

Reducing the Risk: Addressing the Environmental Impacts of the Food System

By: James Stuckey, Caitlin Charman, and Jean-Charles Le Vallee

Centre for Food in Canada

Conference Board of Canada

Every Canadian meal has an environmental footprint— at each stage of the production, distribution, and preparation of food, something is taken from or added to the environment. But while the food system must have some environmental footprint, achieving a food system that is as sustainable as possible is essential to conserve Canada’s environment, and guarantee food security in the years to come.

Reducing the Risk: Addressing the Environmental Impacts of the Food System (August 2013) is a Conference Board of Canada report focused on food-related environmental risks. This report examines the major areas of environmental risk relating to the food system in Canada and what food system stakeholders are doing to address the risks. It also describes a number of key steps to improve environmental risk governance in Canada and the ability of the food system to respond to challenges and opportunities in the years ahead.

The report looks at environmental impacts resulting from the activities of different subsectors of the food supply chain, including the **primary production** (farms), **food manufacturing**, and **retail** subsectors. Among these, primary production tends to have the greatest environmental impact—although manufacturers and retailers also create impacts through their operations, as well as shape the nature of agricultural production through the standards they impose on their suppliers. The report considers impacts in the key risk areas of **water**, **air**, **soil**, and **waste**.

The report recommends the following key steps to help bring about a better-performing environmental risk governance system:

1. Motivate and support improved business environmental performance.

Governments should do more to motivate and support businesses to improve their environmental performance—particularly at the level of primary production, which generates many of the food system’s most pressing environmental impacts.

2. Improve household food waste literacy.

Governments and industry can play a role in reducing food waste in households by fostering improved household food literacy—including skills, knowledge, and behaviours around food purchase and preparation.

3. Develop food eco-labels for retail products.

Governments could lead the way in encouraging the development of food eco-labels at different stages of the food system, and develop environmental performance benchmarks that could provide the basis for food eco-label programs. More widespread use of eco-labels for retail food products would improve consumers’ ability to make environmentally friendly purchasing decisions.

4. Add “green” to agriculture policy and link to income support programs.

Governments should add “green” to agricultural policy by ensuring that it has an integrated and mutually supporting set of objectives and programs across jurisdictions. There is an opportunity to better integrate producer support and environmental objectives.

5. Develop concrete and measurable food sustainability objectives.

Food system stakeholders should develop concrete and measurable food sustainability objectives. It is not enough to speak in the abstract about making the food system “sustainable.” This notion must be made concrete by setting benchmarks and objectives against which environmental performance can be objectively measured and assessed—and acted upon.

6. Create a Canadian agri-food environmental governance system.

Business and government should improve cooperation around environmental risk governance, adopting a total farm-to-fork approach. Developing an overarching and integrated body to coordinate risk governance functions (including risk assessment, management, and communication) would offer a more effective platform for action than the current abundance of risk governance systems, organized around sector, environmental cause, geographical region, and political jurisdiction.

To read the full report, go to the Conference Board of Canada website: www.conferenceboard.ca