National Agricultural Soil Health Strategy
Regional Engagement Sessions

What We Heard

Report

June 9, 11, 16, and 18, 2026



Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
Agriculture et Agroalimentaire Canada
THE SOIL CONSERVATION COUNCIL OF CANADA
CONSEIL CANADIEN DE CONSERVATION DES SOLS
Canada

What we heard: National Agricultural Soil Health Strategy Engagement
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Executive Summary

Four regional virtual engagement sessions were held in June 2026,

hosted by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) and the Soil Conservation Council of Canada (SCCC) to inform the development of the National Agricultural Soil Health Strategy (NASHS). Participants included industry representatives, non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations, provincial/territorial representatives, academia and research, and individuals who contacted the department wanting to be involved in discussions.

Discussions were focused on four main themes of the strategy



Soil research gaps and priorities



Data, measurement and evaluation



Extension and on-farm knowledge transfer



Resources and financial incentives

Several cross-cutting themes emerged throughout the discussions. Participants highlighted the need for a clear and shared definition of soil health. Building on this, they emphasized the importance of developing a clearer and more consistent understanding of soil health, supported by a core set of indicators and measurement approaches that can be applied nationally while remaining flexible enough to reflect regional conditions, production systems and soil types. Regional variability was consistently identified as an important consideration across all aspects of the strategy.

Trust emerged as a recurring theme, influencing data sharing, the effectiveness of extension services, the adoption of practices and relationships among producers, researchers and advisors. Participants emphasized the need for stronger connections between research, extension and on-farm adoption, including improved translation of research into practical information, greater support for peer-to-peer learning and enhanced extension capacity.

Participants highlighted the importance of ensuring that research, monitoring, extension and programming are practical, producer-focused and relevant to farm-level decision-making. Research findings, indicators and funding programs were viewed as most effective when they clearly demonstrate economic value and support producers in understanding the costs, benefits and trade-offs associated with soil health practices.

Participants also highlighted the importance of baseline data, benchmarking, long-term monitoring and improved consistency in soil testing, measurement and reporting. Building on existing research, data systems, programs and regional initiatives was viewed as important for reducing duplication and improving coordination. Many participants noted that a national strategy could help align priorities, coordinate investments, support long-term research and monitoring efforts, and improve collaboration across the sector.



Introduction

Between June 9 and June 18, 2026, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC), in collaboration with the Soil Conservation Council of Canada (SCCC), hosted four regional virtual engagement sessions to help inform the development of the National Agricultural Soil Health Strategy (NASHS). The sessions were held on June 9 (Ontario and Quebec), June 11 (Prairies), June 16 (British Columbia and the Territories), and June 18 (Atlantic Canada). A total of 113 participants contributed to the discussions representing industry stakeholders, non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations, provincial/territorial representatives, academia and research, and individuals who contacted the department wanting to be involved in the consultations. AAFC is committed to advancing reconciliation with Indigenous communities and will be leading separate Indigenous engagement, including regional Indigenous engagement sessions in fall 2026.

Building on the findings of previous engagement led by the SCCC, participants were invited to share their perspectives under Chatham House rules on four key themes via small breakout discussion groups:

- **Soil research gaps and priorities**
- **Data, measurement and evaluation**
- **Extension and on-farm knowledge transfer**
- **Resources and financial incentives**

Discussions focused on identifying challenges, opportunities, and actions that could support improved soil health outcomes across Canada's agricultural sector.

This report summarizes the feedback received during the engagement sessions. The views presented reflect the perspectives shared by participants and do not necessarily represent a consensus position of all attendees. The ideas and information gathered through these discussions will help inform the direction and content of the NASHS. Participants provided thoughtful and valuable input, highlighting both regional considerations and shared priorities for improving soil health outcomes across the country.



The report is structured around the four discussion themes and highlights key messages, opportunities, challenges, and considerations identified by participants. While regional perspectives varied, several common priorities emerged across sessions, providing valuable insights to support the development of a coordinated approach to advancing agricultural soil health in Canada.

Theme 1
Soil research gaps and priorities



Participants emphasized the importance of establishing a clear and shared definition of soil health and developing a more consistent understanding of the concept across regions, sectors and production systems. Many highlighted the need for indicators that reflect the physical, chemical and biological dimensions of soil health while remaining meaningful and applicable at both regional and national levels. Participants generally favoured refining existing indicators, datasets and measurement approaches rather than creating new ones and emphasized the importance of coordination among definitions, metrics and management practices.

Regional variability was a recurring theme throughout discussions. Participants noted that soil health differs across climates, soil types, geographies, production systems and commodities, and that a single approach is unlikely to be applicable in all contexts. Research, indicators and reporting approaches were viewed as needing to reflect regional conditions while also supporting broader objectives. Participants also highlighted the value of building on existing provincial, territorial and regional efforts and sharing lessons learned.

