

FIRST NATION AGRICULTURE IN THE PRAIRIE REGION

A summary of current participation, barriers, and opportunities to future participation in agriculture in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta

DECEMBER 2022



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1. Overview

Agriculture is an important part of the economy of the Prairie region. The region – made up of Manitoba (MB), Saskatchewan (SK) and Alberta (AB) – is a major exporter of crop and livestock commodities. Agri-processing is a rapidly growing activity in the region. First Nations have a history in agriculture in the Prairies prior to European settlement and following the signing of the Numbered Treaties. However, First Nation participation and representation in agriculture is currently disproportionately low.

This report provides a summary of “what we heard” from First Nations through an engagement project conducted by the Provincial governments of MB, SK and AB. The project was undertaken to better understand the current participation of First Nations in the Prairie region and gather their perspectives on opportunities and barriers to achieving their future participation goals.

Through the engagement project it is clear that First Nations are interested in growing their participation in agriculture. While feedback indicates opportunities in production agriculture, agri-processing and other agri-business, support is needed to overcome significant barriers facing First Nations in achieving their goals.

2. Why did we take this journey?

The project engaged First Nations located in MB, SK and AB to understand the current landscape of Indigenous agriculture on a provincial and western Canadian level in order to set a baseline to understand participation and interest of First Nations in agriculture. For the purposes of the engagement project, agricultural participation included primary production, and agri-processing and other agri-business. Feedback from engagement is intended to support and align policy, programming and initiatives of the governments of MB, SK and AB with First Nations’ communities’ vision, land use plans and governance. The information will inform the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership (SCAP) framework, a federal-provincial-territorial program that invests funds into agriculture, agri-food, and agri-based products.

The SCAP will be launched in April 2023 and represents a continuation of programming which started under the Agricultural Policy Framework in 2003. The SCAP looks to build on previous successes, while addressing emerging issues and capturing opportunities. It seeks to address barriers to participation and consider the needs of underrepresented groups such as youth and women and strengthen relationships with Indigenous Peoples to better support sector participation.

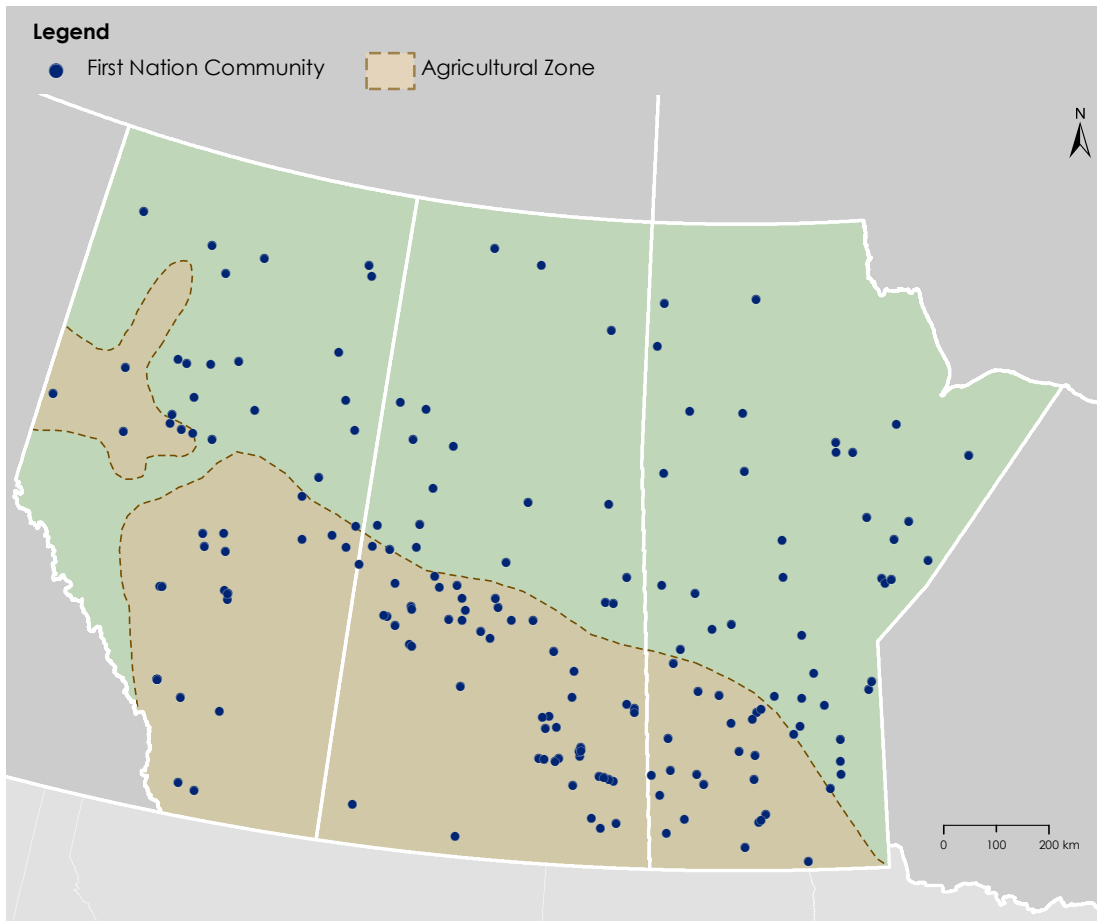
3. What did we do?

