



## **Despite hardships, ag industry has opportunity to become stronger post-pandemic**

**By Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association**

We can all agree that 2020 was a year like none other.

It was a year that tested everyone's readiness to adapt to change quickly. And the agricultural industry was no exception.

From labour logistics and personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages to processing delays and pivoting to online marketing, many farmers across the country encountered a long and ever-changing list of challenges due to COVID-19.

“Farmers faced a lot of new challenges in their ability to function within the restrictions [associated with COVID-19], as did everybody,” says Wendy Bennett, Executive Director of AgSafe in British Columbia. “But if you have a farm, the opportunity for everybody to work from home doesn't work. Here I am working at my dining room table, but that's not an option if there are 100 acres of apples to pick.”

In Manitoba, Thea Green, Program Manager for Keystone Agricultural Producers, says that for many farmers the pandemic did not impact their ability to farm, but “it did impact how they farm.”

There is no denying the hardships and challenges that have been experienced across the Canadian agricultural industry. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has also provided the sector with a unique learning opportunity and the chance to explore new processes.

“We all adapted because we were forced to; it's never fun to have to do something because you're backed into a corner. But there has also been some benefit to being forced to explore change, to make it a priority,” explains Carolyn Van Den Heuvel, Director of Outreach and Member Relations with Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture.





“We all hit some bumps and hurdles along the way while figuring it all out, and if we look at how our food value chain adapted, it’s really impressive and worth recognizing.”

Health and safety procedures top the list of what has been impacted by COVID-19 on farms across Canada. While another layer has been added to what employers have to do to ensure everybody’s well-being on the farm during the pandemic, those requirements may have a positive and lasting effect on farm health and safety procedures.

“COVID opened a lot of eyes to worker health and safety requirements across the board. And those requirements have largely always been there, but some people didn’t think they applied to them. I think, moving forward, the experience of dealing with COVID is going to make people pay more attention,” explains Bennett, adding that her organization has seen a noticeable increase in requests for help with implementing health and safety measures.

“The importance of preparedness has really become evident during COVID-19,” Green notes. “We never know what is going to come our way in the industry, but farmers can use the experiences of COVID-19 to do emergency preparedness for a whole range of situations that would allow them to respond more effectively.”

Van Den Heuvel agrees, explaining that the pandemic underscored the importance of implementing a farm safety plan and conducting a risk assessment.

“We are going to look at health and safety differently going forward. COVID has been, for lack of a better term, a good exercise for implementing a farm safety plan,” she says. “Health and safety are part of an overall farm management plan, and having a solid management plan, understanding processes for making decisions, and communicating with family members and workers were shown to be fundamental during COVID.”

In fact, communication became an essential component across the agricultural industry in response to COVID-19, with collaboration proving particularly beneficial for commodity groups, which used shared experiences to find solutions and address challenges.





“The importance of having open communication really came to the forefront with COVID. The only way that all of us were able to adapt to COVID successfully was by working together,” explains Van Den Heuvel. “COVID showed us what true collaboration brings us; it showed us when we work together, how much further we can get.”

But the benefits of increased communication haven’t been limited to within the industry. With more people cooking at home during the pandemic, COVID-19 has provided the agricultural industry with a valuable opportunity to connect with consumers about their food and what’s being done to ensure food security in Canada.

“There has been heightened interest in Canadian food during the pandemic, and Canadian consumers are increasingly interested in where their food is coming from,” says Green.

Adds Van Den Heuvel, “There is definitely a recognition for agriculture amongst the public like we haven’t necessarily seen in the past, and that means more opportunities to connect with the public about their food.”

What things will look like post-pandemic is still anyone’s guess. But one thing is for certain: Canadian farmers’ abilities to adapt and continue to produce safe and healthy products are proof that the pandemic won’t hurt the agricultural industry. It will make it stronger.

“Everyone in agriculture recognizes that everyone else in agriculture is going through similar challenges,” says Bennett. “And that collaboration will only make the industry stronger for everyone because COVID showed us that you never know what’s next.”

Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW) is a public campaign held annually during the third week of March that focuses on the importance of safe agriculture. The 2021 campaign, Safe & Strong Farms: Lead an AgSafe Canada, takes place March 14-20. CASW is presented by Farm Credit Canada. For more information, visit [agsafetyweek.ca](http://agsafetyweek.ca).

