectively implement the policies once it went to the local level to be interpreted. There was a desire for RAMP to have ‘teeth’ and be empowered to strongly influence the way their local municipalities and counties implemented the overarching policy at the local level. There was a theme of mistrust and a history of disappointments between participants and their local governments. A number of participants stated that local land development decisions often “followed the money” and circumvented policies intended to protect prime agricultural land. Several examples were cited from across the Region.

Participants felt that while RAMP acknowledged the significance of agriculture, it needed to reflect the needs of the next generation of farmers more strongly.

I think they have to look at what’s happening for the next generations. If they want agriculture in the area, they need a plan in place to help new farmers to be able to make this work. Without that, all this doesn’t matter. Might as well just pave the earth unless they think of something to help the new farmers and keep the succession going.

There are lots of young farmers out there, some starting from scratch. They have huge opportunities with farmers retiring, and high capacity relatively cheap machinery for purchase. Their net dollar value per acre is better than many established farmers.


Agriculture has an uncertain future. In the discussion guide, this was phrased as urban expansion creating uncertainty, but there's also uncertainty in who the farmers will be. We have some stats, something like 80% of farms will have to transition to another generation of farmers, due to retirement in the next decade. We need to look at who they are growing for, what they are growing, who they are, we need to look at that and how we transition knowledge and these businesses.


3.2 Challenges That Can Be Addressed Through RAMP

Between 2015 and 2018, EMRB-member counties held stakeholder engagement sessions to inform their local agriculture plans, and a list of challenges facing the agriculture sector were developed from agriculture producers' comments and concerns. Stakeholders in the RAMP engagements sessions were asked to identify the most important challenges from this list, as well as any that were missed. These challenges are listed in the RAMP Discussion Guide (see Appendix B.)

Participants affirmed that the RAMP objectives and policy areas had the potential to address the challenges identified in the Discussion Guide. At the same time, they expressed that the **'low priority' placed on agriculture** and the **'lack of a voice'** for the sector could be a barrier to achieving these objectives, especially given the 'ongoing urban-rural friction' and the sense that developers are setting the agenda.

The most important challenges identified from the list by participants were:

- Agriculture is viewed as a low or non-priority.
- Agriculture has an uncertain long-term future in the Region.
- Declining political influence.
- The lack of a "voice" for the agriculture and food industry.
- Land use planning.
- Ongoing friction in urban-rural areas.
- Conservation of agricultural land.
- Topsoil management.
- Environmental issues.
- Complex regulatory environment.
- Value-added and diversification challenges – and opportunities.

Preserve the black soil zone. The black gold is the black soil in the area. Too much land is disappearing into nonagricultural uses on land that's prime pieces of land, they shouldn't be put into acreages or urban settlements.

Agriculture is viewed as a low or non-priority. That has to be addressed, that's how we all survive. We got to push for the importance of agriculture for all of us as a society.

We have all this great topsoil, and the cities are right in the middle of those zones and just keep eating it up. I'd say conservation of agricultural land is important; once you dig up topsoil it's never the same.

If we have number 1 and 2 soil, that's a valuable resource. If we let 1 and 2 go, then what remains is not as productive and requires more input. We don't have much of that soil in this country. That should be an off-limit resource. There's not much of it.

Participants were asked to identify challenges that were missing from the list provided. They acknowledged that agriculture was an increasingly complex system that included issues of maintaining biodiversity, new farming techniques, market fluctuations and emerging issues such as access to labor and climate change.

Their responses included:

- Climate change will have a significant impact on the future of agriculture in the Region, sometimes positively (longer growing season) and sometimes negatively (more drought).
- Urban sprawl must be addressed, and there must be more focus on densification.
- Developers stripping land and not developing for years.
- Local food security.
- Lack of or disrespectful communication.
- Access to farmland, especially with large farm equipment.

- Ensuring that land rights are maintained for landowners.
- Economics associated with farming, including labor challenges and future skills needed.
- Urban agriculture was a challenge.
- Lack of incentives for farmers to keep their land as agricultural land, especially when they retire.
- Weeds on public land, or land that is waiting to be developed.
- Large scale commercial farms are prioritized over smaller, locally focused farms.
- Non-uniform taxation, specifically the City of Edmonton taxing agricultural buildings when no other jurisdiction in the Region does.


Two challenges were discussed the most by participants:


- Food security and local food production, and
- Feeling disrespected due to ongoing friction in the urban and rural areas.

Food security, local food production and buying local

Participants would like a strategy that addresses local food security, especially in the face of major market disruptions like COVID-19 and climate change. Central to this discussion was preserving agricultural land, regardless of whether it was in urban or rural areas, restricting development to nonproductive agricultural land, and limiting urban sprawl. There is a growing interest and demand from the public to be more connected to their food and be more involved, whether that be through small-scale gardening, shopping at farmers markets, U-pick, or other direct-to-consumer sales. Several participants suggested creating a regional food hub for smaller producers and noted that this may create a potential conflict with the status quo, large-scale food industry. They suggested that a strategy supporting direct sales to consumers would get pressure from commercial grocers, who pay significant taxes.

Participants would welcome a strategy that supported all levels of agriculture, from big production to direct to consumer sales in a value-added environment.


People are getting up and going to farms and getting produce and doing things like the U-pick. We need people in the cities to understand why they need farms.


We have various groups of newcomers, almost always not from Canada, and they say, 'you always want to know a farmer, because if you know a farmer you always have something to eat.' They come from countries where they know what it's like

to not have food and deal with scarcity.



Buy local. Why go to box stores for your green stuff? There's lots of independent garden centers. That box store stuff isn't local suppliers, that's all coming from the USA, Mexico, BC, or Ontario. RAMP should incentivize grocers to buy local.



I know Toronto has a bylaw that states all plants/trees bought for planting in municipalities and developments have to come from something like 100 km of Toronto, and only if what they need is unavailable, are they allowed to look farther out. The majority of Edmonton's stock comes from BC. There are great growers here in Edmonton and Calgary, and the City just won't buy from us.



Will the RAMP add 'buy local' to municipal spending? So not only supporting my market, but also supporting u-pick and farmers markets, and maybe having grants for farmers markets so it's easier for people to access and sell at.



Feeling disrespected due to ongoing friction in urban rural areas

Participants reported feeling disrespected and not valued, especially in areas where rural and urban properties were in close proximity to one another. Some participants suggested that RAMP could focus on creating a collaborative relationship between rural and urban populations. They thought that if people understood the role agriculture played in the economy that perhaps they would respect the role of the farmer.

Participants also felt disrespected by administrators within their municipalities. Local administrators were seen to favor the interests of land developers over the interests of agricultural producers; several examples of this were provided. Participants expressed frustration with the ongoing lack of communication between municipal administration and offered several examples to illustrate.



There is a lack of understanding, awareness, and education around agriculture and

a disconnect for most people in understanding where their food actually comes from.



We need to educate urban residents; we need to change the culture of agriculture and how we are viewed.



Relationships with non-agriculture people in rural areas, we are dealing with that on a weekly basis. It's not easy when you have people around who don't understand, but we propagate the problem when we subdivided and make acreages. You have to live with both sides.



Trying to get out to the public how important our agriculture is and how safe our food is, that's a struggle. Getting buy-in from the public is a challenge.



I don't know if it's arrogance or ignorance that is the biggest challenge. Either way, we have to educate. We need to stop the 'us and them' scenario.



I feel keeping the farm family viable is number 1. By that, I mean our numbers have decreased from 5% to 1.5 % of the general population, so our voices have decreased, both politically and economically. We used to have a strong culture-need to keep our culture, keep that strong, and be concise with land use.



We can hardly get out of our driveway with our equipment, there's no signage for us saying you are in an agricultural area for example. Between traffic and the bicycles, there's so many; every day here, I get the finger.