Engagement was mainly virtual due to the large number of Nations involved, the large geographic area, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic at the planning stage of this project in 2021. Feedback was collected through a virtual engagement survey, phone conversations and a virtual engagement workshop.

Starting in November 2021, the survey was distributed via a link in 189 emails to 140 Nations across the three prairie provinces. Where email addresses were missing or not available, phone calls were made to determine the best way to distribute the survey. Follow up phone calls were made to all Nations to make them aware of the survey and encourage them to complete the survey. To encourage participation, the survey was distributed to tribal councils across the three prairie provinces, advertised at conferences focused on and attended by First Nations interested and/or involved in agriculture, posted on social media, and sent to participants who registered for the online conference in August 2022.

One-on-one meetings, which occurred over the phone, allowed Nations to share additional information with respect to opportunities and barriers to participation in agriculture.

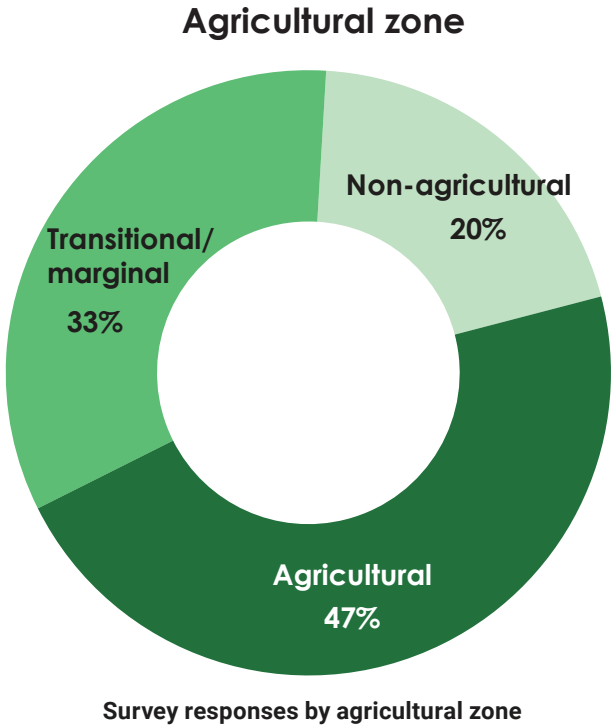
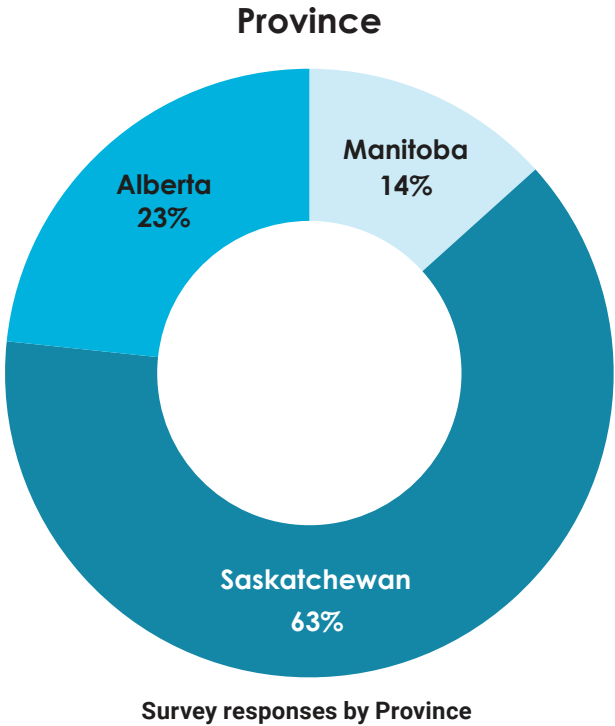
Feedback was also gathered through an online meeting on August 16, 2022, via Zoom. Three speakers discussed various topics that reflected themes from survey results to date. Todd Orman from Olds College in Olds, AB discussed the lack of or lost agriculture knowledge. Stephanie Cook from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation Health Authority in MB discussed their Smart Farm and barriers to accessing funding and capital. Shirley Thomson from the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, MB discussed engaging and equipping Nations for future participation in agriculture. Two breakout sessions were intended to gather more feedback from the participants. Six short polls were run during the online event to gather information and keep participants engaged. A graphical representation of First Nations from across the region is provided in the inset figure.



