



Presentation to:

House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

Remarks by Ashley St Hilaire (COG) and Jim Robbins (OFC)

National Food Policy - September 19, 2017

Ashley St Hilaire - Director of Programs and Government Relations - COG

Good afternoon Mr. Chair and the honourable members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today about Canada's National Food Policy. My name is Ashley St Hilaire, and I am the Director of Programs and Government Relations at Canadian Organic Growers. I am joined here today by Jim Robbins, an organic field crop and cow-calf producer from Saskatchewan, President of the Organic Federation of Canada.

Canadian Organic Growers (COG) is a national charity and organic farm membership organization.

We are pleased to be here today to talk about the importance of the government's initiative to develop a National Food Policy for Canada. We'd also like to announce and remind the committee that it is Canada's National Organic Week – which is an annual, country wide celebration of organic food, fibre and farming.

It's a fitting time of year to discuss a National Food Policy for Canada. As Canadian crops are in their final weeks of harvest, and abundance appears to be all around us, we are reminded by our work today that too many Canadians live with food insecurity. At the National Food Policy Summit we were shocked to learn that food bank usage continues to rise across the country despite Canada being ranked 8th in the world for food affordability. We support the work of this government and of Food Secure Canada to lead the development of a National Food Policy that will address these issues head-on.

Every Canadian deserves to access culturally appropriate and nutritious food so they may live with dignity.

We feel the priority areas within this policy are appropriate and should be equally weighted. Organic food and farming, span all of these priority areas and enhance food security in Canada because the core principle of organic agriculture is healthy soil.

Through organic management practices, organic producers are enhancing the health of our agricultural soils all across the country, ensuring that these lands can produce food for future generations of Canadians. Healthy soils enhance yields and the quality of what is produced. When we don't look after our soils, we turn to inputs, which increase the cost of production for farmers and cut into their profitability, making it harder and harder to make a living growing food for Canadians and the world. Farm profitability and food security in Canada are inherently linked.

We also urge policymakers to recognize that a balance be struck between the productivity of our crops and environmental degradation. Achieving ambitious agricultural export goals of \$75B by 2025 should not come at a cost to the environmental health of our agricultural lands as this would only further exacerbate food insecurity in Canada. Organics is an industry that has always championed this balance and continues to be an agricultural leader in sustainability. Consumers from all walks of life support our industry every day when they purchase organic products at grocery stores and farmers' market, and their desire to access sustainably and locally produced organic food should be backed by this policy and by a commitment from the government to permanently fund the Canadian Organic Standards.

I'll now turn it over to Jim, to speak to that point.

Jim Robbins – President of the Organic Federation of Canada

I am an organic farmer from Saskatchewan. Together with my family, I raise cattle and grow organic cereals, pulses and forages on 2500 acres in Saskatchewan. We farmed conventionally for twenty- one years and are now almost finished our nineteenth organic harvest.

I am proud to be representing today the Organic Federation of Canada which oversees the maintenance of our national Canadian Organic Standards.

The organic standard connects agriculture with environment: it defines good agricultural practices that target productivity, profitability and preservation of our environment. Decades ago, producers from across the country came together because they wanted to change the way they farmed – they wanted to reduce their environmental footprint and become more sustainable. The standards provide a framework for their agricultural practices and allow them to define what they do as organic agriculture. The standards

are not only a measure to ensure public trust in organic but are also an industry benchmark for achieving and standardizing environmental sustainability on a farm. The standards are a public good and all Canadians benefit from the practices organic farmers use on the land.

Our Canadian Organic Standards were established in law by the Government of Canada in 2009, and are referenced by Canadian federal regulations. However, the Canadian organic sector has been operating under the constant risk of losing the backbone of our industry which is our assurance system, our standards, our brand, our public trust. Because unlike our competitors such as the US and the European Union, whose governments fully and permanently fund the maintenance of their organic standards, the Government of Canada has yet to do the same for its own organic industry.

The Canadian Organic Standards, owned by the Canadian General Standards Board, requires our industry to review and update the organic standards every 5 years. The price tag of this work is \$1M, which goes to paying fees of the Canadian General Standards Board to oversee the review and publish the revised standard. It also includes the cost of paying for national consultations to ensure the standard reflects the needs of organic stakeholders. Reviewing the standards is absolutely critical for maintaining not only the Canada Organic Brand, but also all of our government negotiated, international organic trade arrangements which we have with 90% of our major trading partners. The Canada Organic Brand and the Canadian Organic Standards are all owned and backed by Government so when the Government of Canada prepares budget 2018, with the National Food Policy and its 2025 agricultural export goal in mind, we strongly urge you to eliminate this competitive disadvantage and risk to our industry and include permanent funding for the Canadian Organic Standards. They will need to be fully revised and updated by the year 2020 and that work needs to begin in 2018.

To conclude, we remind the committee that organic agriculture is an example of a successful clean-growth industry that offers a model for promoting climate-friendly food production. As the Government of Canada develops this National Food Policy, we hope that it builds a policy that both incentivizes and rewards sustainable agricultural production, which we know contributes to food security in Canada, and also look for opportunities to eliminate competitive disadvantages for organic producers – permanently funding the Canadian Organic Standards would be the way to start.

Thank you for providing us the opportunity to speak on this topic today.