Participants emphasized that research should be relevant to producer realities and support farm-level decision-making. Some noted that research can become disconnected from producer priorities and highlighted the importance of stronger connections between researchers and producers. Farmer-to-farmer learning, on-farm trials and demonstration projects were frequently identified as effective ways to generate knowledge and increase confidence in research findings. Participants also emphasized the continuing need to translate research into practical, accessible, and actionable information for producers. Participants also emphasized the importance of maintaining long-term benchmark sites and developing inventories of existing research, datasets, and initiatives to support future monitoring, coordination and priority setting.

Participants highlighted the importance of linking soil health outcomes with economic outcomes and demonstrating the costs, benefits and trade-offs associated with management decisions. Long-term research,



monitoring and benchmark sites were also identified as priorities, with participants noting that changes in soil health often occur over extended timeframes and require sustained investment to understand outcomes. Research gaps identified by participants included understanding how management practices influence soil health over time; social, economic and policy-related research; biological processes, microbiomes, soil compaction, contaminants, pests and invasive species. Participants also noted the need for greater attention to horticulture, pasture, forage and livestock systems, and supported systems-based approaches that consider interactions among production systems and broader landscape outcomes.

Participants expressed support for greater consistency in methodologies, measurements and reporting approaches, including improved soil testing consistency, quality assurance and access to soil health data. Some participants pointed to existing initiatives, such as the FAO Global Soil Partnership's inter-laboratory compatibility program, as examples of efforts that support more consistent measurement approaches. Many also noted that a national strategy could help improve coordination across governments, academia, industry and producer organizations by aligning priorities, reducing duplication and building on existing research, datasets and initiatives.

Theme 2
Data, Measurement, and Evaluation



Participants emphasized the need for greater consistency in how soil health is defined, measured, monitored and reported across Canada. Many supported the development of a common set of soil health indicators and measurement approaches while recognizing the importance of regional differences in soils, climate and production systems. Several participants suggested a core set of nationally relevant indicators supported by additional region-specific measures. Indicators were viewed as needing to be practical, affordable and linked to outcomes that matter to producers, such as erosion, water-holding capacity, soil function and productivity. Participants also noted that indicator development is already underway in some jurisdictions, citing Ontario's soil strategy where performance measurement approaches, indicators and report cards are being developed using existing data sources.