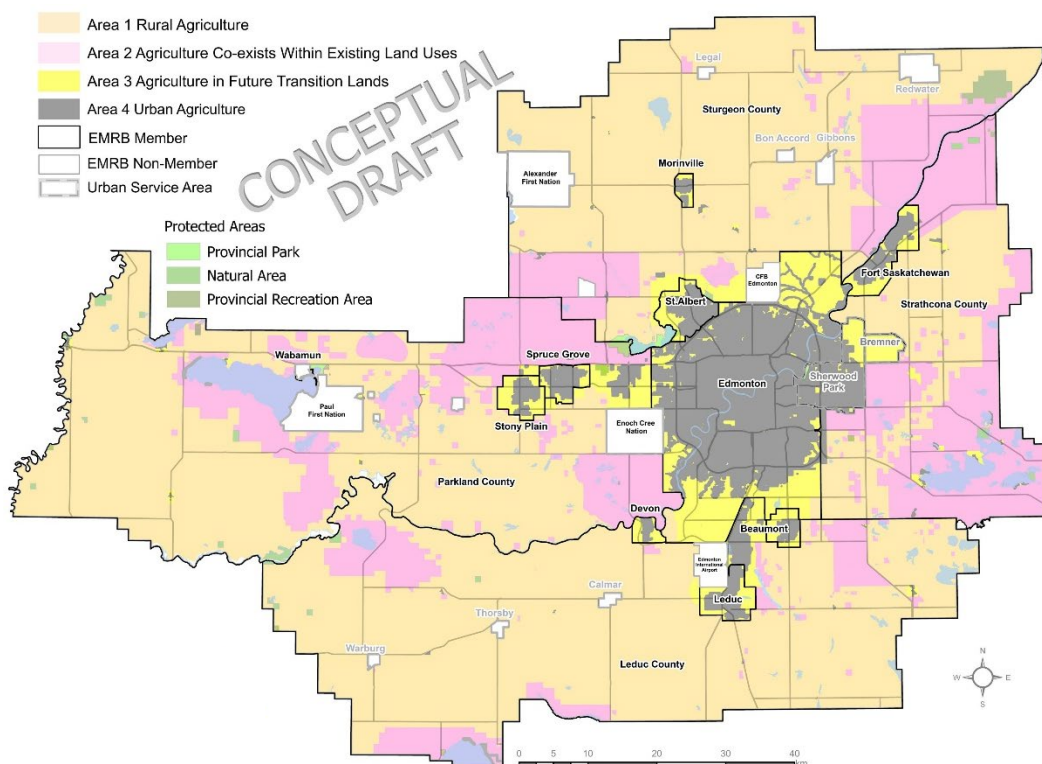


Participants emphasized the need for ongoing dialogue, education, communication, and collaboration to mend the ‘us vs them’ divide. They urged RAMP to focus on and celebrate what could be accomplished together.

3.3 Geographical Approach to Policy Areas

To guide the development of policies that will create a plan for agriculture on a regional level, the RAMP Task Force called for a unique, workable, made-in-the-Region approach. Four geographic areas were identified (called “Policy Areas”) that have common existing land uses. The idea is that regional land use policies can then be focused on the features and agriculture uses common to each area. Stakeholders in the RAMP sessions were asked to comment on the approach and whether it made sense to them, as well as whether they had concerns or felt there were gaps in the approach.

There was strong support for the geographical approach to Policy Areas, and participants were quick to acknowledge it as a concept – they felt it had merit and was an innovative approach to land use planning.



Participants appreciated that RAMP was a plan for agriculture for the entire Region and were supportive of need to consider the location of rural acreages, country residential and non-agricultural uses away from prime agricultural areas. They supported the inclusion of agriculture in the Regional Growth Plan, and in some cases were surprised and relieved that the Growth Plan included strong recommendations about minimizing further country residential development.

Participants appreciated that the approach considered local conditions and different types of land, some of which may or may not be useful agriculturally.

It's a good start, I see it as practical, this where we are at right now. We got here without a strategic plan in place. I like this concept and process.

I agree it makes sense to designate by geography.

It's probably the better way to go, in areas, it allows you to make allocations in areas and have some certainty. Former green belt approaches, it used to be, make a ring around the city, and it is what it is. But that doesn't take everything in. This is a much better approach.

[Organic producers] number one challenge is access to land, especially for vegetable production and market garden production, they tend to be more successful when they are closer to urban centers. But unfortunately, I'm not demonizing developers, but they are chewing up land in the urban sprawl. This geographical approach could help that.

Participants also thought that the geographical approach could go even further, particularly where there may be poor land directly adjacent to productive land. Participants also encouraged an extra layer of analysis that would take into consideration more localized information in addition to soil quality and capability, identifying watersheds, drainage, productivity, and microclimates as examples. Most agreed that a more detailed analysis of agricultural lands is needed (quarter section by quarter section) to be able to identify areas of prime agricultural lands.

The broad categories supplied do not account for all that is happening in these areas. Some land identified as rural agriculture isn't highly productive and could be put to better use. Some land ear-marked for development is class one soil and should not be developed. For decision-making purposes there needs to be more precision. Land that has already been removed from production but is not currently in use could be good for value-added industry or densification - but might be refused if not recognized as such.

One size does not fit all...there's pockets, that piece of land is good. But half a mile down that land is crap, let people build houses there. There could be some conflict. But I think there's the opportunity for mixing.

The 'big picture' view doesn't address the fact that there are small- to medium-sized pockets that could be used for other purposes; a quarter section of swamp land in the middle of a prime agricultural region could house a lot of people; instead, we look for big blocks of land to turn into major metropolitan centres.

There's a level of detail missing, maybe just another layer, a bio-regional approach. Looking at waterways, topography, microclimates, all of that is critical.

Agricultural land can, in some cases, act as a buffer to protect water ways and drainage and things like that. I'd be interested in seeing that. If you get to the final straws and haven't consulted an agronomist or geologist, the plan would only be half-baked.

Participants suggested that poor land use planning in the past “created this mess” and that a regional approach may facilitate wiser decisions in the future. There were issues with annexation of prime agricultural lands. For example, the recent annexation of Leduc County agricultural lands called into question the RAMP approach, as the annexation led to taxation issues as well as pressure from

developers and utilities. Participants saw this as a lack of regard or understanding for agriculture as a systemic issue that “must be dealt with”.

Participants felt that “kept in production until needed for future development” did not create the certainty that RAMP suggested it would. Developers also questioned why land would be annexed with no plans for development.

We don't know what they're doing. They won't tell us. I've called the City dozens of times...

We have nowhere to grow. They annexed us. We don't know if we should build new shops or anything. We don't know what's happening and if we should build, I think we will have to move, but there's no land to buy anyway.

So now we are taxed for our agricultural buildings in Edmonton, which makes it hard to farm here, which no other county does. Just land taxes right. In Sturgeon, you don't pay taxes on your buildings, but you pay in Edmonton, they charge tax on your buildings.

This led participants to reiterate that a regional approach would facilitate wiser decisions, as there is a need for clear and definitive land use planning to provide certainty for agriculture. There was an emphasis on standardizing policies across the Region to ensure consistency in applying the RAMP objectives.

The first way to validate the RAMP as a success to farmers and public would be to standardize ag land subdivision bylaws and protocols between all the Regions/counties/cities. It is counterproductive to allow one owner of zoned ag land to subdivide while the landowner across the county line cannot.

The devil is in the details and I'm concerned about that, every county will approach it differently.

Participants suggested that land use plans should be strategic to locate non agriculture uses on poorer quality soils, and a distinction made between site-specific agriculture needs (e.g., specialty crops like potatoes), land-based needs (e.g., cereal crops), or building-based agriculture needs (e.g., cannabis; mushrooms).