First Nations in the Prairie Region

4. What we heard

4.1 Engagement results



Thirty survey responses were completed. The highest number of responses were received from Saskatchewan (19 responses, 63% of total responses), followed by Alberta (7 responses, 23% of total responses) then Manitoba (4 responses, 14% of total responses).

The one-on-one phone conversations and the virtual engagement workshop provided additional data. Sixty-eight people signed up for the virtual engagement session from various organizations and Indigenous Nations.

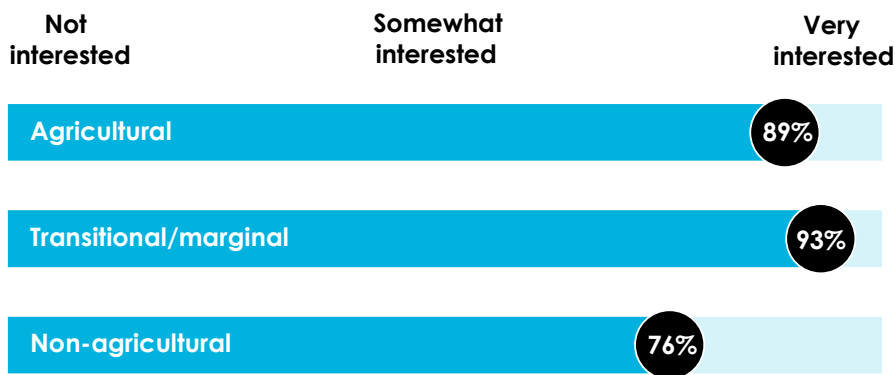
Please note that all engagement results have been rounded for this report.

4.2 Current participation

Current participation in agriculture is limited but interest in involvement is high

Engagement results suggest participation of First Nations in primary agricultural production activities is limited in Prairie region agriculture and provides additional support that First Nations are under-represented in agriculture.

Feedback from engagement indicates there is a strong level of interest in agriculture. This strong level of interest holds regardless of the location of the respondent in relation to conventional agricultural zones – whether in areas considered agricultural, transitional/or marginal for agriculture or non-agricultural (see inset figure).



Engagement survey respondents identify various reasons for their interest in agriculture, including:

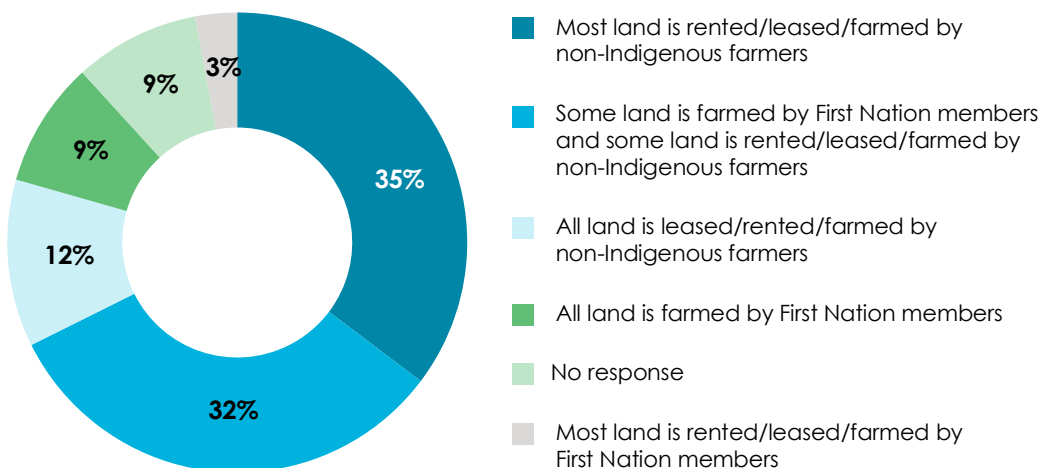
- improve food security/sovereignty
- increase self-sufficiency
- support self-governance
- establish better control over agricultural land
- history in farming the land
- part of the culture
- re-connect with the land
- improve economy, revenue and job creation

Interest in agricultural zones

Crop production

For those respondents whose Nation or community has land in cropping, over 50% indicate that all or most land is leased/rented/farmed by non-Indigenous farmers (see inset figure). Thirty-two percent of respondents indicate that some land is farmed by First Nation members and some is farmed by non-Indigenous farmers. These data suggest there is a high-level of involvement of non-Indigenous farmers in crop production activities on First Nation lands.

