

[Union des producteurs agricoles]

RECOMMENDATIONS PRESENTED BY  
UNION DES PRODUCTEURS AGRICOLES

TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES THAT CANADIAN FARMERS, RANCHERS  
AND PRODUCERS FACE

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September 27, 2018

## Union des producteurs agricoles

Throughout its history, the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA) has worked tirelessly on many issues: farm credit, agricultural and forestry cooperatives, rural electrification, rural education development, collective marketing, recognition of the farming profession, protection of farmland, implementation of sustainable agriculture and even the development of print media in Quebec through its newspaper *La Terre de chez nous*. Since its inception, the UPA has contributed to Quebec's growth and development.

The activities of the UPA and its members are part of Quebec's rural fabric. They shape the regions' economic, geographic and community landscape. Quebec's 41,406 farmers operate 28,194 farms, most of them family owned and operated, and provide jobs for 56,500 workers. Every year they invest \$547 million in Quebec's regional economy.

In 2017, Quebec's agriculture industry generated \$8.5 billion in revenue, making it the biggest primary industry in Quebec and a key economic player, especially in rural communities.

Meanwhile, Quebec's 30,000 forestry producers harvest timber worth more than \$350 million annually, generating revenues of \$2.5 billion for the wood processing industry.

The UPA also extends around the globe through its work with Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries to advocate for a farm exemption in trade agreements, and in Africa, where through UPA Développement international it works to develop collective marketing. By maximizing Quebec's land heritage, agricultural and forest producers have together put Quebec's agriculture and private forests on the map in Canada and around the world.

Today, the UPA is composed of 12 regional federations and 26 specialized groups. It counts on the direct involvement of more than 2,000 producers acting as administrators.

For the UPA, "POUVOIR NOURRIR" means fueling the passion that drives all farmers, building the vision of providing everyone with access to very high-quality products. "POUVOIR GRANDIR" means working together steadfastly toward the future. "POUVOIR NOURRIR POUVOIR GRANDIR" is our promise.

## 1. Farming and psychological distress: a real problem

Farming and psychological distress are talked about more and more. It is therefore reassuring to see the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food take an interest in this issue. Various observations from community organizations and Quebec researchers also underscore the urgent need for action:

- High rate of farming and psychological distress: 57% of farmers consulted in Ginette Lafleur's (2006) study said they were experiencing or had experienced a period of significant distress
- An analysis of 78 coroner's reports following a farmer's suicide (Lafleur, 2010) had disturbing findings, e.g., health and social services do not seem to be adapted to farmers' needs
  - 67% were diagnosed with a mental illness
  - 51% had professional problems
  - 25% had sought help in the months preceding their suicide; 22% in the previous days
- Several stress factors were identified
  - Increasingly large investments and demanding regulations (e.g., environmental, animal welfare)
  - Financial uncertainty (e.g., renewal of trade agreements)
  - Difficult farm transfer (e.g., farm value vs. profitability)
  - Lack of available, skilled labour

- Work-family balance difficult to achieve

These situations cause many farmers to burn out (physical and psychological) and lead to difficult interpersonal relationships (divorce, family tensions, isolation) for themselves and their families. Distress, while not the only factor, can unfortunately lead to suicide. When the worst happens, it has an impact on the farming community. These situations have led the UPA to get involved in mental health and farming.

UPA's activities have focused on at-risk clientele, in partnership with the Association québécoise de prévention du suicide and suicide prevention centres. However, more must be done. Proactive action is needed to reduce psychological distress in farming and its tragic consequences.

## 2. Big picture approach to mental health

Several factors contribute to deteriorating mental health among farmers. In addition to personal reasons, the socio-economic aspects of farming in Canada must also be considered.

In terms of human health, services must take the unique nature of farming into account. In addition to being an economic sector that is dependent on the vagaries of the weather, farming is traditionally a man's world (Roy, 2016). Male farmers are reluctant to seek help and, when they do, they are often desperate. Moreover, services are not always available or accessible, and medical follow-up is often inadequate or even non-existent in some regions. From a socio-economic perspective, the various government programs (e.g., financial assistance, support to learn about the various regulations) must also be easily accessible, coordinated and well planned.

## 3. Recommendations

UPA's recommendations to the Committee are based on three main areas of intervention: prevention to reduce or eliminate sources of stress,

improving psychosocial and health services for farmers (appropriate and available professional services) and improving mental health knowledge and practices.