The area defined as “Agriculture within Future Transition Lands” (aka “Canary Yellow”) which surrounds urban centers is understood by those in the farming community as lands “about to be lost in the near future.” Some participants felt that RAMP should shift its focus more to protecting the areas designated “Rural Agriculture”.

The canary yellow, you'll never farm it again. It's gone. The land close to the city is the least of your worries; the land on the outside in the prime agricultural land, that's what you need to protect, we already know it's over for us. The writing is on the wall in our canary yellow area.

We're not respected. Canary yellow lands have been taken out of production, stripped and then sit undeveloped. And then developers want to rent it back to us to farm when its no longer possible.

There's not much what we can do, in preserving land, unless it's in that last yellow section. Pale yellow, rural agriculture. We don't need to lament what's lost but look forward to what we can do. Especially the land outside of speculation

Some stakeholders believed planning for 25-50 years was fine for the “Agriculture Co-exists Within Existing Land Uses” Policy Area, but the “Rural Agriculture” (light yellow) Policy Area should be 50-100 years.

Land use planning is short term, whereas Agriculture is long term.

Others felt that municipalities should be encouraged to increase density rather than build subdivisions.

And limit growth to pink sections because that's where municipalities should be growing.

I understand cities want to grow in a certain way, but if that means that all the best agricultural land is developed, that's not the best approach.

I'm always concerned that we are spreading out, and you can't grow more land. I'm concerned about how fast the urban sprawl is and changing of land uses. Land is a nonrenewable resource. That's my issue, why are we going out, not up?

Participants welcomed Urban Agriculture as a policy area and acknowledged that it needed considerable effort applied if it were to be included alongside the other three policy areas. They felt that a greater emphasis on the Urban Agriculture Policy Area would add depth and diversity to a strong regional food system. An Urban Agriculture strategy that set goals, tactics, performance measures, and outcomes would help position Urban Agriculture in RAMP. They urged the Task Force to think outside the box and consider integrating farmlands and food production into the urban environments. They felt there should be more consideration for agriculture directly integrated into and adjacent to large urban centers, such as the University of Alberta farm in Edmonton or the example of Les Jardins Carya/MacDonald Farm in Montreal.

Participants wanted more limitations on development, and stronger protections for agricultural land regardless of what RAMP geographic area it fell under.

There is so much opportunity for Urban Agriculture. While you are looking at prime agricultural lands, you should also be looking at prime growing areas in urban environments. The pandemic crisis has left many buildings empty. How might we repurpose those for food production?

For the most part it makes sense. I think everyone understands that part. Some parts, in the yellow, newly annexed, some of that is the best in Alberta. That should be conserved. Look for other directions around the city where land is not viable for farmland to do developments. That's my main take from this.

Being so close to the city, my view is no different, that area shouldn't be developed.

Participants, while supporting the geographical approach, also expressed concern it could limit landowner's property rights and how they could use or sell their land.

I have some reservation around the concept, that it seems like, this plan is looking for an effort to not allow farmers to sell or subdivide land. Let's keep it in nice big blocks until the city needs nice big blocks and gobble it up. It might handcuff retiring farmers.

When you take a paintbrush and make a swatch across the map, you need flexibility. Every quarter needs to be dealt with differently, that's important. So, flexibility has to be there. You can certainly affect bottom lines.

Farming in close proximity to municipalities was a complicated proposition. Producers shared many concerns about the difficulties with equipment access, and the rude behavior of motorists who felt inconvenienced by slow moving farm equipment.

Roads and right of ways need to be clear to operate. Farm machinery is big, trees encroaching on roads prevent us from moving machinery.

But for farmers with lands at the fringe of the city, there should be some sort of tax incentive. If they farm there, some incentive because the whole system is trying to push them out. They should be allowed to farm if they are still producing food. They should have a tax incentive.

Most important is people who live on subdivisions, that they should understand farming. It makes noise, smell, dust.

Participants acknowledged and were troubled by the ‘us vs. them’ mentality that exists. In order for RAMP to be successful, the polarized mindset needs to be resolved.

Its very us vs them, urban vs rural, that’s a huge challenge, but how do you marry them? I agree with preserving the land. But we haven’t addressed being collaborative. We need the urbans to build up and support the rurals.

The challenge is the us vs them mentality that needs to be broken down, and communities need to figure out what's in the best interest of all of us.

3.4 Defining the Characteristics of Prime Agricultural Land

RAMP is directed by the EMRB Growth Plan to “identify and conserve an adequate supply of prime agricultural lands.” Identifying agricultural lands based on soil classification is one way to define prime agriculture lands, but there are also other characteristics that make agricultural areas productive. Stakeholders were asked to discuss and list other characteristics they thought should be considered in the identification and the conservation of prime agricultural lands.

Participants strongly agreed that prime agricultural land should be protected and preserved for agricultural use and emphasized the importance of identifying and protecting high value specialty crops in the Region. They also urged consideration of large contiguous lands as prime agricultural areas, specialty and intensive crop areas, pastureland, and also open spaces for wildlife. Participants appreciated the focus on conserving prime agricultural land and acknowledged that a complex system needed this rigor and identified the need to ensure the definition of agriculture was broad and inclusive.



To conserve an adequate supply of ag land, large parcels need to be preserved. Conserving large groupings of large parcels is even more important. A 1/4 section (160 acres) is great, but 1/2 sections (320 acres) and in rare cases, full sections (640 acres/1 mile x 1 mile) are most important. Larger parcels allow farmers to be more efficient, be more environmentally responsible, and be more precise in application. Large parcels also provide a buffer for people that may find farming unsavoury.



The majority of participants highlighted the significance and value of the land in the Region, and why it was different than anywhere else in western Canada. The Region exists in a post glacial area that resulted in a particularly rich soil quality; it should not be underestimated for what can be grown here. Participants felt that the soil in the Region deserved special classification and protection due to its valuable qualities.



Our soil is top of the grade around the world. It took 10 -15,000 years to develop topsoil following glacial retreat ... It's not just DIRT, soil is a living medium supporting life. We cannot be cavalier with development. This is a rare, precious asset.



Participants agreed that there was more to categorizing prime agricultural land than soil quality.. At the top of the list was the quality and volume of production. Participants suggested that RAMP consider Agricultural Financial Services Corporation (AFSC) as a resource to supply data on yield and quality at the quarter section – this type of accurate data would assist in identifying the best fields. Other criteria included:

- Value of product and productivity.
- Quality and consistency of crop production.
- Contiguous land in a single, unfragmented tract.
- 'Flat' land.

- Microclimates.
- Differences in elevation that result in more frost-free growing days.
- Access to water and infrastructure, such as irrigation.
- Access to roadways for heavy equipment.
- History of the land: generations farming, average value of crops, contribution to the economy.
- Proximity to a workforce and job creation.
- Drainage, including infrastructure such as drainage tiling.
- Irrigation, access to water, and impacts on the waterways should be considered as part of the classifications.


Also look for municipalities to encourage respect for waterways, wetlands, streams, and to put a buffer in the riparian area. That’s an important area for mitigating floods and droughts and serve as wildlife habitat. Consider the water ways and where the water is being stored and working throughout the landscape.


Participants noted there should be recognition that poor soil classification doesn’t mean low productivity, especially when using different agricultural techniques or value-added processing. Some felt that as long as food was being produced, it should be considered as agricultural land. Soil quality can also be improved by using regenerative farming practices.


Farmers in the zone have been heavily utilizing regenerative ag practices for many years. The Sturgeon Valley Soil Savers pioneered minimum- and zero-till practices in the 90s.



Production doesn’t need to be on prime agricultural land. You could put a greenhouse on gumbo. Location is important. You need people willing to run the greenhouse.