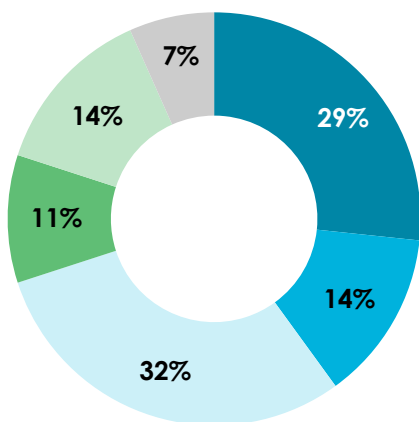
Therefore, land rental/leasing is an important component of crop land management and source of revenue from agricultural crop land belonging to First Nations. Further, this suggests that the value potential from agricultural crop land and production is not being realized by First Nations in many cases.



Crop production on Nation or community land

Livestock production

For those respondents whose Nation or community has land in livestock production, close to half (43%) indicate that all or most livestock/farm animals are raised/managed by First Nation members (see inset figure). A quarter of respondents (25%) indicate that all or most livestock/farm animals are raised/managed by non-Indigenous farmers, while just under a third of respondents (32%) indicate some livestock/farm animals are raised/managed by First Nation members and some by non-Indigenous farmers.



- All livestock/farm animals are raised/managed by First Nation members
- Most livestock/farm animals are raised/managed by First Nation members
- Some livestock/farm animals are raised/managed by First Nation members and some land is rented/leased/farmed by non-Indigenous farmers
- Most livestock/farm animals are raised/managed by non-Indigenous farmers
- All livestock/farm animals are raised/managed by non-Indigenous farmers
- No response

These results demonstrate a higher level of First Nation involvement in livestock production activities relative to crop production activities. Cattle, horses, and bison were most frequently listed by respondents as animal types currently raised, with a few mentions of chickens (broilers, egg-laying hens).

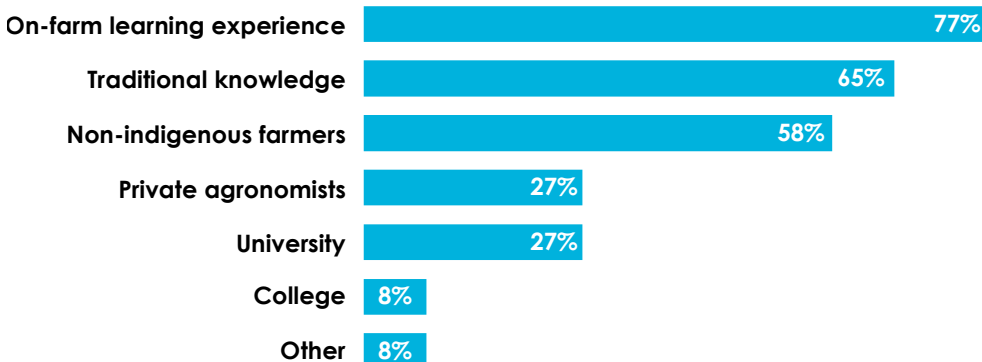
However, feedback on livestock herd sizes anecdotally suggest unrealized potential in intensity of livestock production on First Nation lands.

Livestock production on Nation or community land

Other types of agriculture and food systems

To ensure that non-conventional agricultural and food production activities were captured, respondents were asked if their Nation or community was involved in types of agricultural production other than cropping and raising livestock. While most respondents indicate other types of production are not practiced, 30% of respondents indicate at least one other type of production. Community gardens were the most common, while wild rice, traditional and/or medicinal plant collection, and 'other' types, including greenhouses, individual gardens, and food gathering activities (e.g., wild berries and mushrooms) were noted by fewer respondents. Community gardens are referenced by multiple respondents as an activity which, beyond providing locally grown produce, can be used to promote involvement of members including youth (e.g., incorporation into school programming). Wild rice harvesting and traditional and/or medicinal plant collection provide commentary on the importance of traditional foods, local/country foods and nutrition from the land for some Nations.

Agricultural production knowledge is gained from a range of different sources. Respondents to the survey identified on-farm learning experience (77%) and traditional knowledge (65%) as the most common source of knowledge (see inset figure). Outside sources of



Sources of agricultural knowledge

knowledge are also common with 58% of respondents indicating knowledge is acquired from non-indigenous farmers, and 27% indicating private agronomists are used as a knowledge source. Post-secondary institutions were cited by 27% of respondents in terms of university education and 8% of respondents in terms of college education. Other sources of knowledge were indicated by 8% of respondents.

