

Informational Report. May 23, 2023.

AGRICULTURE MATTERS: AN OVERVIEW OF PARTY VISIONS

Report 3 of The
Alberta Elections
Project

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May 23, 2023

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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 rigour 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.

This report presents an analysis of the Alberta provincial election party platforms and the commitments relevant to the agriculture sector. It is important to note that this report was not designed to provide a value judgment on one platform over another or encourage the reader to choose one party over another. Rather, the report was developed by the Simpson Centre team with a focus on public education. The Simpson Centre's election project is aimed at helping Albertans make an informed decision on election day.

INTRODUCTION

On May 29, 2023, Alberta will elect a new provincial government mandated to devise policies that directly impact the agriculture industry. Alberta farmers' perspectives are often overlooked in election dialogue. In the lead-up to the election, the Simpson Centre published two reports that were designed to allow readers to make an informed decision on voting based on agricultural issues.

The first report, "[Agriculture Matters: The Role Of Political Parties In Shaping Agriculture Policy](#)" provided an analysis of each party's time in office, their budgetary decisions and policy choices. This report found that during the New Democratic Party's (NDP) time in office, they emphasized government support and programs on key issues such as farm insurance, climate issues and agriculture research. On the other hand, the United Conservative Party (UCP) focused on farmer autonomy and capital spending to support industry development.

The second report, "[Agriculture Matters: Primary Producers' Voices on Policy in Alberta](#)," featured findings of a survey of around 300 primary producers in Alberta and their opinions on the topics of climate, government spending, markets/commodities/trade and technology and research. The survey found that older farmers had different views than younger farmers, indicating a potential age divide in Alberta and a difference in priorities.

This report provides an analysis of the party platforms and candidates to determine how a potential government of Alberta would address the challenges facing the agriculture sector. This report provides an overview of the candidates running in the election and whether they have ties to agriculture, the provincial budget, NDP election pre-releases and the party platforms themselves.

The cost of living is front and centre in this election and the rising cost of food has been a significant contributor to inflation. According to Trevor Tombe, an economist at the School of Public Policy, average prices for bakery and cereal products went up by 11.3 per cent, fruits by 8.3 per cent, meat by 7.7 per cent and dairy products and eggs by 7.2 per cent between December and March over the corresponding period last

year.¹ This issue of rising food prices and cost of living is particularly relevant for the agriculture sector in Alberta, as it is a significant contributor to the province's economy. With the upcoming election, the parties' visions for the agriculture sector and their policies to address the rising costs and inflation are being closely scrutinized. Alberta has a diverse range of agricultural products, including beef, grains, dairy and vegetables. Farmers and producers in the province face a variety of challenges, such as weather conditions, access to markets and fluctuating commodity prices. The policies put forth by the various parties will have a significant impact on the agriculture sector and its ability to contribute to the provincial economy. It remains to be seen how each party will address the issues faced by the agriculture sector and whether their policies will have a positive impact on the industry and the consumers who rely on it.

CANDIDATES

Alberta has 87 provincial electoral districts of which approximately 40 per cent can be classified as rural. Populations in provincial electoral districts range from 28,000 to 54,000 approximately with the average being 47,000 in a riding. Each riding elects one representative to represent the district and each party can select one candidate to run in that district to become a member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA).

The Simpson Centre conducted a thorough analysis of the candidates' biographies to determine any connection to the agriculture sector. Their previous careers and roles in politics were also considered. Although this method has its limitations due to the restricted size of the candidates' biographies, it provides valuable insights into the candidates' perspectives on agriculture in each party.

UNITED CONSERVATIVE PARTY

The UCP is running a full slate of 87 candidates in every electoral district in Alberta. Looking at the candidate breakdown, we can see that there are 50 candidates with prior MLA experience, 49 of the current 60 UCP MLAs are running for re-election (82 per cent) and 23 of 25 current ministers are running for re-election with two former ministers also seeking re-election. There are also three new candidates with previous municipal experience seeking election on behalf of the UCP.

There are 11 of 87 candidates running for the election whose biographies mention that they come from an agriculture background (13 per cent). It is noteworthy that 10 of these candidates currently hold seats in the legislature with four of them having previously served in ministerial roles.

ALBERTA NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY

The NDP has fielded a full slate of 87 candidates for the upcoming election. Looking at the candidate breakdown, it is evident that 21 candidates have prior experience as MLAs. Notably, 19 out of the current 23 MLAs are seeking re-election (83 per cent), indicating a strong continuity in their representation. Additionally, 10 of the candidates running have previously held ministerial positions during the NDP's governance in 2015.

