Agriculture Master Plan

What We Heard Report

Sturgeon
COUNTY

Executive Summary

Sturgeon County's commitment to excellence in agriculture has led to the development of the Sturgeon County Agriculture Master Plan (AMP). This plan will guide Sturgeon County's agriculture-related services and initiatives from 2025-2034 to foster sustainable growth, innovation, diversification and resilience in the sector.

Engagement for the Sturgeon County Agriculture Master Plan consisted of two primary phases.

Phase 1 of the engagement process extended from January 30 to April 10. Local producers, processors, landowners, distributors and consumers were asked to identify issues, barriers and opportunities for agriculture. Throughout the course of this phase, we heard from 202 individuals.

Phase 2 looked to gauge the level of support for the topic areas and actions developed in the previous phase of engagement. The phase consisted of an online survey that gathered feedback from 121 additional respondents from July 3 and July 31, 2024.

Phase 1 Findings

Phase I engagement efforts spanned three months, inviting interest holders to share their feedback through an online survey, interviews and a range of workshops. Participants shared their ideas, potential actions, and concerns regarding the future of agriculture in Sturgeon County, ensuring that the plan reflects the community's needs and aspirations. The top 10 overarching themes garnered from the engagement process are outlined below.

- **Limitations for farm operations due to regulatory policies and bureaucracy:** Participants were concerned about the need to limit government involvement in farm operations and fewer restrictions to allow more autonomy for farmers.
- **Support for small family farms**: There is a desire for more substantial support and initiatives to help sustain and promote small family farms, which have been noted through engagement as vital to the local agricultural community.
- **Urban development concerns:** Engagement participants expressed concerns about urban development encroaching on agricultural lands, impacting the availability, access and productivity of local farmland.
- **Water supply management:** Issues related to water supply, including the quality and availability of water for agricultural purposes, were commonly noted as prominent challenges throughout the engagement process.
- **Infrastructure needs:** There is a call for better infrastructure support, particularly regarding roads and water systems, to aid farming operations.
- **Economic pressures:** Participants discussed the economic challenges faced by agriculture producers, including high costs of operations and the financial viability of farming under current economic conditions.
- **Technological advancements:** The adoption and impact of new agricultural technologies were frequently discussed, with a focus on the challenges and the opportunities they present regarding the changing agricultural landscape.
- **Land use and preservation of farmland:** The need to protect high-quality crop lands from being repurposed for non-agricultural uses was a major theme, with a strong emphasis on maintaining the integrity of farmland.
- **Educational and community engagement:** There was a notable desire for more agricultural education and community engagement to enhance agricultural literacy and foster a connection between the community and agricultural practices.
- **Climate change and environmental concerns:** Participants are worried about the impacts of climate change on agricultural production, stressing the need for strategies to manage and mitigate the effects of drought and other extreme weather events.

Throughout the engagement process, a common underlying sentiment emerged regarding the desire to limit the influence of government policies and regulations on farm operations. Participants emphasized their own expertise and experience as sufficient to ensure the sustainability of their farms.

These findings reflect a community deeply engaged with the issues facing agriculture in Sturgeon County, showing a strong interest to support and sustain local agricultural practices amid growing challenges.

Phase 2 Findings

Phase 2 validated the findings from phase 1, with all actions receiving a 50% or higher level of support from respondents. See page 7 to learn more.

How We Engaged

From January 30 to April 10 the Sturgeon County Agriculture Master Plan received **500+ ideas**, with communication impressions reaching **39,900 potential interest holders**, **180+ community hours**, and **2323 active participants** across the surveys, workshops, and interviews.

The engagement process used a series of distinct tactics, including:

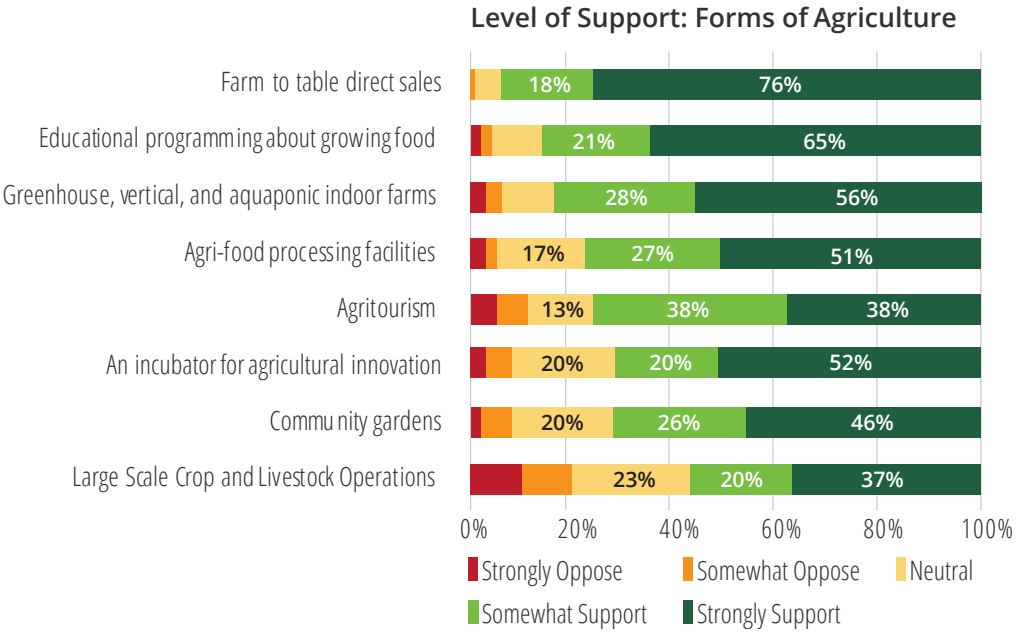
- Data Walk Workshops: 60 participants
- Online Survey: 105 responses
- Experience Interviews: 10 participants
- Validation Workshops: 27 participants
- Project Webpage: 568 visitors
- Validation Survey: 121 responses

What We Heard

Online Survey

The approach to online engagement gave residents an opportunity to share their insights for action in a way that allowed for 24/7 access with a relatively minimal investment in time. This enabled the project team to gain a broader variety of insights into the ways that Sturgeon County can bolster the local agriculture sector. We asked local producers, processors, landowners, distributors and consumers about the agricultural activities they partake in, what initiatives they believe are most important, the barriers to agriculture they have noticed in the county, their level of support for various forms of agriculture along with their ideas for the future. This comprehensive approach ensured that we heard diverse perspectives and gathered a variety of suggestions for enhancing the agricultural landscape of Sturgeon County.

What is your level of support for these forms of agriculture in Sturgeon County?



We heard from

323

participants throughout engagement.

Engagement opportunities were communicated using the following:

- The Sturgeon County AMP project webpage with 568 visitors
- Email invitations to 80 key interest holders
- Dynamic social media campaign reaching over 39,900 impressions
- E-Newsletter promotions delivered directly to 1,361 subscribers
- Newsletter feature in Spring edition of County Connections reaching 6,718 households and over twenty thousand residents
- Billboard & Letterboard signage at the following locations:
  - Sturgeon Road and Starkey Road
  - Cardiff Road east of Highway 2
  - Cardiff Road and Highway 28
  - Gibbons Area and Excelsior
  - County and Highway 642
  - Redwater
  - Calahoo
  - Highway 642 near elevators west of Morinville
  - Lily Lake Road and Legal Road
  - Cardiff

What are the most important current or future issues for Sturgeon County's agriculture industry?

Theme	# Occurances	Description
Keep farmland intact	21	Limiting the subdivision of land and what that means for farming operations and equipment access
Protect high quality crop lands	19	Concerns about destroying valuable crop lands for alternative uses
Urban Sprawl	17	Increased number of subdivisions are concerning people who have an agricultural/rural focus
Less rules/regulations for farmers	13	Farmers want to be free to continue farming without interference - less restrictive policy
Land use by-law changes	9	Negative sentiments about the bylaw changes

Indicative Quotes

"Maintaining agricultural land use; including protecting high quality crop land from development. Community agricultural events, there seems to be general lack of ag focused events for the greater community to participate in eq. fairs, odd unusual sales, cattle/horse shows/rodeo, ag based tradeshows"

"To keep agriculture land as farm land and not something else does not produce agriculture products"

"Urban sprawl and industrial development devastating agriculture land and driving up land prices. Foreign and corporate entities are buying up those lands at an alarming rate on speculation. The lack of arable acres is driving the agriculture producers out of business. No Farms no Food"

"Less obstacles such as needing permits for absolutely every. Less government in our lives."

"Continue to put the needs of farmers at the forefront of any future land use rules or regulations."

What can Sturgeon County do to support agriculture?

Theme	# Occurances	Description
Less rules and regulations	15	Participants suggested letting farmers do what they know is best on their own lands - less restrictive policy
Protect high quality crop lands	9	Limit the degradation of valuable crop lands for alternative uses
Keep farmland in tact	9	Limit the subdivision of land to better facilitate farming operations and equipment access
Education	8	School curriculum and capacity building for new residents regarding rural/agricultural practices
Tax increases	8	Stop/limit tax increases (Carbon tax etc.) - people want lower taxes

Indicative Quotes

"Stop centralized control. We do not need government overreach. Farmers are capable of running their own businesses."