Listen to the producers, they know what they have, there is lots of land that's just clay, build on that. Why would you build houses on a foot of topsoil? There's a lot of places with just gumbo. Build there.

One thing, we can anticipate we will have more periods of drought or at least in the summer. So, access to water will be important.

Being a farm owner in the co-exist area of the industrial heartland, it is so vital and important to conserve the prime farmland located next to the Sturgeon River and North Saskatchewan River. These rivers provide sustainable and critical value to sustain the farms and farmland use in the area.

So, to grow crops you need prime agricultural land, you need good climate, maybe microclimate, and you need water, and you need drainage.

You can't have a vibrant agricultural economy if you don't conserve your best lands. There are amazing lands around the Edmonton metropolitan area. It really needs to be the balance of development, agriculture, and natural environment. The Growth Plan talks about balancing those things. Those natural lands need to be conserved as well. We shouldn't encourage development onto marginal agricultural land just to produce. Especially for water quality, those natural lands are needed for the health of the watershed, which agriculture uses.

Ecologically important areas should be recognized, especially areas that contribute to the watershed since agriculture is highly reliant on water resources.

Another thing - don't just say, it's not good for agriculture, let's develop it. The

watershed and the slough areas, those are more fragile, and they do more for the water cycle than the agricultural lands. It needs to be a holistic approach.



Emphasis was also placed on the importance of irrigation, particularly along the northeast corner of Edmonton and along the Sturgeon River. Irrigation, access to water, and drainage are crucial for prime agricultural land, and Edmonton has several pieces of land along the North Saskatchewan River that are unique and can produce high value horticultural crops. Consistent irrigation would increase the yield and quality of crops in the Region.



If there's anything RAMP can help with, it's the North Saskatchewan River, that opportunity for irrigation, and that's huge, and I think we need to make a note of how important the river is to our agricultural land, especially horticulture land. We irrigate 500 acres of potatoes. Without that, we wouldn't be successful and wouldn't be in business.



3.5 Fragmentation and Conversion

The EMRB Growth Plan also directs RAMP to “minimize the fragmentation and conversion of prime agricultural lands for non-agricultural purposes.” Stakeholders in the RAMP sessions were asked to share their ideas, perspectives, and input about how and what lands could or should be subdivided (fragmentation) and/or used for non-agricultural purposes (conversion).

Fragmentation and conversion were the areas that caused the most angst, uneasiness, and divergent responses from participants. While on one hand, they fiercely believed in the preservation of prime agricultural land, they also struggled with estate planning for their families, and retirement planning for themselves.

Minimizing the fragmentation of ag land is probably the hardest goal; this also is the most important goal.

Conversion should be avoided for top producing land, or for lands providing specific local needs. Fragmentation should be a concern where the disruption to farming would make it difficult to continue farming. Careful planning and the inclusion of experts to supply advice in how to avoid disrupting farming should be part of any developments that go forward.

Participants thought that in some instances, fragmentation and conversion would be appropriate. Examples included a value-added agricultural processing operation, agri-tourism, farm to fork, u-pick operations, or a small industrial operation in an abandoned equipment yard. Most common, however was the example of the need to fragment the home and yard when wanting to purchase additional lands for farming. Participants also noted challenges with transitioning the land for succession.

I don't need another entire farm; I just need more farmland. The way it is now, that house can't be sold just by itself. If my parents want to sell the house, and if I want to buy just the land, I must buy the house. If my neighbor wants to sell, I must buy his farmyard too. If I have to buy a farmyard every time I want to buy a piece of land, that land is more likely to go to non-farmers. The last thing we want is another yard or rental house. We need to look at the big picture. If someone wants to buy the whole thing, great, but if someone doesn't want to buy the yard, it makes sense to subdivide the yard and sell it. Otherwise, people could never afford to buy that land.

The RAMP needs to be aware that farmers do not want to be landlords, being able to subdivide and sell older developed yard sites is a necessity.

Participants thought that fragmentation and conversion should be allowed in circumstances that create value-added opportunities and to allow a farm to better integrate into a community.

So, turn it into processing or warehousing? Yeah, well, if you look at the cheese factory in Sturgeon County, that's a great example. I believe in the farmer being able to sell direct to consumer. It's vital for many reasons but mostly socially, visiting with community members.

Several participants suggested fragmentation and conversion should be considered on a case-by-case basis, since every situation will be different. Fragmentation and conversion should also provide flexibility to allow farmers to evolve, as the nature of farms and farming is changing along with agricultural practices.

Participants also discussed landowners' ability to exercise their rights and manage their property.

Let's talk about the elephant in the room—economics. Are you really going to tell farmers that they can't sell their land? That land is their retirement fund.

Historically, one might suggest understanding what's happened, you should "follow the money." True land use policy discussion must face the financial implications and challenge of urban development pressure vs agricultural use.

What do we do about the landowner who transfers the land to a grandchild? And that grandchild loves the farm but has no plans on working it. So, they subdivide and sell...How can we make that work for everyone?

Some felt that landowners should be compensated if RAMP restricts their ability to use or sell their land. This generated discussion about land trusts, cooperatives, and innovative strategies for win-win solutions.

I think of [participant x] on the edge of the urban and rural divide, and what sacrifices are we willing to make as a society? Can we say beyond this line, you aren't allowed to use it for urban growth anymore? But then there'll be a reduction in the property value, and what will we do, would we pay them a premium for that money they were expecting? We need those conversations. Who are we willing to disappoint and who aren't we? There's a lot of conflict.

Recognize that conserving land requires the hard work of identifying that land and determining how to compensate farmers for the decision to prevent development on farmlands, so that all farmers can be onside with protecting the land. Agriculturalists need support in long-term planning for retirement, so that selling the land is not their only way to afford to retire.

Participants felt fragmentation and conversion should only be allowed on nonproductive agricultural land or in yellow/pink zones that are already ear-marked for future development.

It's rare that all parts of the land can be farmed. I think in many prime areas, there's swamp, trees, whatever. If there is a natural division for acreages, that makes sense, it's not farmed anyway. It's ludicrous to whack off a chunk of prime agricultural land and build houses.

Fragmentation is not all bad, though. Discreet development where poorer lands and patches of unproductive land is developed instead of vast pieces of land with good and bad soil alike, would be preferable, and possible. Developers have just had too much input.

You need a guideline to lead the people in the right way, if there's a swampy area, or hilly, overgrown with trees, non-prime agricultural land, I could see that. But I've seen good land being cut.

Participants also felt that municipalities were the ‘worst offenders’ when it came to fragmentation and conversion, ignoring plans and policies to protect agricultural lands. They gave several examples of a municipality deciding to develop further on prime agricultural land. Others suggested that the rules are often disregarded by government administrators because the municipalities have a vested interest to increase the tax base through additional housing, which has more value than the land alone. They felt that agriculture must be viewed as development as well.



When we farm that land, we are developing it. Agriculture should count and be considered as development.



The RAMP objective concerning fragmentation and conversion is welcome, although municipalities credibility was repeatedly called into question. There is significant mistrust and skepticism on the ability to achieve that objective.



Bulldozer diplomacy has stifled the concern of county residents, some county councillors and like-minded Albertans. Reportedly some of the owners of the poorer agricultural land in the area are eager to sell but instead prime agriculture land was identified for development. This situation underscores the importance of the objectives of RAMP.



When the future urban development area was chosen, consultant studies, which recommended an area of poor farmland, were ignored. As well, the County’s own Agricultural Master Plan which states, ‘The conversion or fragmentation of large tracts of primary or unique agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses to accommodate growth...will only be done as a last resort’ was also ignored. Located in the Thick Black Soil Zone of Alberta, nearly 90% of its area is the highest soil class, the most productive soil. And it was approved.