On the other hand, the NDP boasts seven new candidates with prior municipal experience, adding a diverse perspective to their roster. Among the 87 candidates, nine (10 per cent) emphasize their agricultural

¹ Trevor Tombe, "Food Continues to be a Problem," April 18, 2023, <https://twitter.com/trevortombe/status/1648328051288334336?s=20>.

backgrounds in their biographies. It is noteworthy that one of these candidates currently holds a seat in the legislature, while another aims to rejoin the legislative body after previously serving as the minister of Agriculture. Furthermore, one of the candidates with agricultural experience has a background as a former rural district municipal councillor.

ELECTION PROMISES

In order to gain insight into the future plans of each political party for the agriculture sector, this report offers a comprehensive analysis of their platforms and their alignment with the survey of producer priorities previously published in our series. It is important to note that platform commitments are expected to be announced subsequent to the release of this report. Therefore, we encourage readers to click the links provided below to review the full platform of each party and stay informed about their specific proposals and strategies.

UNITED CONSERVATIVE PARTY

Unfortunately, at the time of release, the UCP has released few substantive agriculture commitments. The election is largely focused on affordability and health care with wildfires also consuming a significant portion of the discussion. We encourage readers to stay updated on the latest developments by monitoring the UCP website for the full release of their platform as soon as it becomes available. The UCP platform can be accessed through the following link: <https://www.unitedconservative.ca/ucp-platform-2023/>.

AGRICULTURE PLATFORM COMMITMENTS

Expand the Feeder Assistance Loan Guarantee from \$2 million to \$3 million for cattle farmers

This promised increase of an extra million dollars will ensure that farmers are able to acquire more capital for the feeding of cattle through relatively easy access to low-interest, leveraged financing backed by a government guarantee. The [Feeder Assistance Loan Guarantee program](#) typically finances 17 per cent to 24 per cent of the calf crop each year, providing a significant portion of the industry's lending requirement. This commitment may not move the needle for the agriculture sector with only 58 per cent of cattle producers and 48 per cent of all producers saying in the survey that the government subsidizing agriculture input costs was a high priority.

OTHER PLATFORM AND BUDGETARY COMMITMENTS

Budget 2023

The pre-election budget offers a window into the governing parties' priorities for the election. The budget provided substantial new funding in the areas of health, education and a new Alberta Fund to direct resource revenues. This budget promises that multi-year spending may be drastically changed under the tenure of a new government, but the UCP can provide interim promises in exchange for a mandate through its budget.

The agriculture sector was a major benefactor of the 2023 budget with a large, new Agri-processing Investment Tax Credit program. The program provides a 12 per cent non-refundable tax credit based on eligible capital expenditures to corporations investing \$10 million or more to build or expand agri-processing facilities in the province ([Alberta n.d](#)). This tax credit will spur private agriculture investments and drive growth in the sector.

The UCP budget also promises to deliver major investments including:

- \$38.5 million devoted to results-driven agriculture research (RDAR);
- \$33.5 million to modernize irrigation infrastructure and increase water storage capacity;
- \$25.8 million in combined operating and capital funding to water management infrastructure;
- \$13.5 million to the Irrigation Rehabilitation Program;
- \$9 million is invested in projects that promote regional economic growth and diversification;
- \$10 million is invested in Travel Alberta for rural tourism investment programming; and
- \$10 million, over three years, is invested in agriculture and irrigation to support rural businesses as well as “economic development capacity building initiatives” ([Alberta 2023a](#)).

While the Simpson Centre survey was conducted after the release of the provincial budget, several of these measures tackle the issues that producers highlighted in the survey. Our survey asked if respondents felt confident in Alberta’s ability to quickly address environmental risks such as floods and droughts, and 57 per cent agreed, signifying that there may be room for improvement. The large investments made in irrigation are likely to mitigate some of these risks. Technology and research were also a major highlight in our producer surveys, where 76 per cent of respondents said that investing in innovation and technology was a high priority for them. The new investment in RDAR is also likely to be positively received.

Major Initiatives of the UCP Government Highlighted on the Platform Site

The UCP did highlight several actions on their website that speak to their agriculture priorities ([United Conservative Party 2023](#)).

During their tenure in office, several significant changes were made to agriculture policy including the following:

- Repealed the 2015 [Enhanced Protection for Farm and Ranch Workers Act](#), commonly known as Bill 6. In its place, they have introduced the [Farm Freedom and Safety Act](#), which grants farmers the autonomy to choose the most appropriate insurance coverage for their operations, whether private or public. Moreover, this act removes certain labour practices that had an impact on family farms, thereby addressing concerns related to their operations and ensuring their continued success and viability;
- Made a \$815-million investment to modernize irrigation district infrastructure and increase water storage capacity, creating up to 6,800 direct and indirect permanent jobs and up to 1,280 construction jobs;
- Established a Rangeland Grazing Framework to support the important work of ranchers to sustain and enhance the function and productivity of Crown land rangeland ecosystems in a way that promotes biodiversity and ecological goods and services;
- Increased the Feeder Association Loan Guarantee Program to \$150 million to improve producers’ access to capital so they can grow their business and meet the demands of today’s marketplace; and
- Recognition of the important role rural communities play when it comes to the community and the overall success of Alberta.

