

Canada should stand with farmers at COP28

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Agriculture Minister Lawrence MacAulay. A more sophisticated defence of our food system needs to be presented by the Canadian government at COP28, writes Marty Seymour. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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COP28 is scheduled for Nov. 30 to Dec. 12, 2023. The United Nations Climate Change Conference has slowly evolved into a soap box event for evangelicals to shout from the rooftops, touting the perils of climate change.

Nations will arrive with huge delegations, to be shuttled around in private cars and stay in world-class hotels, while pointing fingers at each other and saying more needs to be

done to hit the ambitious climate targets set out in Paris in 2015. Meanwhile, protesters will point fingers at every industry, demanding change and substantial overhauls outside the gates of the convention centre, filling our evening news with images of chaos and anarchy.

This year is special because the event is held in Dubai, the epicentre of “Big Oil.” The president of this year’s COP is Sultan Ahmed Al-Jaber, CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), the United Arab Emirates’ largest oil company, which runs a solid 12th in global oil production. Hollywood could not have written a better screenplay for controversy, passion, and politics.

While the focus will be on decarbonizing the oil sector and wealth transfers to developing nations, one group will be unjustly named and shamed for its contribution to climate change: agriculture.

This is one sector the Canadian government needs to show up prepared to defend. This is the time for courageous leadership.

Agriculture is commonly accused of contributing 11 per cent of carbon dioxide emissions, but not all agriculture is created equal. For example, large scale wheat fields on the Prairies using the latest seeding and fertilizing technology cannot be lumped in with the two-acre subsistence farmers in India, who are eking out a living on methane-rich rice paddy fields. Nor can cattle grazing the grasslands of the western Prairies be compared to the cattle of the Amazon.

Canada risks shifting our food production out of the country if we over-regulate the agriculture industry, and carbon emission penalties can act as a catalyst. One of the three core principles of carbon crediting is the risk of “leakage.”

In simple terms, if one makes a choice not to cut down a tree for lumber, but simply shifts the choice to one's neighbour, the true carbon capture was not achieved, as the act "leaked" to someone else, and a tree was still lost. This is what happens when we create unjust regulations on the production of our beef or wheat and, as a result, production shifts to other nations with lighter regulatory requirements or punitive penalties.

The Canadian food system has unique features and land use opportunities, which are only made possible by six months of winter and huge areas of unoccupied land. A more sophisticated defence of our food system needs to be presented by the Canadian government at COP28. Regulatory handcuffs placed on Canadian farmers will simply result in reduced yields, and a shift in production to other countries who don't have Canada's vast land mass and clean water. This effectively increases the carbon intensity of foods produced in less productive regions.

A sustainable food system must be integrated into a successful climate strategy. Hungry people have but one need, and it's not saving the planet. This means climate targets focused on a specific sector like agriculture cannot be rolled out in a vacuum or in isolation by any nation. Equally, 173 nations can't unilaterally decide to make a sweeping change in production practices without a series of unintended consequences.

Canada has a unique competitive advantage to grow large volumes of high-quality food. It's our responsibility to show up at COP28 to defend our farmers and invite the world to shop in Canada.

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