We were disappointed when the County put in their whole industrial area and there was no consideration at that time about the quality of the soil, it was just tax revenue for the county.



That how it starts out. They say they'll add value-added, and then it's just an excuse for a bigger acreage. They are supposed to produce a financial plan, get your value-added plan approved, and then they just never proceed with it.

Every acre of beautiful topsoil that gets stripped off, and then a developer comes in, years later--what can we do to disincentivize that? Or make the city expand in areas where they don't chew that up?

Resources extraction, especially of aggregates such as gravel and sand also had mixed reactions. Participants felt it was important for RAMP to not prohibit access to these resources and believed land could be rehabilitated in some cases back to an agricultural use.

There are uses of land that would help agricultural land, and they should be considered as primary uses of the land if they improve agricultural productivity, like resource extraction and topographical reconstruction to something better. I'd also be concerned if prime agricultural land could never be used for non-agriculture uses, like temporary resource extraction.

Agricultural projects are often a key part of the plans to reclaim former gravel pits. Within the Capital Region, there are former gravel pits that yield as much 95% of agricultural production, compared to before aggregate extraction.

Fragmentation and conversion to country residential was also another issue, which led to friction between the new residents and farmers in the area. Some participants were adamant that this type of development should be stopped, with no additional prime agricultural lands converted to country residential, and subdivisions limited to less than five acres on prime agricultural lands (ideally 2.5 acres), provided the homestead could be sub-divided off.

Participants also felt that municipalities should have consistent rules for development, and not be able to subdivide or strip the soil until the developer is “shovel ready”. They felt there is a need to consider

the impact of an application to subdivide or convert prime agricultural lands on the surrounding lands, including the use, scale, size, infrastructure needs, and transportation requirements of those operations.

“*Every acre of beautiful topsoil gets stripped off. And then the developer comes in and it just sits there. The farmland is ruined.*”

“*There should be no further "country residential" development approved in the Capital Region. Prime farmland is always the target because it's unfragmented and therefore easy to acquire. Also, when a development is approved based upon a density target, each ASP should meet the density targets, not starting out as all single-resident big lot properties with the promise that within a half a century there will be high density areas to compensate.*”

“*There's a lot of traffic, we go down the road in rush hour, we don't get love, we get the opposite. The more houses, the more people, the less agriculture, it works against us.*”

3.6 Value-added Agriculture and Infrastructure Needs

The final objective for RAMP identified in the EMRB Growth Plan is to “promote diversification and value-added agriculture production and plan infrastructure to support the agricultural sector and regional food system.” The EMRB recognizes the potential for agricultural producers in the Edmonton Region to grow, diversify and innovate in the value-added agriculture sector, and that the Region should build the infrastructure improvements to support this growth. Stakeholders in the RAMP engagement sessions were asked to identify the opportunities in the agriculture and value-added agriculture sector and what infrastructure would be needed.

Participants felt that this topic had significant potential and should be an essential plank in any policy document. Participants suggested that a Regional approach was essential for any value-added initiative. They thought that the value-added objective would be a logical starting point for regional collaboration and cooperation and could provide some quick wins for RAMP.

This area generated a great deal of enthusiasm, with participants pointing out that the Edmonton Metropolitan Region was ideally positioned for value-added initiatives.

We are ideally situated for value-added production. We have the best farmland in western Canada, have access to road, rail and air, and are close enough to an urban environment that we could create jobs. We are the perfect candidate for value-added industries.

For processing food? The opportunities are so endless it's ridiculous. Its just your imagination. There is nothing we produce that we can't process ourselves. Its 100% doable.

Participants recognized value-added production was essential to the future growth of the local agriculture industry. They felt that the oil industry was in decline and would not recover, and as the next largest industry in Alberta, the province should switch its focus to agriculture.

They recognized the need to switch to creating more finished products, as opposed to exporting raw materials, and felt as though creating new infrastructure such as irrigation would attract new opportunities in the Region. There were several mentions of the need for small- to medium-sized processing plants for specialty crops like quinoa, hemp, peas, beans and livestock.

Once you have good infrastructure, like irrigation, and can have very productive crops, that incentivises the processors to come. The cart before the horse I guess.

We seem to export a lot of grain. Unfinished or unprocessed grain. So, infrastructure that facilitates doing the processing here, so we are exporting finished products has a lot of potential and will be seen favourably by everyone.

Some participants stated that farmers should diversify based on their perceptions of agriculture.



Promoting diversification has a couple definitions. To a farmer this might mean new crops/livestock or maybe going back to a mixed farm. To a non-farmer this invokes buzz words like ag tourism, organic, regenerative agriculture, etc. Farmers and the market are the ones who should decide how Ag should diversify. The RAMP should not be steering the diversification of ag industry but aiding the direction the market chooses.



As far as agriculture production, all the land is being farmed in our area. So, you won't see any more production. If we want to grow and add value it is with processing plants—keep the processing at home instead of shipping to another country, then buying it back. That is how to get more value and currency. We are not the low-cost producers in the world. The way we can stay competitive is to do more to add value to the products we produce.



Participants believed that this Region has a well-integrated transportation system with good access to rail, roads, airports, and highways. A significant infrastructure concern was rural roads – they felt they were too narrow to accommodate goods movement and large equipment, and it was difficult to access agricultural lands.



I'm already doing it, it's very easy. Infrastructure wise, it's very easy. We just need roads.



In order to plan infrastructure to support the agricultural sector and regional food system we need to talk about it. There are many areas where infrastructure is lacking or poor repair. Power, natural gas and proper roads are needed so that farms can operate and new value-added businesses have a chance to create products and get them to market.



Participants thought that with modern e-commerce, technology and transportation infrastructure, there are near limitless opportunities for small producers to operate without a physical retail location while also being able to market globally.

Participants also believed that value-added processing should be supported and incentivized by local governments, since it creates a significant increase in tax base and jobs.

With today with e-commerce, consumers may only come visit to farm once or twice a year, but we can still sell direct to consumer. We can do physical stores and operate one, and have people come out to it, but you can also just order online and deliver it, so you wouldn't even need a retail location.

As an example, we have 3 quarters in a row. My rough estimate, with value-added processing, and with our U-pick garden, our annual sales, 10-15 million dollars a year range, and employ maybe 100 people, some seasonal. You'd be employing people. It generates taxes.

Participants thought that lack of access to internet in rural communities was a major barrier, and a significant piece of infrastructure that was missing.

But if we are trying to get internet in rural communities, it's important, it's a barrier, and if we want, it's related to density of people, in the future it will be very important.

In the COVID era, having a good web presence is helpful, or even if you want to connect to the city at all.

Internet and communications access its huge. Every morning I get kicked off my internet. I've switched suppliers, it doesn't matter. Urban people take it for granted.

Participants believed that financial and business services were a major piece of infrastructure that was missing, and that the definition of agriculture created barriers to obtaining financing.


If we want to kick start something, could we have a pool of money, a provincial pool of money, to help develop infrastructure, to help this kind of manufacturing and processing get started.



I'm a strong supporter of value-added, but there needs to be people in place to ask the right questions. How much work do you need to do to get consumers to accept the value-added? How big will the project get? How will it meet the needs of the province? There needs to be advisors to see that whatever is put forward is viable.


Participants felt overall that there should be further discussion on additional infrastructure needs for the value-added sector and important to hear from those working in this area.

4. Insights and Advice for RAMP Moving Forward

4.1 Implementation

Participants also thought about the implementation of RAMP, a plan that to them, would address both the challenges and opportunities in the Edmonton Metropolitan Region.

