

Informational  
Report.

March 16,  
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# AGRICULTURE MATTERS: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN SHAPING AGRICULTURE POLICY

Report 1 of The  
Alberta Elections  
Project

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# AGRICULTURE MATTERS: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN SHAPING AGRICULTURE POLICY

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## EDITORIAL PRACTICES AND OBJECTIVES

As a unit within the University of Calgary’s School of Public Policy, the Simpson Centre is committed to academic rigor and neutrality in all its work. Our mission is to provide neutral, evidence-based analysis to assist decision-makers, stakeholders, and members of the public in creating policy that supports a more sustainable agriculture industry.

Written in the context of the 2023 Alberta General Election, this report outlines the approaches of the major political parties to the agriculture sector. In order to provide a timely overview that is responsive to community needs during the election, the analysis presented in this report has not undergone blinded external peer review. The non-partisan intent of the report is to encourage readers to engage with and consider the different agricultural policy stances taken by the province’s various political parties.

## INTRODUCTION

Agriculture in Canada has significantly transformed over the last decades. Since 1980, the value of agricultural production and the yields of all major crops have increased substantially. This progress can be attributed to the conducive policy and regulatory environment provided to the industry over this period. Alberta is a major agriculture producer in Canada. In 2020 Alberta produced 27.84 per cent of Canada’s canola, 31.38 per cent of wheat, 49.19 per cent of barley, and 69 per cent of Canadian fed-cattle production ([Invest Alberta 2023](#)). Agriculture accounts for \$5.1 billion, or 1.6 per cent, of Alberta’s gross domestic product (GDP) and employs more than 69,800 people ([Government of Alberta 2022a](#); [Invest Alberta 2023](#)).

On May 29, 2023, Alberta will elect a new provincial government mandated to devise policies that directly impact the agriculture industry. Albertan farmers’ perspectives are often overlooked in election dialogue. The Simpson Centre is conducting a study to discuss how the New Democratic Party of Alberta (NDP) and the United Conservative Party of Alberta (UCP) have shaped the agriculture sector in their last terms in office. This report provides an overview of how the previous two governments have approached agriculture policy and prioritized spending over the past eight years and provides readers with an understanding of the role of the provincial government and nature of the key decisions made in Edmonton that affect daily farm operations.

## FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL AGRICULTURAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Farmers’ day-to-day decisions and operations are directly impacted by policies adopted by the government. To understand how the NDP and UCP have approached agriculture policy in the past, it is useful first to know the provincial government’s responsibilities in governing the agriculture sector. Federal and provincial governments manage agriculture through a mix of shared responsibilities. Table 1 outlines Alberta’s responsibilities for the six policy subjects relevant to Albertan farmers. The first four — animal welfare, climate emissions targets, trade, and supply management — are primarily federal responsibilities with specific carve-outs for the province. Irrigation and insurance is primarily a provincial jurisdiction with specific federal responsibilities to assist.

For further explanation of the responsibilities specific to the federal government, please see Appendix A.

**Table 1: Alberta’s Agriculture Responsibilities**

<b>Animal Welfare</b>	While animal welfare is a federal responsibility, Alberta’s responsibilities in this topic stem from the <a href="#">2007 Animal Health Act</a> , which provides guidelines about reporting and quarantining animals exposed to diseases, and the <a href="#">2000 Animal Protection Act</a> , which prohibits people from causing animals distress.
<b>Climate Emissions Targets</b>	Setting climate emissions targets is a federal responsibility. Alberta’s role in climate emissions comes, in part, from the <a href="#">2019 Technology Innovation and Emissions Reduction Regulation</a> , which details information about allowable emissions and the measuring of emissions for certain facilities.
<b>Trade</b>	Alberta’s role in trade, despite that trade is primarily a federal responsibility, comes from the <a href="#">2000 Marketing of Agricultural Products Act</a> , which governs Marketing Boards and Commissions and empowers them to regulate commodities, the Alberta Export Expansion Program that provides funding to encourage companies to access international markets ( <a href="#">Government of Alberta 2023b</a> ) and Alberta’s international offices that promote Albertan commodities internationally ( <a href="#">Government of Alberta 2023a</a> ).
<b>Supply Management</b>	Supply management is primarily a federal responsibility, though Alberta’s <a href="#">2000 Marketing of Agricultural Products Act</a> empowers marketing boards and commissions to establish minimum prices paid to producers for their agricultural products.
<b>Irrigation</b>	Irrigation is primarily Alberta’s responsibility. The <a href="#">2000 Irrigation Districts Act</a> establishes irrigation districts, which deliver water and operate irrigation works, among other tasks. The <a href="#">2000 Water Act</a> sets guidelines for water usage for agricultural purposes, including defining which agricultural users can divert water without obtaining a license. The Prairie Provinces Water Board ( <a href="#">2022</a> ) seeks to prevent and resolve conflicts and encourage cooperation in water management. Transboundary Waters Agreements ( <a href="#">Government of Alberta 2023c</a> ) creates agreements where there are none for water management between jurisdictions, such as the Mackenzie River Basin Transboundary Waters Master Agreement ( <a href="#">Government of Alberta 2023d</a> ).
<b>Insurance</b>	Alberta is primarily responsible for managing and regulating insurance, and the <a href="#">2000 Agriculture Financial Services Act</a> establishes the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC). The AFSC provides insurance such as crop insurance, with options such as perennial crop insurance, annual crop insurance, or straight hail insurance ( <a href="#">AFSC 2023</a> ).