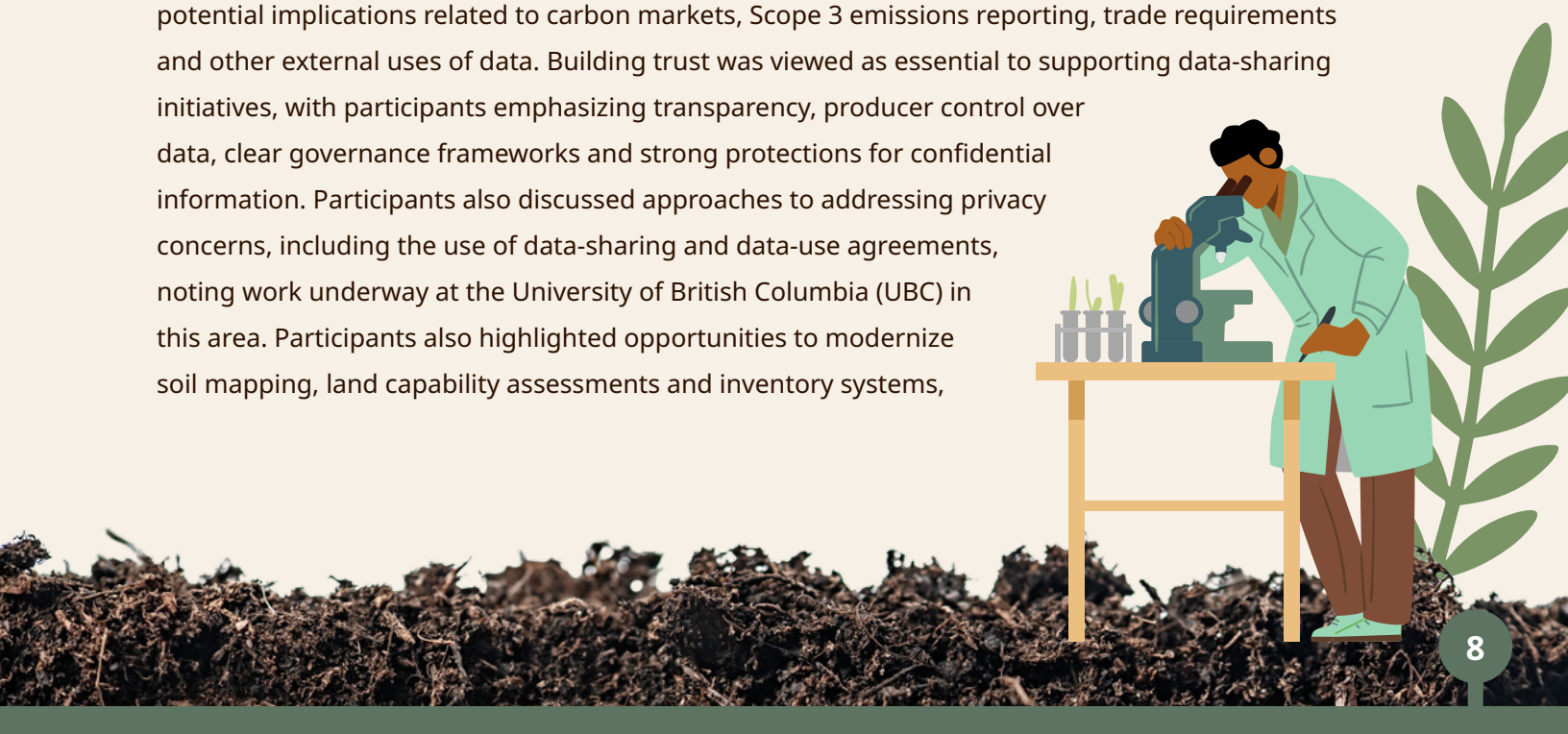


Participants highlighted the importance of baseline data, benchmarking and long-term monitoring to better understand soil health conditions and track changes over time. Monitoring was viewed as important not only for measuring change, but also for improving understanding of soil function, management impacts and long-term outcomes. Benchmarking approaches were seen as useful for distinguishing between inherent soil characteristics and changes resulting from management practices.

There was strong support for improving access to soil health information through centralized databases, repositories and data portals. Participants noted that valuable information already exists across governments, provinces, industry organizations, private laboratories and research institutions but is often fragmented and difficult to access. Many participants emphasized the importance of building upon existing databases, inventories, mapping initiatives and provincial efforts while improving coordination and reducing duplication.

Participants expressed concerns about differences in sampling protocols, analytical methods and reporting approaches, noting that producers can receive different results from different laboratories. Harmonized methodologies, quality assurance processes, laboratory accreditation and nationally recognized testing standards were identified as potential ways to improve confidence and comparability. Participants highlighted the cost of soil testing as a challenge, noting that affordability can influence the frequency of testing. Participants also emphasized that data collection alone is insufficient and that producers need support interpreting results and applying information to farm-level decision-making.

Data ownership, privacy and trust were recurring considerations throughout discussions. Participants noted concerns regarding how farm-level information is collected, stored, shared and used, including potential implications related to carbon markets, Scope 3 emissions reporting, trade requirements and other external uses of data. Building trust was viewed as essential to supporting data-sharing initiatives, with participants emphasizing transparency, producer control over data, clear governance frameworks and strong protections for confidential information. Participants also discussed approaches to addressing privacy concerns, including the use of data-sharing and data-use agreements, noting work underway at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in this area. Participants also highlighted opportunities to modernize soil mapping, land capability assessments and inventory systems,



supported by long-term funding for data infrastructure, monitoring and regional capacity. Existing mapping tools, databases and information portals could also be better integrated and leveraged, while some land capability and soil mapping systems were viewed as needing modernization.



Theme 3
Extension and On-farm Knowledge

Participants emphasized that extension capacity is a critical factor influencing the adoption of soil health practices.

Reductions in public extension services were identified as having created gaps that are increasingly being filled by industry, commodity groups and other organizations. Supply chain partners like General Mills and McCain were noted as contributing towards extension training and incentives. Participants highlighted the importance of existing advisory networks and trusted relationships, as well as the value of long-term extension capacity and extension specialists. Trust was consistently identified as a key factor influencing adoption, with participants noting that producers are more likely to adopt practices when information comes from credible sources and is relevant to local conditions.

Peer-to-peer learning was repeatedly identified as one of the most effective approaches for encouraging practice adoption. Farmer-to-farmer communication, producer networks and community-based learning opportunities were viewed as valuable because they are grounded in practical experience and local realities. Perennia in Nova Scotia was cited as a successful example, with participants highlighting its short, locally delivered on-farm workshops that bring farmers together to learn directly from one another. Participants also highlighted the importance of extension as a two-way process that enables knowledge exchange between producers, researchers and advisors. Education and training were identified as important pathways for building long-term capacity, including through universities, colleges, diploma programs and continuing education opportunities. Participants pointed to examples such as the living labs model, Saskatchewan's AgriArm and Quebec's Réseau québécois de recherche en agriculture durable as effective mechanisms for connecting researchers, advisors and producers through training, collaboration and knowledge-sharing activities.