Agri-processing and other agri-business

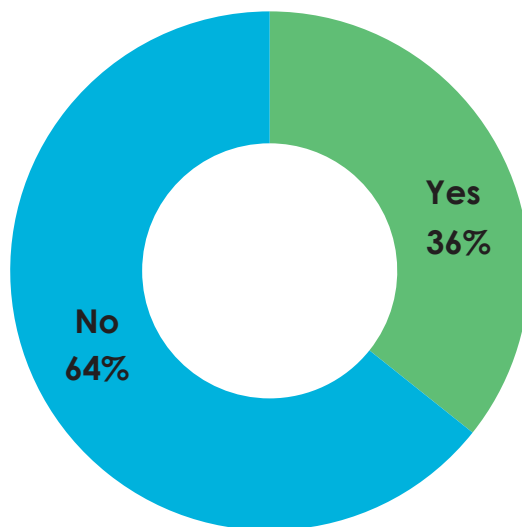
First Nation involvement in agri-processing and other agri-business is currently limited. Of the 30 engagement survey respondents, 28 completed this section. Of the respondents who completed this section, the majority (64%) indicate their Nation or community is not involved in agri-processing or other agri-business, while 36% indicate involvement in this portion of the sector (see inset figure).

For those respondents indicating that agri-processing and other agri-business is part of their participation in agriculture, the majority of respondents indicate that traditional food processing and medicinal food processing are activities being undertaken. Other current agri-processing activities include crops/grains processing, animal feed/forage processing, meat processing, and other types of processing.

Multiple respondents indicate the need for support in this area, such as training, funding, and long-term programs.

Direct engagement feedback was received from a few Nations who discussed value-added agri-business they have developed including:

- Vertical or smart farms, which allow for produce to be grown in cold climates like the Prairie region year-round and grown in areas where conventional agricultural is not possible due to inadequate climate or land suitability, such as the northern zone of the region. Some are constructed in shipping containers and are designed to grow produce using hydroponics within a controlled environment (see inset image). These developments provide opportunities for education, training, awareness and employment for youth and other community members.
- An irrigation project and forage processing plant provide good examples of value-added activities in areas of conventional agricultural production. These types of developments allow for the increase in value of agricultural land and crop production, while providing flexibility around land management and primary production activities (e.g., rental and leasing of land for production), and, at the same time, provide training and employment opportunities for First Nation members.



Nation or community involvement in agri-processing or other agri-business



Source: original photo by Stephanie Cook; photo taken from *The Western Producer* "First Nations farm focuses on health, September 30, 2021" at <https://www.producer.com/news/first-nations-farm-focuses-on-health/>

These types of opportunities can increase participation in agriculture without some of the challenges associated with entry into production agriculture, and can result in increased agricultural economy, employment and career opportunities, and improved food security and sovereignty. They are not without their own challenges, however, such as access to funding and capital, access to markets, and the need for training and skilled labour.

4.3 Barriers and opportunities to future participation

Barriers to achieving future agricultural goals

Numerous barriers were provided as options to respondents to select as those that are limiting their ability to achieve future agricultural goals. While all barriers presented were selected as applicable by respondents, the most frequently selected barriers (i.e., the top 10 barriers selected) were primarily related directly or indirectly to lack of agricultural knowledge, experience and skills, and lack of/access to funding and capital (see inset figure below).