\*The information in this table is not exhaustive, and there may be relevant information not captured in this table.

## A LEGISLATIVE HISTORY OF ALBERTA’S AGRICULTURE

The NDP and UCP both passed important legislation during their time in office that impacted Alberta’s agriculture industry. We discuss some key pieces of legislation that reflect the policy priorities of each party.

The NDP’s time in office focused on promoting and protecting the agriculture sector, including an emphasis on protecting farm employees. The 2015 [Enhanced Protection for Farm and Ranch Workers Act](#) increased farm safety standards and protection for farm employees. It mandated that farms purchase public insurance coverage and removed occupational health and safety exemptions for farms. This legislation, which is still partly in place today, ensured that farm workers were treated fairly and equitably with workers in other sectors. The NDP also supported a private members bill and in 2018 passed the [Supporting Alberta’s Local Food Sector Act](#). The establishment of the Local Food Council and Local Food Week signified the promotion of Alberta agriculture as an important export for Canada. This promotion has remained bi-partisan and continues to this day. During their time in office, the NDP also allowed citizens the ability to file a complaint with the ministry through the [Local Food Sector Administration Regulation](#) in 2019.

The UCP’s time in office has focused on farmers’ rights, allowing those in the agriculture sector to retain control over their daily farm operations. The 2019 [Trespass Statutes \(Protecting Law-Abiding Property Owners\) Amendment Act](#) gave farmers more control

over access to their land from protesters by creating more severe punishments for trespassers. The 2019 [Farm Freedom and Safety Act](#) allowed farmers to retain the decision of what type of coverage was most suitable for them, private or public. The major amendments made to existing legislation came in the form of the changes to the 2000 [Marketing of Agricultural Products Act](#) regulations for Lamb, Eggs, Hatching Eggs, Alfalfa, Beef, and Sugar Beet commodity boards. The [Marketing of Agricultural Products Amendment Act](#) created changes to the governance structure of commissions which allowed commissions to determine their own service charge model, for example ([Canadian Bar Association 2017](#)).

In essence, both the UCP and NDP passed legislation important to Albertan farmers. The NDP’s legislation focused on promoting and protecting Albertan agriculture and those employed by the agriculture sector, while the UCP’s legislation was focused more on farmers’ rights and giving farmers more control in decisions about their daily farm operations.

## BUDGET INVESTMENTS

From 2015 to today, the provincial budgets have seen significant changes in expenditure on the agriculture sector. Table 2 — using fiscal plans from the 2023 Alberta budget ([Government of Alberta 2023f](#)), Government of Alberta Annual Reports ([Government of Alberta 2023g](#)), and ministry business plans ([Government of Alberta 2023f](#)) from 2015-2016 to 2022-2023 — outlines the operational and capital expenses for agriculture from the 2015-2016 to 2022-2023 budget period, and their share in total provincial budget. For additional citation information and links to the fiscal plans and ministry business plans, see the bibliography.

**Table 2: Alberta’s Agriculture Budget, 2015-2023.**

Year	Party in office	Total budgeted expenses of Alberta (\$ million)	Total budgeted expenses for Ministry of Agriculture (\$ million) *	Total estimated capital expenses (\$ million) **	Agriculture spending as percentage of the total budget (%)
2015-2016	NDP	49,906	1,274	27	2.61
2016-2017		51,097	906	44	1.86
2017-2018		54,859	916	38	1.74
2018-2019		56,181	943	28	1.73
2019-2020	UCP	58,720	746	44	1.35
2020-2021		56,789	716	70	1.38
2021-2022		57,330***	770	77	1.48
2022-2023		59,378***	796	75	1.47

Please note the chart above includes an approximation of capital expenditures due to data limitations.

\*Operational expenditure does not include expenses on forestry, debt servicing expenses, and ministry capital investments.