A thorough analysis of both the UCP’s and NDP’s time in office can be found in our first report in the series: [Agriculture Matters: The Role Of Political Parties In Shaping Agriculture Policy](#). However, to summarize the report’s findings, the NDP government’s legislation focused on promoting and protecting Alberta agriculture and those employed by the agriculture sector, while the UCP government’s legislation was focused more on farmers’ rights and giving farmers more control in decisions about their daily farm operations. Both parties’ legislative priorities are echoed in their budget investments. The NDP government incurred higher spending

on the Ministry of Agriculture and lower spending on 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.

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY

The NDP has released a campaign platform that largely echoes their approach taken during their time in office. The full NDP platform can be found here: <https://www.albertandp.ca/commitments> but the section below will offer an overview of specific platform promises from the party.

AGRICULTURE PLATFORM COMMITMENTS

Create an Alberta Value-Added Incentive Program to Help Companies Access Capital

This program may echo the [Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership \(SCAP\) Value-Added Program](#) which provides grants up to \$250,000 for bio-industrial processors, food processors or individuals or corporations registered in Alberta. Eligible activities under SCAP include building processing capacity expansion, implementing food safety improvements, new product and process development and market development and access ([Alberta, 2023b](#)). While the NDP gave no specifics on how this program would work, agriculture policy critic Heather Sweet discussed the barriers for value-added processing facilities and commented on the need for red-tape reduction around building regulations and the need for better access to capital ([Real Agriculture 2022](#)).

Set up a Local Food Incentive Task Force

This commitment reflects the NDP's continued dedication to promoting local food during their time in office. The [Supporting Alberta's Local Food Sector Act](#) that was passed in 2018 established the Local Food Council and Local Food Week to promote Alberta agriculture exports. This initiative is aimed at incentivizing small-scale, rural start-ups that can upgrade local ingredients to new food products. It is likely to receive support from Alberta producers: in our survey of producers, 73 per cent of respondents said incentivizing Alberta commodities over imported goods from other markets was a high priority. We also saw 64 per cent of respondents say investing in additional processing facilities was a high priority which may bolster the NDP's plan to incentivize local start-ups.

Increase Staff for Services and Agri-food and Value-added Approvals

The NDP's expansion of public service employees aligns with their goal of strengthening ministry programs and services during their tenure in government ([Lammam and MacIntyre 2018](#)). On the contrary, the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation experienced staffing reductions under the UCP government, particularly in the area of research, as part of the transition to the results-driven agricultural research approach ([Dhaliwal 2021](#)). Creating more positions in the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation would signify a return to ministry-driven support over farmer-driven resources. This may resonate with the aspirations of producers, considering the prevailing skepticism surrounding the current government of Alberta's capacity to effectively promote and market Alberta commodities, secure fair prices for agricultural products and engage in meaningful consultations with producers regarding critical matters like supply chain challenges.

Lower Capital Borrowing Costs for Irrigation Districts and Municipalities

The current interest rate for local authorities seeking loans for capital projects varies between 4.48 per cent and 5.0 per cent, depending on the duration of the project ([Alberta 2023c](#)). Borrowing provisions laid out in the [Local Authorities Capital Financing Act](#) dictate how money can be spent by local authorities, including municipalities and irrigation districts. The NDP did not state what the interest rate would be, but favourable loan rates will ensure irrigation infrastructure remains accessible for farmers in Alberta. Irrigation was not a major focus of the NDP during their time in office and was only brought into focus through the UCP government restructuring the ministry during their tenure from Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Economic Development to Agriculture and Irrigation ([Alberta 2022b](#); [Ferguson 2022](#)). Our survey asked if respondents felt confident in Alberta's ability to quickly address environmental risks such as floods and droughts; 57 per cent agreed, signifying that there may be room for improvement. A favourable rate for borrowing capital may help increase the ability of local authorities to assist in flood and drought management.

Bridge the Digital Divide and Bring High-speed Internet to Every Albertan By 2027

The NDP has announced a commitment to uphold the Alberta Broadband Strategy, released in 2022, which commits to universal connectivity for all Albertans by 2027. The strategy, which was slated to begin in 2022, committed \$390 million to provide high-speed internet to approximately 500,000 Albertans; however, no construction has occurred so far ([Alberta 2022a](#)). Full connectivity is estimated to grow the Alberta Gross Domestic Product by up to \$4 billion and add nearly 20,000 new jobs due to the increased opportunities ([Alberta 2022a](#); [Alberta NDP 2023](#)). Technology was also a major highlight in our producer surveys, in which 76 per cent of the producers said that investing in innovation and technology was a high priority for them.