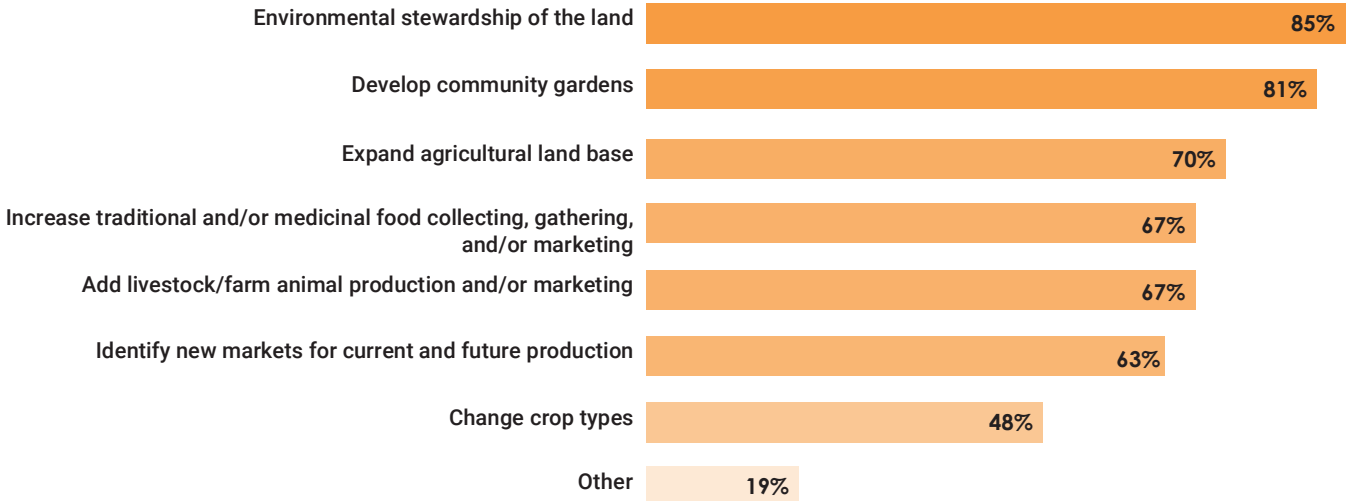


Barriers limiting First Nations' ability to achieve future agricultural goals

Opportunities in primary agricultural production, and agri-processing and other agri-business

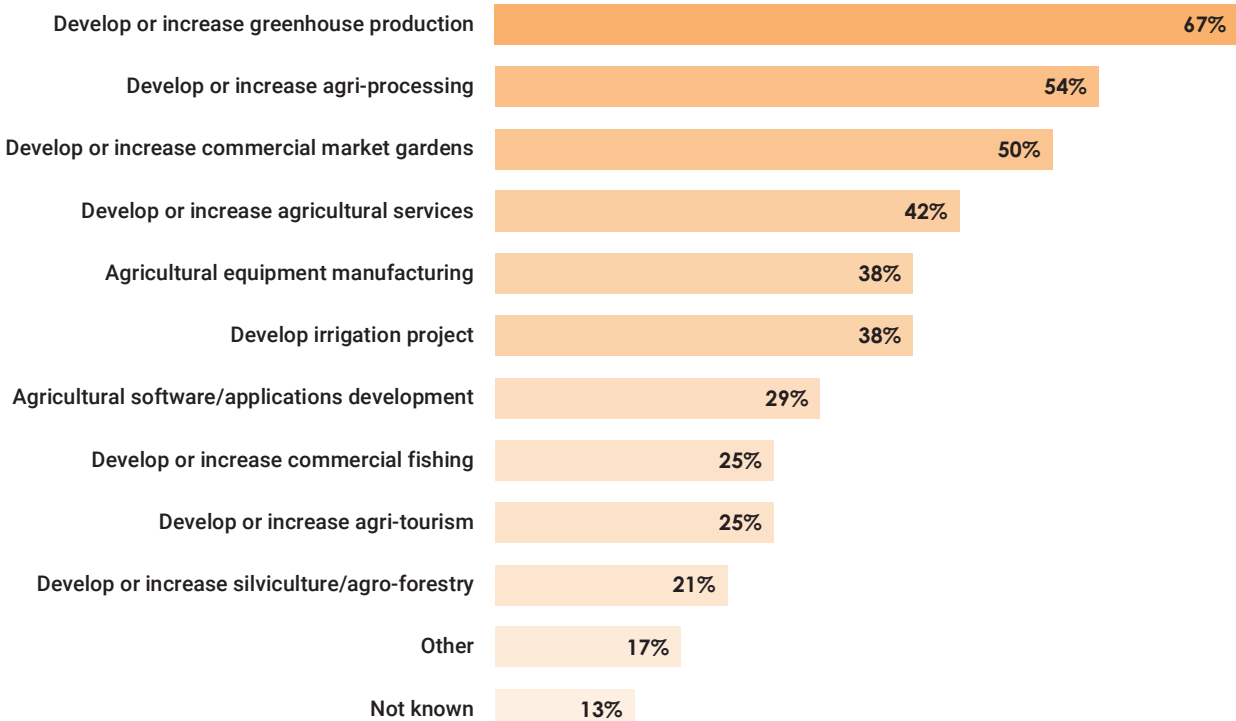
When asked about opportunities in primary agricultural production, and agri-processing and other agri-business, opportunity options presented in the survey resonated strongly with respondents.

For production agriculture, environmental stewardship of land was selected most frequently (see inset figure below). Developing community gardens and increasing traditional and/or medicinal food collecting, gathering, and/or marketing had strong responses, and were identified as a means of connecting the community with agriculture and traditional values while providing nutritious food supply to First Nation members. Expanding the agricultural land base, identifying new markets for current and future production, and adding livestock/farm animal production and/or marketing were all selected by more than half of the respondents and reinforce the importance amongst respondents of growing agricultural economy and food production.