"Stop letting people turn farmland into other lands that stop producing agriculture products"

"To educate Urban or any peoples in regards to when moving out to acreages with the farming practices workings and what to expect at certain times of the crop season as so they are aware as not to cause strife and to remind them they moved out into an agriculture community. Bottom line is to sustain agriculture as it is!"

"Keep taxes low, stop rezoning farms into residential"

Data Walks Workshops

In the datawalks workshops, the engagement team used a dynamic mix of data, visual examples and real-time visualization related to the AMP, to gather reflections and insights about participants' relationships to the data.

Datawalks workshop themes and participant reflections included the following:



Farm Operator Demographics: The impact of changing demographics on the agricultural community was a pressing issue defined during the Data Walks workshops. Concerns about the sale or transfer of small farms and a risk of knowledge loss as the aging population transitions into retirement were highlighted as reasons to improve opportunities for new entrants into farming.



Farm Operations: The dominance of larger, profit-driven operations and the increasing presence of foreign-owned farms were key themes highlighted for farm operations. This trend raised apprehensions about the displacement of traditional farms and the decline of family-owned operations, underscoring the transformation of farming from a way of life to a business enterprise.



Crop Production: High costs and profitability concerns were issues that dominated conversations about crop production, highlighting the importance of profit and opportunity within the market. The impacts of new technology and innovation also surfaced, suggesting that improved technological advancements and practices can potentially have an influence on reshaping the agricultural landscape.



Agricultural Technology: Challenges presented by emerging technologies in agricultural practices included the unequal access to new technology, particularly affecting smaller family-owned farms due to financial constraints and the need for improved broadband infrastructure. Both of the top themes play a role in the adoption of new technology.



Infrastructure and Services: Equal levels of support were shown for various themes related to infrastructure expansion and its potential impact on agriculture. These included the need for broadband internet and fiber optics expansion, concerns about bridge widths with load restrictions, and the importance of technology to enhance data collection and reporting.



Natural Environment: Significant themes regarding agri-environmental issues included concerns about government overreach in agricultural policies, emphasizing the need for balanced regulations that support farmers. Additionally, climate change events such as the frequency of droughts and water access were highlighted as significant challenges impacting agricultural production.



Agricultural Land Use: Conflicts between agricultural activities and residential preferences were highlighted as a key issue for agricultural land use, particularly in areas zoned for large subdivisions. Additionally, concerns were identified in areas designated for heavy industry and gravel extraction although some participants also highlighted opportunities to collaborate with industries to explore carbon capture initiatives.



Livestock Farms: The majority of the areas for improvement shared by participants were actions that are outside of the County's control. Considerations such as the reduction of provincial and federal taxes and the direction of the market related to the agricultural industry.

Validation workshops

The second round of workshops were designed to encourage feedback on emerging topic areas and potential actions for consideration in the AMP. This step sought to understand what may be missing and what actions had the most significant impact on the lives and agricultural operations of participants.

Five of the possible actions have received significant support during the Validation Workshops, providing a strong foundation for potential priorities captured within the Agriculture Master Plan. Participants were also asked to share their thoughts about gaps or missing elements as the project team moves forward with action development. The possible actions with the highest levels of support and most common gaps are listed below:

Actions with highest levels of support

- Clearly state the right to specific farming practices within agricultural areas
- Clarify to all residents the reasonable operations to expect from farms within the agricultural areas
- On-farm agricultural value-added processing facilities provided with a unique tax assessment category with tax rate lower than commercial rate
- Prime agricultural areas are to be defined and promoted in accordance with approved provincial policies
- Substantiate the use of setbacks from existing commercial farming operations to subdivisions for residential uses

Top 5 gaps

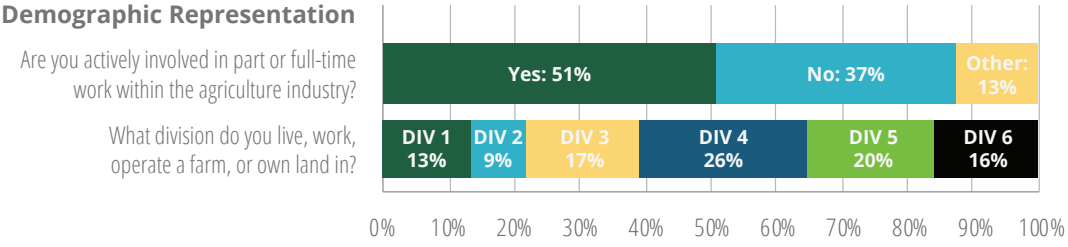
- Preserve and support the long-term sustainability of small farms
- Landowner engagement
- Our land our choice: Participants emphasized the importance of land ownership and decision-making rights for agricultural producers
- Better grader operators and grading quality to ensure that farm equipment can move around the County to support operations
- Consultation with local producers during road design

Validation Survey

An online follow-up survey provided residents with a convenient, around-the-clock platform to share their insights, requiring only a small time commitment. The survey asked a series of detailed questions identifying respondent support for specific actions from the previous phase. The survey engaged with local producers, processors, landowners, distributors, and consumers to learn about their agricultural activities, identify key topics and actions they consider important, and more. Between July 3 and July 31, 2024, the survey received 121 responses split across the six divisions in Sturgeon County.