The participants wondered how RAMP policies would be enforced or followed at the municipal or county level. They thought that without sufficient detail, the counties could interpret RAMP inconsistently across the Region. Participants also expressed concerns that developers and industry would continue to have disproportionate influence over land use decisions, tilting the process away from land preservation and reinforcing the low priority of agriculture.

Participants endorsed the plan that, in their words, contains ‘lofty goals that would benefit agriculture.’ They are looking for clarification on implementation roles and seeking assurances that the RAMP would be implemented as written amongst all counties.


How do we know this is going to be implemented consistently among counties? Every county could have their own interpretation. Can EMRB provide assurances that the policy will be viewed through the same lens in every county?


They felt that RAMP needed ‘teeth’ to ensure that different regulatory environments in each jurisdiction should not supersede the intent of RAMP.



When we broke this into the geographical approach, we have these 4 areas, but did we look at different counties with different areas laid aside for different uses, and what their rules are? How will this work?



Based on my experience in dealing with municipal land use planning, if there’s a regional document, it needs to be more than just guidelines and best practices and have teeth and requirements for municipalities to align land use plans with the objectives of RAMP. I think that if there isn’t a firm requirement for municipalities to get on board with preserving agricultural land, local politics will always influence decisions that don’t work with the goals.



Policies with teeth to protect farmland must be put in place while there’s still time. While there’s a “pause,” there’s a chance to re-think what is expendable and what is actually needed for growth. There’s still an opportunity to protect what can never be replaced. We should be long past the time when rural areas are simply seen as land banks for nearby urban centers and developers who like wide-open farmland.





They felt that RAMP would be challenged by the lack of understanding or commitment of local governments or developers, and that these groups were not thinking about the agriculture industry or its importance to the local economy, food security, or even the general well-being of farmers and rural communities. Ultimately, agricultural producers wanted to be more involved and have more consideration from the urban sphere.



All I’m saying is we have to work together, but we need to be included, they aren’t saying what’s happening. Our side isn’t represented.




Thinking balance – how can we as a society balance agriculture and urban development responsibly and sustainably so that both sectors can benefit and thrive, creating a symbiotic relationship?


4.2 Gaps in RAMP


All systems need a supportive culture, environment, and ecosystem to survive. Participants felt that agriculture was not valued, respected, or considered integral to the regional and provincial economy. How agriculture is viewed, valued, and how decisions are made going forward to support the sector will play an essential role in the success of RAMP.

The challenges of “lack of voice”, “agriculture as a non-priority”, and “decline in influence” resonated with participants. They felt the RAMP Task Force may want to give consideration for how RAMP could address this concern.


Participants noted the importance of Indigenous food sovereignty and Indigenous land-use systems, and the vital contributions and learnings that could be gained from engaging with and including Indigenous groups in the Region to contribute to RAMP.

Several participants felt that there were gaps in RAMP with respect to the environment, including the positive and negative effects of climate change broadly and locally, as well as ecological considerations like biodiversity, wildlife habitats, and riparian areas. Some felt the Region should explore and embrace emerging trends in other countries where there is a shift to regenerative farming, agroecology, and the ecological relationships that farming has with the environment. Others felt that these practices, and other advanced measures were already being incorporated into generations-old farming businesses. Others spoke of the important role agriculture plays in watersheds, as well as access to water and water rights as an important factor to consider, especially in the face of climate change.

Several participants suggested that RAMP consult and take into consideration many of the policy and conservation resources available, like transfer of development credits, expansion of conservation easements to include cultivated agricultural lands, and tax incentives from federal programs like the Ecological Gifts programs. Others mentioned ALUS (Alternative Land Use Service), BRIMS (Bio-Resource Information Management System), and the EMRB’s GIS system as resources for identifying land data and environmental aspects of the land.


What I really see missing is recognition of environmental stewardship of the land and the infrastructure that agriculture creates. So, for example, the North Saskatchewan River runs through Parkland county, what role do the farmers have in providing clean water to the citizens of Edmonton? We've covered the usual subjects, but from a sustainability standpoint, we need to look at what environmental infrastructure our farmland creates, and tie back to the vision, how in the future will we promote this area and our local food, so we have something of value for our kids too. You have all the topics that are the usual things, but we are missing the piece around the environmental vision.

Some participants cautioned against the use of the word 'sustainability' suggesting the farmers have achieved standards that extend beyond sustainability.


The buzz word sustainability is loathed by farmers as we are not sustainable. Farmers, and especially farmers within the RAMP mandate surpass sustainability. We are consistently increasing yields and are doing more with less, not sustaining.

4.3 Other Words of Wisdom and Advice

Participants were invited to think about everything they had read and been asked to consider in the sessions, along with their own personal experiences working in the sector and provide one piece of advice to the RAMP Task Force as they move forward. Participants made a number of recommendations, which echoed and reinforced their concerns over protecting agricultural lands and agricultural livelihoods.

Following is a list of common themes. Please see Appendix A for quotes from participants on these themes.

Agricultural land must be conserved for the future

- Land must be conserved responsibly for future generations and to maintain food security. Once prime agricultural land is lost, it is lost forever.

- Conserving agricultural lands in transition zones may cause difficulties for producers who choose to stay in those areas in the future as the land is developed around them, reducing their productivity, and limiting their land uses.
- If agricultural land is to be protected, it needs to make sense economically, and that land should be economically productive to provide incentive for its protection.
- Development should be pushed to nonproductive land. Stripping of land for development creates serious issues, particularly wind erosion picking up dust, weeds, and other contaminants and polluting surrounding areas.
- RAMP should shift its focus to long-term preservation (50 years+) of the lands identified as “Rural Agricultural”. Most farmers understand that urban sprawl is out of control, and land surrounding urban areas will soon be developed, and as such, there is no future for them there.
- Once you convert prime farmland to other uses, it is next to impossible to convert back.
- Development must take into consideration the impact it will have on surrounding land uses.
- Fragmentation should be minimized as much as possible.
- Prime agricultural land must be preserved for future generations of farmers.
- Urban Agriculture is important and needs support. This could include an overall Urban Agriculture strategy that provides a situational analysis and tactics that could be incorporated across the Region.

To protect farmland, we need to prevent urban sprawl

- Urban growth should be directed at densification and preventing urban sprawl. Rural areas need to be protected from urban sprawl and the lack of understanding and awareness that comes with it.
- Urban sprawl should be contained, and development should focus on increasing density in already developed urban areas.

Conservation of farmland is an act of environmental stewardship

- Environmental stewardship and a vision for the future must be considered.
- Both the positives and negatives of climate change must be considered and planned for.

Municipal governments need to be accountable

- RAMP needs to hold municipalities and counties in the Region accountable and create certainty and uniformity for land users across the Region.
- Maintaining local autonomy and continuity with land use plans already in place is important.

- All jurisdictions in the Region should be interpreting the rules the same way, and they should not be in competition with each other to offer better conditions for development.
- The regulatory and political environments need to be simplified as much as possible to “cut the red tape” and allow different land uses to better co-exist.
- Clarity needs to be provided so that all actors in the Region have certainty in what to expect, and how to act with their land. Currently, there are issues with uncertainty in the regulatory environment, at least for developers, which leads to delays and added costs, even when land has already been designated for development.
- At the same time, landowner rights should be protected.

The agricultural industry is a key economic driver

- The agriculture industry should be recognized and supported as it is the second largest economic driver in Alberta. New partnerships, innovations, and forms of investment are required to help the agricultural sector to grow.
- The Region has significant advantages in terms of agricultural production, and just needs to shift to value-added production methods to compete with other jurisdictions with significantly less production abilities.
- Counties need to think creatively in terms of zoning to allow farmers to fragment their land to create new value-added opportunities and grow their tax base.
- Farming needs to be a financially viable opportunity to maintain agricultural land as agricultural land.