Opportunities in agricultural production

When it comes to opportunities in agri-processing and other agribusiness, all of the opportunities presented were selected by multiple respondents (see inset figure below) indicating an openness to a broad range of opportunities for secondary agricultural development. The two opportunities that more than half of respondents indicate as potential are developing or increasing greenhouse production, and developing or increase agri-processing (food processing, packaging and marketing).



Opportunities in agri-processing and other agribusiness

4.4 Feedback summary by themes

The following themes were identified from feedback received, and a summary of key feedback is provided for each theme.

Access to funding & capital

Access to funding and capital is the most noted and notable barrier to entry into and growth of agricultural activities for First Nations. Lack of land ownership is a major, specific factor limiting the ability for First Nation members to acquire agricultural loans for primary production activities, such as purchasing equipment.

Awareness of support programs

Respondents said there is poor awareness of support programs available to support Indigenous agriculture. Respondents indicated a lack of awareness and/or lack of understanding of how to access or use support programs. Based on the general desire and eagerness to pursue opportunities amongst those that provided feedback, there appears to be a need to improve awareness, understanding, and access to support programs and opportunities.

Improving educational opportunities and building knowledge, experience and skills

Feedback strongly indicates that providing educational opportunities to build knowledge is a priority for future participation in the agriculture sector. Provision of education is a necessary step to provide youth with the foundation for future involvement but is a long-term process. The immediate need in addressing the lack of capacity, experience and skills requires additional action including training, mentorship and support services.

Youth involvement

Engagement feedback strongly indicates the sentiment that the youth are the future and that their involvement should play a significant role in the future of sustainable agriculture for First Nations. However, there is an acknowledgement that current involvement and opportunity for involvement is lacking, and that investments must be made to better engage youth in agriculture, and increase awareness of the importance of agriculture to food security and sovereignty.



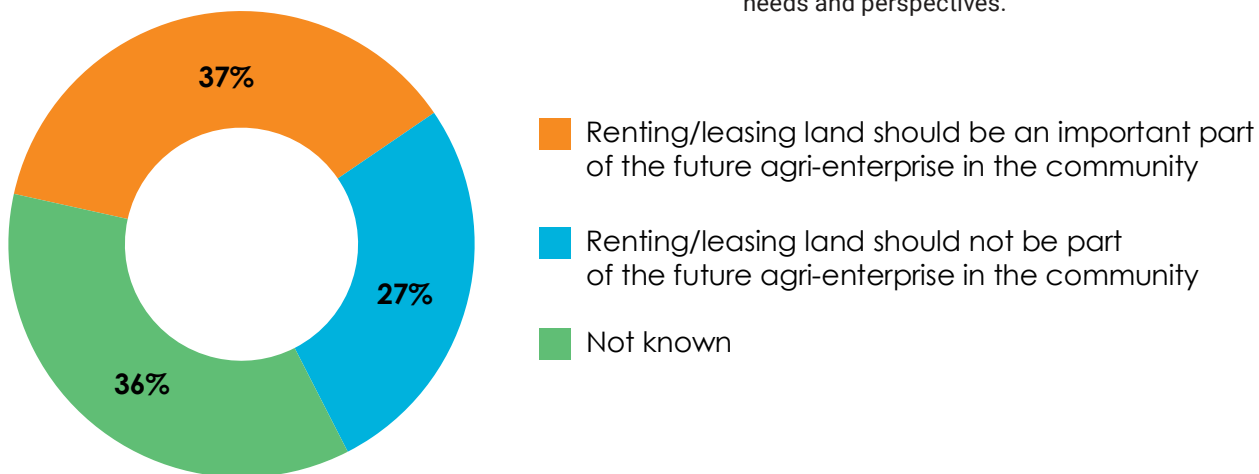
Land management, availability and suitability

While some land is actively managed by First Nation members for crop and livestock production, rental and leasing out agricultural land to non-Indigenous farmers appears to be the dominant land management model in the region. For those Nations not currently actively involved in agricultural production, entry into agricultural activities has numerous and significant barriers to entry.

When asked what role agricultural land rental and leasing should play in the future, engagement feedback was mixed (see inset figure below).

Respondents indicate the need for support in this area, the need to maintain fair market value for leased land, the desire to take a more active role in the management of First Nation lands, and in some cases, to lease more land and acquire or develop more land to lease out. Regarding support, references were made to access information and experts, information on land suitability (i.e., land study) and uses, agricultural land management and land use planning and education, and providing support to members to lease their land. Other respondents weren't sure how to improve the current rental and leasing model.

Respondents also indicate that buckshee leases still exist in some Nations and are a barrier to participation by other community members.