Participants highlighted opportunities to improve the translation of research into practical and accessible information for producers. Guidance documents, factsheets, demonstrations and decision-support tools were identified as useful mechanisms for communicating research findings and demonstrating practical value. Several participants noted that knowledge transfer is often most effective when it is integrated throughout the research process rather than occurring only after research is completed. Connections between researchers, extension specialists and producers were viewed as important for ensuring research remains relevant and applicable at the farm level.

A variety of extension tools and approaches were identified as valuable, including centralized information hubs, online resources, webinars, recorded sessions, factsheets, mobile applications and digital mapping tools. Participants noted the importance of providing trusted and consistent information, reducing confusion associated with multiple sources of information and improving access to resources. While digital tools were viewed as useful, face-to-face interactions, field days and direct engagement were consistently identified as particularly effective approaches for building understanding and trust.

Participants noted that soil health improvements often occur over long timeframes, making it difficult to observe immediate results from management changes. As a result, ongoing support, follow-up and long-term extension efforts were viewed as important for sustaining adoption. ALUS was provided as an example of a program that supports longer term positions, establishing workers as a member of the community and enhancing the ability of staff to build relationships. On-farm research, demonstration sites, field-scale trials and producer-hosted events were highlighted as effective approaches for connecting research with practice adoption by providing locally relevant examples and opportunities for hands-on learning.

Participants also noted that soil health is often considered alongside broader issues such as farm profitability, risk management, drought resilience, climate adaptation and long-term farm sustainability. Practical examples demonstrating economic, agronomic and environmental outcomes were viewed as important for supporting understanding and encouraging adoption of soil health practices.



Theme 4
Resources and Financial Incentives



Participants identified financial constraints as one of the primary barriers to adopting and maintaining soil health practices. While many producers recognize the benefits of improving soil health, upfront costs, financial risks and the expense of services such as soil testing, physical assessments and drainage evaluations can limit adoption. Participants expressed broad support for cost-sharing programs, financial incentives and transition supports that help offset costs while producers work toward longer-term soil health outcomes.

Participants frequently described the current funding landscape as fragmented, difficult to navigate and administratively burdensome. Many highlighted opportunities to improve accessibility through greater coordination among federal, provincial and industry-funded programs, as well as approaches such as standardized application processes, centralized information services and alignment with broader agricultural, environmental and climate-related initiatives.

Participants emphasized that soil health generates benefits beyond the farm gate, including contributions to water management, carbon sequestration, climate resilience and other ecosystem services. A range of financing and risk-management approaches was discussed, including tax credits, favourable lending rates, public-private partnerships, ecosystem service payments, carbon-related initiatives, transition supports and insurance mechanisms that help producers adopt new practices and technologies. Participants also noted growing private-sector interest in regenerative agriculture and highlighted opportunities to leverage both public and private investments. At the same time, several cautioned against creating additional complexity or limiting access to existing business risk management programs.

Participants emphasized the importance of flexible programming that recognizes different production systems, regional realities and levels of adoption, including both early adopters and producers beginning their soil health journey. Demonstration projects, on-farm trials and pilot initiatives were viewed as valuable tools for reducing risk



and building confidence in soil health practices and technologies. Programs that combine financial incentives with technical support, peer-to-peer learning, demonstrations and advisory services were viewed positively. Participants also noted that barriers to adoption are not always financial and may include access to equipment, technology, knowledge and technical expertise. As a result, coordinated approaches that address both financial and non-financial barriers were seen as important to supporting implementation. Several participants highlighted AAFC's On-Farm Climate Action Fund (OFCAF) as an example of an approach that combines financial incentives, technical support and peer-to-peer learning to support adoption.

Cross-Cutting Themes

There were several cross-cutting themes and principles that emerged from the discussions:

Regional flexibility within a national framework	Greater coordination and alignment (research efforts, data systems, extension networks, funding programs and existing initiatives)	Practical, producer-focused approaches	Trust as a foundation for participation and adoption
Balancing consistency and flexibility (national frameworks, standards or core indicators that could be adapted to regional conditions and producer needs)	Long-term commitment and investment (long-term research, monitoring, extension capacity, data infrastructure and financial)	Stronger connections between research, knowledge transfer and adoption	Building on existing strengths and initiatives



Conclusion and Next Steps

Participants expressed broad support for the development of a NASHS and identified opportunities to improve coordination, strengthen knowledge transfer, support long-term monitoring and research, and enhance the accessibility of programs and resources. Throughout the discussions, participants emphasized the importance of balancing national consistency with regional flexibility and ensuring that future activities remain practical, producer-focused and grounded in local realities.

The input gathered through these engagement sessions will help inform the ongoing development of the NASHS. Perspectives shared by participants will be considered alongside contributions from other engagement activities, existing research, and ongoing work across governments, Indigenous partners, industry, academia and producer organizations.