Support Post-secondary Schools with Agriculture Programs and Ensure Agriculture and Ag-Tech are Core to Any Technology Strategy

The NDP has made several commitments towards reversing cuts and supporting post-secondary education in Alberta, including university agriculture programs. The cost of tuition in Alberta has increased an average of 33 per cent since 2019, signifying a large additional burden for students beginning their careers ([Babych 2023](#)). The majority of the respondents (75 per cent) in our survey also believed that starting a farming career was unaffordable. They supported an additional investment in agriculture programs at post-secondary institutions with 84 per cent of respondents indicating it was a high priority. Producers across all age groups widely supported the implementation of policies that provide additional support for innovation from Canadian universities. This reflects a shared recognition of the importance of fostering innovation in the agricultural sector and leveraging the expertise and resources available at universities to drive advancements in technology, research and sustainable practices.

OTHER PLATFORM COMMITMENTS

The NDP has also made several commitments that, while not explicitly aimed at the agriculture industry, are likely to have an impact on the sector. This section provides an overview of those commitments and explores their potential impacts on the agriculture sector.

Create an Alberta's Future Tax Credit to Promote Growth in Emerging Industrial Sectors

While agriculture is not a new emerging industrial sector for Alberta, ag-tech and innovation has emerged as a powerful sub-sector in the past few years. Dedicated organizations such as [THRIVE by SVG Ventures](#) and [Alberta Innovates](#) make capital access possible in Alberta for innovative start-ups in the agriculture sector. Seventy-six per cent of respondents in our survey ranked investing in innovation and technology in Alberta a high priority. Considering this strong sentiment, it can be anticipated that initiatives focusing on targeted growth in the ag-tech sector will be well received by Albertans.

Bill 6 Discussion

During the NDP's tenure, they introduced the unpopular Bill 6, also known as the 2015 [Enhanced Protection for Farm and Ranch Workers Act](#). The introduction of this act brought about significant improvements in farm safety standards and enhanced protection for farm employees. It required farms to obtain public insurance coverage and eliminated occupational health and safety exemptions previously applicable to farms. This bill met with immediate pushback from farmers who were concerned the new wage and safety regulations would be applied to children and volunteers assisting in the harvest ([Bartko 2015](#)). On April 27, 2023, a journalist at a press conference asked Rachel Notley if Bill 6 would be reintroduced. She replied:

There's no question that we remain concerned about safety for farm workers all across the province. That's a really important issue, I think, that became super clear during COVID; no question about that. As you know, when the UCP undid Bill 6, they also undid a bunch of things like, for instance, a minimum wage. A lot of people don't know that farm workers in Alberta aren't necessarily entitled to be paid the minimum wage under the UCP regime. That seems a bit inappropriate. So, we would be looking at it, but we learned from last time and we know that we need to consult with farmers and employers in that sector. We know that we had made good progress after the fact last time in terms of ... reaching a lot of agreement with key leaders within the sector. So, we would go back to where that work had left off and then we would hope to be able to move forward on some elements of it after we have had a chance to really talk about it with some folks in the sector.²

CONCLUSION

Government elections may not be won or lost on agriculture issues, but this sector still deserves careful attention by voters. More generally, inflation and the cost of living may be key to voting decisions for many Albertans and food inflation is a key part of the puzzle. On May 29, 2023, Albertans will head to the polls and elect a new provincial government mandated to devise policies that directly impact the agriculture industry. The Simpson Centre analysis and our previous two reports are aimed at helping voters make an informed decision on voting day.

² Rachel Notley, "We Commit to a Health Innovation and Challenge Fund," Twitter, April 27, 2023, <https://twitter.com/RachelNotley/status/1651625108082143232?s=20>.

Analysis of each of the party's platform commitments available shows that a status quo approach is being adopted, suggesting limited significant shifts in agriculture policy. The [NDP's agriculture platform](#) aligns with the preferences of the surveyed producers, but the persistent memory of Bill 6 may dampen that reception. With the [UCP](#) leading the polls in rural ridings, except for Banff-Kananaskis, it is likely that rural Alberta holds favourable views towards the UCP's approach to agriculture ([338Canada 2023](#)). Readers are advised to stay updated on the party platforms as future commitments relevant to the agriculture sector may be unveiled.

For access to all reports, please visit the Simpson Centre website at:

<https://www.simpsoncentre.ca/events/alberta-elections/>. For further information or media inquiries, kindly contact Shawn Wiskar at (shawn.wiskar@ucalgary.ca). For any significant updates released prior to May 29, readers can find commentary on our [Twitter](#).

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