Food security is an opportunity to grow Regional agriculture

- Support local producers. Farming has a rich cultural heritage in Canada that should be respected as ultimately farming is what feeds the population and keeps it alive.
- Alberta, and Canada in general, should shift towards being more self-sufficient and sustainable, and focus more on food security, especially with major disruptions such as COVID-19 and political instability creating shortages in global supply chains. All people should be able to grow their own food, at least in some capacity.
- COVID-19 represents a unique opportunity where the public is now more concerned with local food security.
- COVID-19 also represents an opportunity to build the profile of agriculture and show the value of locally produced food.

We need to work through relationships to bridge divides

- Strong relationships need to be built and maintained with anyone who intersects with the agriculture industry, from farmers, urban consumers, and governments, to other industries. This includes fostering connections between the public and local food producers, and the recognition that there is a need for compromise in these relationships.
- Urban and rural communities are intimately connected, and RAMP should focus on synergies between the two instead of trying to separate them.
- The foundation of relationships is respect and trust. Counties need to listen to agricultural producers. Increased communication is necessary to overcome the perception that municipal governments have a disregard for the issues affecting individual farmers.
- Counties are forcing offsite levies onto farmers, despite not having them involved in the development process.
- Let people innovate and do exciting things in the Region. Many farmers, especially the younger generation, are eager to innovate, advocate for positive change, and invest in building their operations, however, many of them have been disenfranchised by poor political leadership.
- If the RAMP Task Force wants to better engage with the agricultural community, they should consider reaching out directly to individual farmers, as many don't trust the county.

“Boots on the ground” knowledge is important

- Farmers and others involved in agriculture should be the primary focus of the RAMP consultations. People with firsthand knowledge of each piece of land should be consulted, as they have the best understanding of the land.
- Elected officials as well as any other administrators, land use planners, and developers should have to take a course on agricultural land management. Most people in positions of power around land use planning have a vested interest to develop the land for short term gain and are not true stewards of the land.

The work of RAMP needs to be clearly communicated and championed

- RAMP and the long-term vision of conserving agricultural land is important. There needs to be more clearly defined objectives, goals, and outcomes for RAMP, which then need to be communicated with the public.
- Agriculture is a long-term industry that will likely outlast most other industries, and as such, should be protected and cared for. Planning should be focused on supporting future generations.
- These engagements sessions are a good start – don't stop here.

Appendices

A. Participant Quotes – Words of Wisdom and Advice

Participants were invited to “Think about everything you have read in this Discussion Guide and the questions we have asked you to consider, along with your own personal experiences working in the sector. What is the one piece of advice you would give to the RAMP Task Force as they move forward?” Participants made a number of recommendations, which echoed and reinforced their concerns over protecting agricultural lands and agricultural livelihoods.

Following are quotes from participants categorized by theme.

Agricultural land must be conserved for the future

Protect agricultural soils. It's priceless. Make sure its protected, if there's one thing, we need to protect that

Once development happens, you aren't getting that back. If you lose it you lose it forever.

It's all about responsibility for future generations. Food security. City people can't grow what we grow on the farm. I think that's a real big thing. Responsible growth and protection of agricultural lands... My parents went through World War II in Europe. They walked 10 miles for potatoes. I don't want to see that here. I don't want to go hungry. We don't want to see that; we need food security.

I would champion preserving as much prime agricultural land as we can as long as we can. Land is a precious resource and should be protected.

In the end, for my take, the old saying, they aren't building any more land. Preserve the land we have for agriculture.

Economics. One thing I haven't seen, is economics of this is so important. How do you preserve ag land in a free market society? It's the elephant in the room. I think if you really want to conserve ag land, we need to look at land trusts.

The economics have to play into this. Encourage high value production and crops. If I can grow crops of high value and make money, that piece of agricultural land is going to be protected, because I'm making a living off of it.

There's only so much good land in the province. There's a lot of room in the county where things can go that aren't production. Use the poor land for development.

And the worst is the topsoil stripping, there's no erosion protection. Our calves kept dying and getting pneumonia, and we had calves with bellies full of plastic bags, like why are we here still.

**50 years is enough in the canary yellow zone, but not the rest.
That's where you need to focus. The long term, that's more important.
The stuff in the canary yellow, you know it's limited. The writing is on the wall.
That's where the long-term comes in.**

Edmonton is big enough already.

**Agricultural land, once you convert it, it's next to impossible to get back. Once you
lose the agriculture families it's hard to get back. Protect what we have.**

**I've seen both sides to it. People who want to develop their own land to make a
few bucks, you can't knock it, but you have to take into consideration the impact it
has on surrounding areas**

Looking at scale and size of developments needs to be looked at too.

Think ahead with the fragmentation. Small 2 or 3 acres off the yard site, not 40 just

because a guy wants a horse, it's not worth my time you know for the small pieces



Prime agricultural land must be identified through it's potential to be productive and must be protected into the future.



We need to identify the best land, identify what it's being used for now and it's potential in the future, and there needs to be 0 touch on that land, instead of just class 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 soils. But if we could identify the good lands and come to understanding through all the counties to put that off limits.



I think they have to look at what's happening for the next generations. If they want agriculture in the area, they need a plan in place to help new farmers to be able to make this work. Without that, all this doesn't matter. Might as well just pave the earth unless they think of something to help the new farmers and keep the succession going.



In order to protect farmland, we need to prevent urban sprawl

From urban planning, with residential, we need to do more building up not out. Getting into cores of towns, more towers, less sprawl, that would be appreciated by the agriculture community. We need to look harder at that.



Establish a boundary. We need to expand up not out.



One piece of advice, make sure that urban areas don't take over the rural areas.

Conservation of farmland is an act of environmental stewardship

What I really see missing is recognition of environmental stewardship of the land and the infrastructure that agriculture creates. So, for example, the North Saskatchewan River runs through Parkland County, what role do the farmers have in providing clean water to the citizens of Edmonton? We've covered the usual subjects, but from a sustainability standpoint, we need to look at what environmental infrastructure our farmland creates, and tie back to the vision, how in the future will we promote this area and our local food so we have something of value for our kids too. You have all the topics that are the usual things but we are missing the piece around the environmental vision.

Emphasis on the environmental aspects of agriculture. The livelihood is based on conservation of the land.

I understand sustainability, I think you need a better word. We aren't sustainable, we actually make things better.

Over the next 30 to 50 years we can anticipate climate change and weather. It won't be the same as the last 1500 years. If you are making a plan for the future you have to think about that. We could be one of the few areas in the world where we do ok, but only if we can take advantage of it. But also, in the broader world, in 50 years there will be more market chaos, how will that affect us? But we do know something right now, how do we get a chance to take advantage of it?

Municipal governments need to be accountable



Based on my experience in dealing with municipal land use planning, if there's a regional document, it needs to be more than just guidelines and best practices and have teeth and requirements for municipalities to align land use plans with the objectives of RAMP. I think that if there isn't a firm requirement for municipalities to get on board with preserving agricultural land, local politics will always influence decisions that don't work with the goals.



The whole masterplan idea is really good, and I appreciate where you mentioned preserving the local autonomy, there will always be unique pieces of land, and having the guiding principles of a master plan is a very good goal and gives vision.



You don't want different municipalities out competing with others because rules are different. It's like a transportation corridor, no one is happy, but in the end, people are happy because of someone making those tough calls that no one was happy with.



Getting everyone on the same page in terms on bylaw, subdividing, land use, that's fair, and that's really tough.



The main concern I have, is don't make it too complex. Farming, and dealing with all the rules and regulations, from municipal to provincial to federal, it's overwhelming, to understand what the intent of the regulations are. I know it's difficult. To really make it straightforward and simple. Don't be too complex in the implementation.

The big one is providing clarity as to what the expectations of municipalities are, especially the more urban ones, the towns and cities in the Region.

