

# Beef, poultry producers abandoning Edmonton area as agriculture faces 'tipping point'

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Livestock operators are pulling out of the Edmonton area and large-scale grain farmers are planning their exit strategy, regional leaders heard Thursday.

On the surface, it looks like the region's agriculture sector is holding its own, said Jerry Bouma, a consultant who prepared a state-of-the-industry report for the Edmonton Regional Metropolitan Board. But that's not the reality.



Cattle are seen on the Wedman farm in Leduc County in a 2016 photo. The farm has been in the family since the 19th century and was included in a recent Edmonton annexation plan. **IAN KUCERAK / IAN KUCERAK**

“The agriculture food system is less than stable and may be reaching a tipping point,” he warned in the report on the first steps toward setting aside land to protect for farming.

Livestock producers are moving away, large-scale grain farmers are securing land outside the Edmonton region — ready to relocate if necessary — and even the market gardens and U-pick berry operations and bee hives that should flourish in the shadow of urban growth are not.

Agriculture here can have a bright future but needs certainty, said Bouma. It requires large, attached parcels of land where food can be produced. That’s being threatened and fragmented, he said, which in turn threatens thousands of jobs in Edmonton’s \$3.7-billion food processing sector.

If Edmonton and other municipal leaders want to make agriculture and food production a key pillar in an economy diversified beyond oil and gas, he said, it must act now.

“The policies in place today are not strong enough,” Bouma said, urging leaders, including Mayor Don Iveson, to declare farming a local priority.

The board, which is responsible for co-ordinating the Edmonton region’s 30-year growth plan, includes mayors from 13 communities. Leaders will be asked to vote on an agricultural vision this fall, exploring ideas like farming reserves and the development of credit systems.

If Alberta loses agriculture in the Edmonton region, it will lose a natural gift. Thirty-five per cent of all Alberta’s class one soil is found in the Edmonton region, Bouma said, and the climate is so favourable, some local farm families say they have not had a crop failure in 100 years.

“It’s clear we need to address some critical issues,” said Rod Shaigec, mayor of Parkland County and the chair of board’s agricultural master plan task force.

“We need to be willing to make some tough decisions,” he said, citing the region’s growing population, growth that must be directed away from the best lands. “Our goal must be focus on securing future land supplies.”

Bouma said both urban sprawl and acreages in the counties are causing issues, taking land out of farming but also introducing non-farmers with a lower tolerance for the dust, smells and round-the-clock work often required on farms.

The task force will explore “right-to-farm” legislation to curb complaints in agricultural areas. It will also look at development credits, which have started to work in places such as Lancaster County, Penn., in the United States. It allows farmers in protected areas to sell development rights to developers wanting to put housing on less productive areas.

The group is also working on a tool to objectively measure which lands are best to set aside — considering both soil quality and those that are currently less fragmented.

But some mayors question whether or not the effort will actually effect change.

“Is this just more talk again?” said Strathcona County Mayor Rod Frank, wondering if the federal and provincial governments are willing to help, even if it puts votes at risk.

People generally believe there’s lots of land but “we’re shooting ourselves in the foot,” said Frank. “There’s not lots of land any more.”

Federal and provincial representatives are on the task force, noted Bouma. But it will be challenging. “There will be sparks flying to be sure.”

It’s critical to keep the industry involved and find fair ways to change the rules, added Alanna Hnatiw, mayor of Sturgeon County.

If farmers feel control of their land is being taken away from them, they may sell early or farm with a short-term vision, mining the soil of nutrients, she said. “We’re well aware of the landmines in front of us.”

## By the numbers

- Livestock production is down across Alberta but there have been sharper declines in the Edmonton region. The biggest drop was for pigs, where production fell 75 per cent in the Edmonton region and 28 per cent provincewide between 2001-16. Chicken production increased 16 per cent provincewide but fell 28 per cent in the Edmonton region.

- Across Alberta, nursery products, greenhouse areas and bee operations were up 12 per cent, 15 per cent and 46 per cent respectively. But for Edmonton, the enterprises — plus those for fruits, nuts and

- berries, and vegetables — all declined between 2001 and 2016.

- The number of vegetable farms increased to 49 in 2016 from 29 in 2001 in the Edmonton region, but the total amount of land farmed dropped by half to 342 acres.

- A new interest in local food and farming may support a turnaround. Edmonton’s new bee keeping program is fully subscribed, with 130 applicants. Fifty licences for backyard hens have been issued. The number of farmers’ markets in the region also is growing; Edmonton has 18, up from 12 six years ago, and there are 10 more in the region.



Consultant Jerry Bouma warned regional leaders agriculture in the Edmonton region is close to a tipping point in his state of the industry report on agriculture at the Edmonton Metropolitan Regional Board meeting on Aug. 9, 2018.

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