\*\* Capital expenses include infrastructure and development programs.

\*\*\*These numbers do not include COVID-19/recovery plan expenses.

Table 2 reinforces the distinct policy approaches of both the NDP and the UCP in facilitating growth in the agriculture sector. The NDP presented budgets that included high spending within the ministry and smaller capital expenditure than the UCP, signifying their prioritization of program delivery and ministry support over infrastructure and grants. The UCP government made a significant cut in the agriculture ministry’s operational budget when they took office. Although the operational expenditures gradually grew over time, they remained well below the NDP governments operational budget expenditures. The UCP government prioritized capital expenditures and made investments in large capital projects. The capital spending by the end of its term more than doubled the capital spending in the last year of NDP’s term. The following sections take a closer look at the budgetary approaches.

### **NDP Spending Priorities**

Agriculture expenditures and capital spending under the NDP remained relatively stable. Major changes in the annual budgeted expenses represented in Table 2 came from insurance payments and income support. Severe droughts in the 2015-16 growing season led to nearly \$1 billion in insurance claims due to record low yields, resulting in a budget of \$814 million set aside for insurance payouts ([Dykstra 2015](#); [Government of Alberta 2015b](#)). The following years saw the insurance budget decrease to approximately \$400 million ([Government of Alberta 2016a, 17](#)). The NDP also prioritized restructuring the AFSC ([Alberta's NDP Caucus 2019, 10](#)).

The NDP government funded investments in research, food safety, and animal health ([Government of Alberta 2023g](#)). Capital investments were made in energy efficiency, land stewardship, cereal crops and the Leduc Agrivalve Processing Business Accelerator ([Government of Alberta 2015a](#); [Government of Alberta 2016b](#); [Government of Alberta 2017b](#); [Government of Alberta 2018b](#)). Producers saw direct benefit through the investments in primary agriculture and income support and indirect benefits through the changes to AFSC, research and development investments, and direct investments. The NDP government also oversaw the bargaining and launching of five-year Canadian Agricultural Partnership which provided \$406 million in support to Alberta's strategic programs and activities under the partnership ([Government of Alberta 2018c](#)).

### **UCP Spending Priorities**

The UCP government has taken a direct-investment approach with Albertan producers and decreased ministry expenses for increased capital spending. Upon forming government in 2019, the UCP sought to reduce spending through cutting expenses and phasing out ministry support and research services and transitioning to the Results Drive Agricultural Research program (RDAR) ([Dhaliwal 2021](#); [Government of Alberta 2020a, 17](#); [Government of Alberta 2021a, 11](#)). The full transition was completed in the 2020-21 fiscal year which saw a cut of 250 research jobs and the ministry fully exited the research market ([Dhaliwal 2021](#)). The UCP also made significant cuts to Climate Leadership Plan programs and transitioned their focus onto encouraging farmer adaptation strategies ([Government of Alberta 2020a, 17](#); [Government of Alberta 2021a, 11](#)). The government also budgeted for a reduction in insurance and income support payments due to a predicted favourable growing season ([Government of Alberta 2020a, 17](#); [Government of Alberta 2021a, 11](#)). The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak also resulted in a reduction in spending due to need for the government to implement relief measures ([Government of Alberta 2021b, 115](#)).

The increased capital spending was in alignment with the policy goals of the UCP government's goal of returning agency to producers. Significant investments have been made in the provincial irrigation strategy, land-use management and additional increased program funding to agri-business initiatives such as the Leduc Agrivalve Processing Business Accelerator ([Government of Alberta 2019b](#); [Government of Alberta 2020b](#); [Government of Alberta 2021b](#); [Government of Alberta 2022c](#)). The government has also collaborated with the federal government to support crucial infrastructure capital projects. In 2020, a joint investment with the Canada Infrastructure Bank of \$244.5 million was made for the uplift of irrigation infrastructure ([CIB Media 2020](#)). The UCP government has also been working with the Federal Government to develop the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership which will replace the current Canadian Agricultural Partnership beginning in April ([Canadian Agricultural Partnership 2023](#)).

## **CONCLUSION**

Government decisions are often a reaction to ongoing political, social, and economic conditions. As a result, policy decisions and initiatives may overlap between governments. Despite this, it is evident that the NDP and UCP governments' past policy priorities speak about their vision for the agriculture sector. The NDP's *Enhanced Protection for Farm and Ranch Workers Act* emphasized increasing protection for those working in the agriculture sector. The UCP's *Farm Freedom and Safety Act* focused on giving agricultural workers more control in making decisions about their daily operations. Both parties took unique approaches which are indicative of how they might approach worker safety policies in the future. The parties' legislative priorities are echoed in their budget investments. The NDP government had a higher spend for the Ministry of Agriculture and lower spend in capital expenses:

they focused on investing in research and development. The UCP government, on the other hand, had a lower spend for the Ministry of Agriculture and a higher spend in capital expenses: they prioritized spending on direct investments.

