

Editorial: Farming is part of the future

EDMONTON JOURNAL EDITORIAL BOARD

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Long before Edmonton became an oilpatch city, it was a farming community. And while other sectors now receive more attention, agriculture remains a key economic driver in a region blessed with rich soil and favourable climate.

But the era of agriculture in and around Edmonton is at risk of drawing to a close, owing in part to urban sprawl, the spread of acreages and suburban neighbours hostile to the dust and smells of farming operations. Farmers and ranchers are fleeing the area and other agri-businesses face a rough go, even the trendy enterprises that should thrive around a big city — market gardens, U-pick orchards and honey farms.

That's according to a state-of-the-industry report, prepared by consultant Jerry Bouma, for the Edmonton Regional Metropolitan Board.

Consternation that farming in the region may be heading toward a tipping point isn't just wistful regret over the passing of a traditional industry. Agriculture quietly remains a critical economic engine.

Burgeoning middle classes in developing nations are consuming more protein and one only has to visit a farmers' market or chic eatery to witness the soaring popularity of locally sourced foods. Encouraging the growth of value-added agri-businesses such as breweries, distilleries and food processors is touted as one way to diversify Alberta's economy away from fossil-fuel dependence.

The question is, will the Edmonton region stand to benefit from agriculture's resurgent economic importance if nearby livestock operators are pulling out and large-scale grain farmers are planning to move to areas away from the city? Hog production fell 75 per cent in the region between 2001 and 2016 while chicken production dropped by 28 per cent. It's the same story for vegetable farms; the total amount of land farmed dropped in half to 342 acres.

One problem is that large tracts of land required for food production are shrinking and fragmenting. That, in turn, threatens thousands of jobs in Edmonton's \$3.7-billion food-processing sector.

That's where the Edmonton Regional Metropolitan Board, which includes mayors from 13 municipalities, comes in.

Responsible for co-ordinating the area's 30-year growth plan, the board will be asked to vote on an agricultural vision this fall that could include ideas such as farming reserves, credit systems and "right-to-farm" legislation to curb complaints in agricultural areas.

Their solutions have to be enough to protect countryside from subdivisions, industrial parks and strip malls so that agriculture remains part of Edmonton's future.

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