So, when a parcel is already designated in a municipal plan, and servicing plan, I start to question the value of having something like an agricultural impact statement. The person on the municipal side sees it as a checkbox item, it will just sit on a shelf, I don't think it will sway the decision in any way. Especially in an urban land, what else would it be used for? Especially if its soil 3 or 4, it would never be leapfrogged to agricultural land.

If that area has already been designated for an urban use, what value does an agricultural impact assessment have? Specifically, in an urban setting.

We need to be cognizant that farmers should have rights with what they do with their land at the end of the day. We can't trample on that at the end of the day. They should still be able to make decisions on their land at the end of the day.

And the farmer is always the owner. They shouldn't be railroaded into something that wasn't in their long-term plans.

The agricultural industry is a key economic driver

We've done a lot to help the energy sector, but I think we can lend a better hand to the agriculture sector.

I would suggest there's a need for a new or renewed public private partnership. That where the public good, or keeping land for the public good, everyone wants more investment in that and to eat. There's a need to explore different public private partnerships that are structured to stimulate investment, for whoever wants to invest in new things like those oat milk plants, to let that happen more quickly.

I want to say that we have a grain house operation, and a dairy operation, and we all work together. When Edmonton looks at that, zoning things differently, this is for this, whatever, just how variable land is and how interests can occupy the same areas, we need to engage all the partners when we are zoning an area so we can work together.



Think broadly about what agriculture is. Especially in Alberta, agriculture is a well-established piece of the province and we want to continue that, but don't get too narrowly focused on what agriculture is at the moment. Think about the entire spectrum of agriculture, the really small stuff and the new things that haven't been considered yet. A broad-spectrum lens that opens us up to new opportunities in the future. Agriculture isn't just growing things, it's also the value-added piece. We don't know what agriculture will look like in 20 years, or even 200 years. It's nice to think this will last for 200 years, but this document will set up whatever comes next.



We need to focus on the size of the prize. We have everything here, the water, the land, we need to focus on that.



Instead of just growing grain and shipping it out, let's see what we can add.



How are these counties going to keep collecting enough taxes? They need to think outside of the box, and get out of the way, and let us develop fragmentation plans and maybe if there is fragmentation, that it creates value, and does let us expand and do things outside of the box.



The plan needs economic feasibility. It needs to work for everyone. The producers, the worker, the city, everyone.

I feel keeping the farm family viable is number 1. By that, I mean our numbers have decreased from 5% to 1.5 % of the general population, so our voices have decreased, both politically and economically, keep that strong, and be concise with land use.

Food security is an opportunity to grow Regional agriculture

I don't grow a thing that stays in Canada. Nothing stays in the county that's for sure. My brother's operation, goes to USA, Manitoba, but for me, most goes to India or China, Canada is an export giant.

I have one word. McDonalds. No matter what you think about them, they have done Alberta a great service in their ad campaigns, but now their trucks are wrapped, with a beautiful Alberta wrap.

We need to work through relationships to bridge divides.

Communicate with your lovers and your haters, very important. Too often we only talk to people who agree with us.



There's lots of people that care about their food. There's a huge organic movement. As someone who produces organic, I'm seeing how regulations change and the wool is being pulled over people's eyes though. People give a shit. We need to work on people caring. Like recycling, now everyone is recycling, but it just gets shipped somewhere else and dumped in the ocean now because people don't know what to do with it now. Someone cared enough to work hard enough to get this into the public eye, but people care enough to start recycling and they still recycle, and it's still growing. People care today about their food, even if they don't know what they are doing. They do care.



Going back to marrying rural and urban together. The AI cluster, they are creating a program for farmers. Less of that us vs them mentality. Create synergy where urban areas are doing things that support rural. We've seen the grocery prices go up, and logistics and things, so make it so agriculture isn't a rural thing, it's a community piece. Have the conversation where it's a Regional food cluster.



Development will happen, we need to encourage a way to combine urban and rural settings, maybe with agritourism, to provide food security.



There's a disconnect in where our food comes from and the work involved in that. The alternative agriculture industry can make that connection, they may not be the main economic driver, but they create that connection.



I don't know honestly. You can do it as long as you can. But you know when you're done. So much stuff is going on, you'd rather just not deal with it. The county is not at all pleasant to deal with. They took our road out. Communication is huge. Anyone doing development, its key. If your county isn't communicating with you, you need to talk to the developers. Everything that happened to us, we found out through guys quoting jobs. They show up saying oh we are putting this up.

The county asked my mom and dad to come, that's why they aren't here. You'd be appalled to understand how the county treated us.

Yea one day an excavator came and dug a 60 hole under the driveway for the pipeline coming in and no one told us it was coming. And we pleaded with the county to stop, since that was our road to bring our harvest out. And they just dumped us a pile of sand to work with, here you go. We had to try to build a new road out all by ourselves. And the county's response was "just move then". You got to have someone good in charge and who is going to help you.

No, and we should be, and at the day, all the offsite levy goes to us, so either the developer or we have to pay that. When you sell your land, you are paying that. If your county is doing that, we should be at the table, we should decide this. We should have a vested interest in what's going on.

...we have 18 million dollars off offsite levies on our land. Our land was 75,000 dollars an acre. Since all this, it's dropped to 30,000 dollars an acre. So, it's all communication with your county development side. I'd love to stay if it was possible. We are 2 miles from the elevator, you can't find a better spot. But our neighbors are leaving next year. The land to south will be developed in 2 years. We are an island.

One of the best things, we are ready to go. We are ready to make something.

I think too, there's more guys like me the younger generation. The county dismissed us. There's not lots of the younger guys, but we should be heard, the old guys won't be here much longer.

We all got invited. My neighbors just weren't interested. No one will come to a County event.

I know people interested in coming to this. But they didn't trust the County.

“Boots on the ground” knowledge is important



I'd echo that, make sure you consult with a lot of farms in the area. They are directly affected by this; they need to say their piece. Give them a chance to say their piece.



More actual farmers. People who sit in board rooms don't know what's happening in the field, literally. Farmers have good input, it's their livelihood.



Take what everyone said, think about it, and don't leave it at today. Phones always work. If you want advice, give us a call. Find out what you are dealing with. Come see what you are dealing with. Come see some actual farms and see what the problems are. If you spend a day in our shoes, they might have a different understanding how this is going and might make good changes in the future.



Most important, take every elected official in the area, take all the administrators, and land planners, and put them through a course showing them how important agricultural land is. None of them know. They all come from non-agricultural backgrounds. They make decisions on land with no knowledge.



My experience in the past with county planning, that they aren't people with an interest, and sometimes the people we think are stakeholders, aren't stakeholders. They have an agenda and an association they report to, and a job, but they are not vested stakeholders in the same way property owners are.



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A lot of people aren't really stakeholders and don't understand agriculture and the impacts.
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The work of RAMP needs to be clearly communicated and championed

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I think most important, is having really clear explanations of the outcome that is desired that also speak to non-agriculture people so you can have support from everyone in the area, not just agricultural producers.
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“
My advice would be look at the past, look at what's happened throughout the world like in Europe, and know it's a commodity that should be cared for. Think long-term.
”

“
Agriculture is a long-term plan. I can point out several examples of civilizations that cratered because they didn't consider their food and agricultural requirements. We can't eat oil. We can't eat tech. We can eat food. Agriculture should be a number one priority.
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“
Consider who will be farming 40 years from now, who they sell to, what they grow, how to make it accessible for people 40 years from now.
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At the end of the day, planning our future, think of our future generations and think of the world you want to live in. We need more consideration for others, and we need more understating of agriculture.

B. RAMP Discussion Guide

The RAMP Engagement Discussion Guide and Questions are available at letstalkRAMP.ca.