While the NDP and UCP governments have taken distinctive approaches to agriculture policy in the past, the similarities between the two parties cannot be ignored. The distinct approaches of both the governments, such as their stances on the Farm Freedom and Safety Act, are given significant attention by news and media. However, the similarities in legislative and budgetary decisions that are maintained from one government to the next, are also noteworthy. The *Supporting Alberta's Local Food Sector Act*, for example, established a Local Food Week which still happens every year. Both the NDP and the UCP have invested in agri-business, such as through the Leduc Agrivalue Processing Business Accelerator. The cost-shared Canadian Agricultural Partnership was also supported by both the governments. Considering the similar and different approaches of both the parties, readers can form their expectations on how these parties might approach agriculture policy after Alberta's 2023 election.

This report, a historical analysis of the NDP and UCP's approaches to the agriculture sector, is the first of three reports that are part of the Simpson Centres Alberta Elections Program. The second report will present findings of the survey recently conducted by the Simpson Centre to understand producer priorities in Alberta before the upcoming provincial election. Survey responses focus on market access, government spending, and climate change, and how the priorities for producers in Alberta align with differing policy perspectives of the major political parties. The third report will compare and analyze the election platforms of the NDP and UCP and will also provide a ranking of parties' agri-food awareness based on a neutral set of criteria.

You can access these upcoming reports on the Simpson Centre website: <https://www.simpsoncentre.ca>, or email Shawn Wiskar ([shawn.wiskar@ucalgary.ca](mailto:shawn.wiskar@ucalgary.ca)) for more information.

## Appendix A

The following chart details federal responsibilities in six topics relevant to farmers. Please note that this chart is not exhaustive, and there may be relevant information not captured here.

<b>Animal Welfare</b>	The <a href="#">2012 Safe Food for Canadians Act</a> gives the federal government the ability to create regulations about the “humane treatment and slaughter of animals.” The <a href="#">1990 Health of Animals Act</a> outlines policy to deal with diseases that might affect animals, specifically rules about recall orders, importing and exporting, and declaring infected places and control zones when a disease or toxic substance exists in an area. The <a href="#">1997 Canadian Food Inspection Agency Act</a> establishes the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, responsible for administrating and enforcing acts related to animal welfare.
<b>Climate Emissions Targets</b>	Canada’s <a href="#">2021 Canadian Net-Zero Emissions Accountability Act</a> requires setting emissions targets up to 2045. This includes reducing GHG emissions from fertilizer application by 30 per cent between 2020 and 2030 ( <a href="#">Government of Canada 2022</a> ).
<b>Trade</b>	The <a href="#">1985 Agricultural Products Marketing Act</a> empowers national and provincial marketing boards and commissions to make regulations, market commodities and authorize interprovincial and export trade. The <a href="#">1985 Farm Products Agencies Act</a> establishes the National Farm Products Council to advise on how to maintain and promote the agriculture industry and to work with agencies to make marketing more effective, among other tasks. The <a href="#">1985 Meat Inspection Act</a> establishes that meat products cannot be exported out of Canada, or traded interprovincially, unless they are prepared or stored in a registered establishment, as defined within the act.
<b>Supply Management</b>	The <a href="#">1985 Farm Products Agencies Act</a> establishes the Farm Products Council of Canada, which oversees the agencies that direct Canada’s supply management system. The <a href="#">1985 Canadian Dairy Commission Act</a> allows the Canadian Dairy Commission to investigate matters such as the costs of production and processing, and to establish prices paid to producers of milk, among other tasks.
<b>Irrigation</b>	While irrigation is primarily a provincial responsibility, the <a href="#">1985 Canada Water Act</a> outlines policy for managing Canada’s water resources. The <a href="#">1985 International Boundary Waters Treaty Act</a> concerns boundary waters between Canada and the United States. For example, section 11 of this act states that unless someone has a license to do so, boundary waters may not be diverted or obstructed in a way that changes the natural flow or level of these boundary waters.
<b>Insurance</b>	Insurance is primarily a provincial responsibility. Federal responsibilities in insurance include providing assistance through the AgriStability program. AgriStability is a program under the Canada Agricultural Partnership and focuses on protecting against declines in income due to “production loss, increased costs and market conditions” ( <a href="#">Government of Canada 2023</a> ).



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