### 3.1 Take preventive action

The state has a responsibility to provide easily accessible farming programs to head off crisis. In this regard, UPA recommends:

- at the socio-economic level
  - implement programs to facilitate the transfer of intergenerational farms
  - develop a strategy for recruiting and training a skilled agricultural workforce, including foreign workers
  - simplify administrative documents so various government programs can be accessed
  - adopt compensatory measures to mitigate economic losses as soon as changes to trade rules that may have a significant impact on farm profitability are recognized by the federal government
  - implement an appropriate risk management program as soon as economic, political or climatic problems arise
  - consider human health, particularly mental health, in all development projects
  - include the obligation to support farmers in distress within Canadian farm organizations
- in terms of health promotion
  - develop a national strategy to implement a mental health promotion campaign for farmers that takes into account the unique nature of farming, such as periods of heavy farm work and economic and meteorological disruptions
  - increase awareness of the importance of protecting one's health and seeking help at the first sign of a problem

- promote a balanced lifestyle, e.g., support research on farming issues related to work-life balance and develop awareness campaigns for farmers

### 3.2 Improve psychosocial and health services

The State has a responsibility to ensure that people get the psychosocial and health services they need. Psychological health for farmers should be provided through community organizations and public services. To this end, UPA recommends:

- recognize the unique nature of farming in various programs:
  - develop a farming component at the Canadian Mental Health Association;
  - develop a prevention strategy through health promotion and better life balance (awareness, information, education, support) specific to the agricultural world
- implement public health and psychosocial services in all regions of Canada and available and accessible services in all rural areas:
  - facilitate access to professional health services and psychosocial intervention before the situation becomes critical
  - provide significant support to community groups in the regions
  - support Au coeur des familles agricoles in developing a permanent network of farmers across Quebec's agricultural regions
- support sentinel training, an agricultural approach for Canadian government professionals who meet farmers through their work (e.g., food safety and animal health inspectors, advisors, Farm Credit Canada);
- implement a system for sharing information among provincial authorities responsible for mental health intervention
- encourage mental health workers (e.g., psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers) to develop practices adapted to the reality of farmers
- better coordinate the work of professional resources so as to increase access across all regions

### 3.3. Improve knowledge and practices

Research can help increase knowledge of mental health issues in farming. Programs and tools also need to be developed to increase awareness, information, support and advice for farmers. Lastly, developing indicators to monitor issues over time would be extremely useful. The UPA therefore recommends:

- research in health care
  - current status (e.g., health determinants, information to identify current health status and trends)
  - review of research projects carried out to date
  - research on the health status (physical and mental) of farmers, including the development of indicators for year-over-year tracking of changes, perceived stress level and suicide cases
  - develop a database (clientele, provision of care/services, signs of distress, suicides, etc.), accessible to various stakeholders
  - research/action or surveys to identify unmet needs among farmers (preventive and curative) and the services they would like to count on
- develop intervention tools
  - guides to raise awareness among professionals and encourage them to take the complexity of life on the farm into account in their practice
  - training for farmers to help them cope better with stress (e.g., traditional training, e-learning, webinars)

### 4. Take preventive action

Action is needed now to preserve farmers' health: psychological distress is affecting many of them. Taking preventive action means taking public action. The UPA believes that farmers need to be made aware, informed, advised and supported wherever they are. Mental health services must be concerted and coordinated and adapted to the agricultural reality. A true preventive approach is needed. It presents a challenge because farm life is

woven into the fabric of personal and family lives. The UPA is already active in this area and hopes that the federal government will also commit to health, safety and well-being in agriculture. Food security in Canada depends on maintaining a balance between farm profitability and farmers' health.

The UPA has made an action plan and appointed someone in each of its regional and local offices to oversee this file. Its network allows it to cover the whole of Quebec and reach all agricultural producers. The UPA has ensured that sentinel suicide prevention training is adapted to the agricultural reality and promotes it among its agri-food partners; more than 600 sentinels have been trained to date. Two provincial forums in 2016 and 2018 provided an opportunity to share knowledge and bring our partners together to prevent psychological distress in agriculture. Our next action plan is aimed at consolidating our activities and prevention.

Our recommendations to the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food aim to reduce sources of stress, increase services to farmers and their families and improve mental health knowledge and practices.

Taking care of farmers and their families is the best way to keep them healthy.