Future role of agricultural land rental and leasing

Traditional values and environmental stewardship

Traditional values and environmental stewardship are two values of importance to First Nations based on engagement feedback. Supporting the awareness of alignment of these principles with agricultural production and agricultural practices occurring within Indigenous communities may help in strengthening the connection between First Nation members and agricultural activities.

Partnerships and collaboration

There is a need for meaningful and lasting relationships to be built between First Nations and others involved in agriculture, including organizations such as:

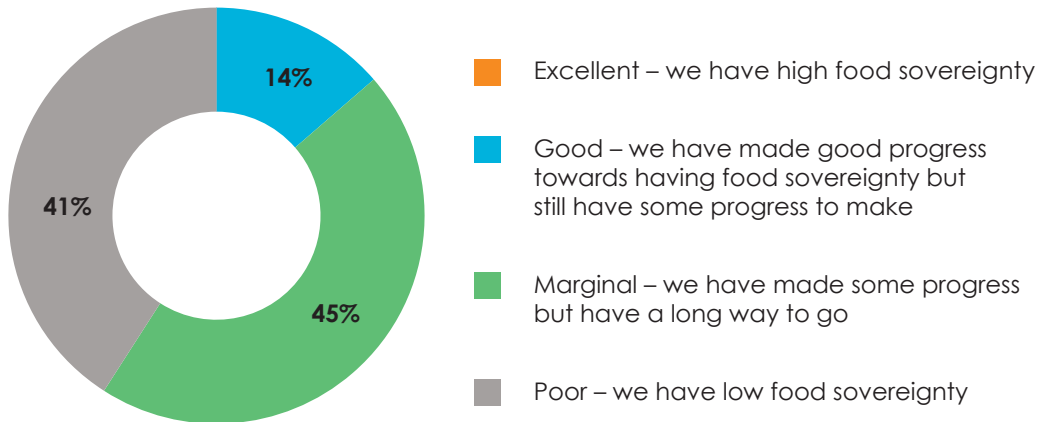
- Governmental departments and agencies involved in agricultural and agri-business
- Private agri-businesses
- Educational institutions with agricultural programs (colleges and universities)
- Non-Indigenous farmers
- Agricultural lending institutions
- Other agricultural stakeholders (e.g., producer commodity organizations, grassroots organizations such as 4-H Canada, conservation districts)

Relationships need to be built on respect for First Nation peoples' history, tradition, culture, and diverse and unique needs and perspectives.

Food sovereignty

Engagement feedback confirms a strong sentiment that food sovereignty is an important priority amongst First Nations in the region. However, when asked to rate current levels of food sovereignty within their communities, survey respondents indicate that it is predominantly considered poor or marginal (see inset figure below).

A range of barriers to food sovereignty heard through engagement include lack of financial resources to buy food, remote communities with short growing seasons, developed dependencies on local and regional stores, perceptions that agriculture is a threat to culture, member commitment, lack of knowledge, education, teachers and training in food production, lack of experience and ability, and lack of capacity, resources, and infrastructure.



Current level of food sovereignty within First Nations communities



5. Engaging and equipping for future participation

Regardless of their location relative to conventional agricultural capability, First Nations have a strong interest in the agriculture sector and a strong desire to have First Nation members involved. Policy and programs to support the growth in First Nation agriculture in the Prairie region need to reflect the diversity of the current participation in the sector and support partnerships and collaboration to address barriers to entry and facilitate opportunities.

It is clear from the engagement project that diversity and inclusiveness needs to be a core principle of policy and programs. A broad diversity in current participation in the sector, and the unique history, capability, and capacity of First Nations precludes a one size-fits-all solution. Programming must aim to leverage the various interests and desires in order to support First Nations in their journeys towards achieving their goals and objectives in agriculture in the region.

In spite of the interest in growth in First Nation participation, there are significant barriers to entry, including accessing capital and funding, lack of experience and knowledge, and lack of skilled labour. Examples of successes across the region could be leveraged to illustrate paths for other Nations. There are opportunities for partnerships and collaboration to support First Nations in their pursuit of growth and development in the sector. These partnerships and collaborations may be between: First Nations and government; First Nations and industry; First Nations and non-Indigenous farmers; and/or, First Nations and other First Nations.

A potential path forward that could involve provincial governments but goes beyond the scope and capacity of the provincial governments alone, would be developing a broad-based model to bring together members of Indigenous groups, industry, academia, and non-profit organizations to collaborate, reduce barriers and facilitate opportunities in agriculture. This type of approach could bring the necessary members, focus, support, and financial means to a “Growing Indigenous Agriculture in the Prairies Region” initiative to encourage and foster meaningful growth and participation in First Nation agriculture across the Prairies.



FIRST NATION AGRICULTURE IN THE PRAIRIE REGION