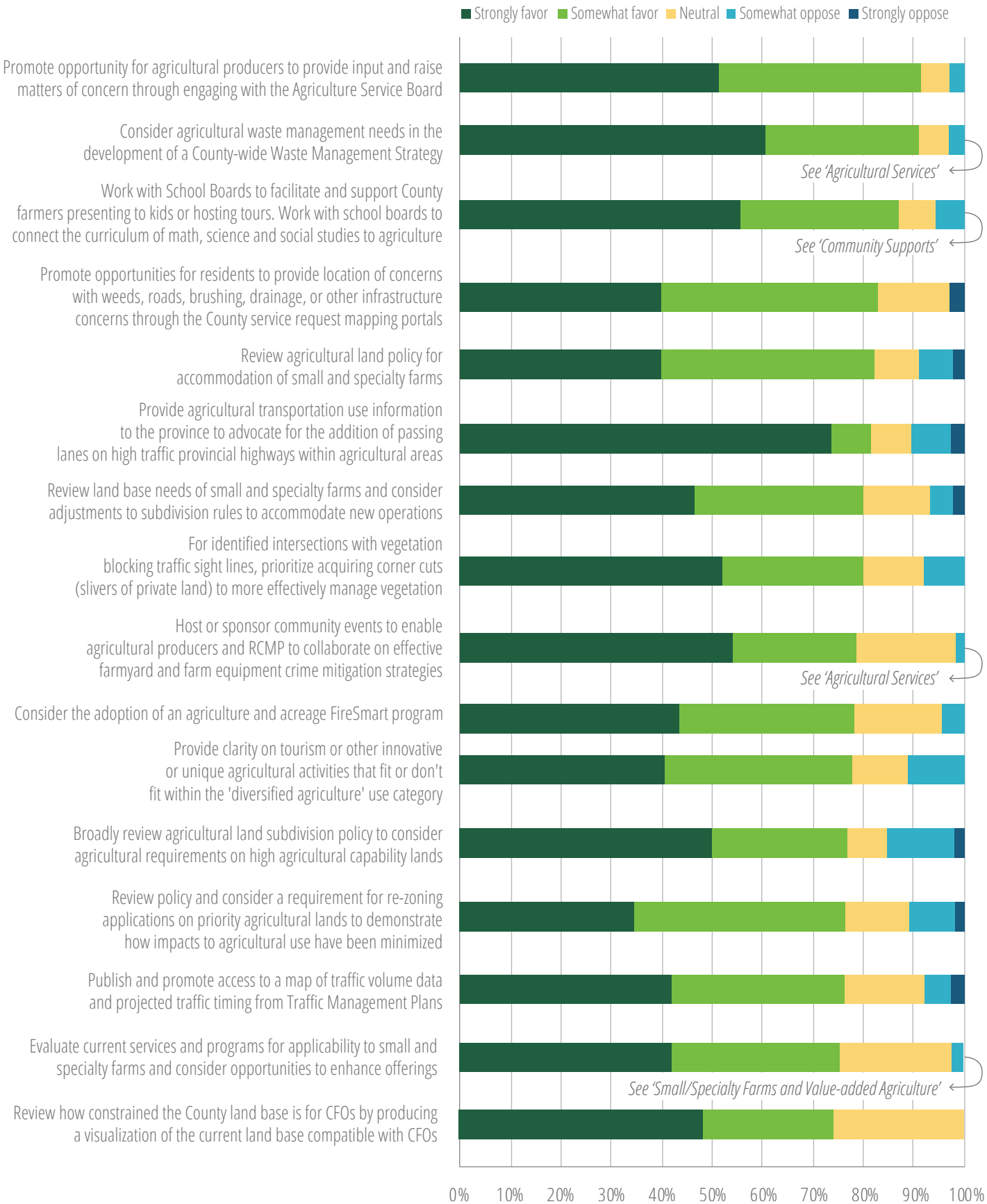
Of the 121 respondents, 51% identified being actively involved in part or full-time work within the agriculture industry. Respondents represented a variety of types of agriculture, including: Cereal and oilseed crops (37), Hay/forage (20), Other Livestock (15), Beef cattle (14), Poultry (8) among others.

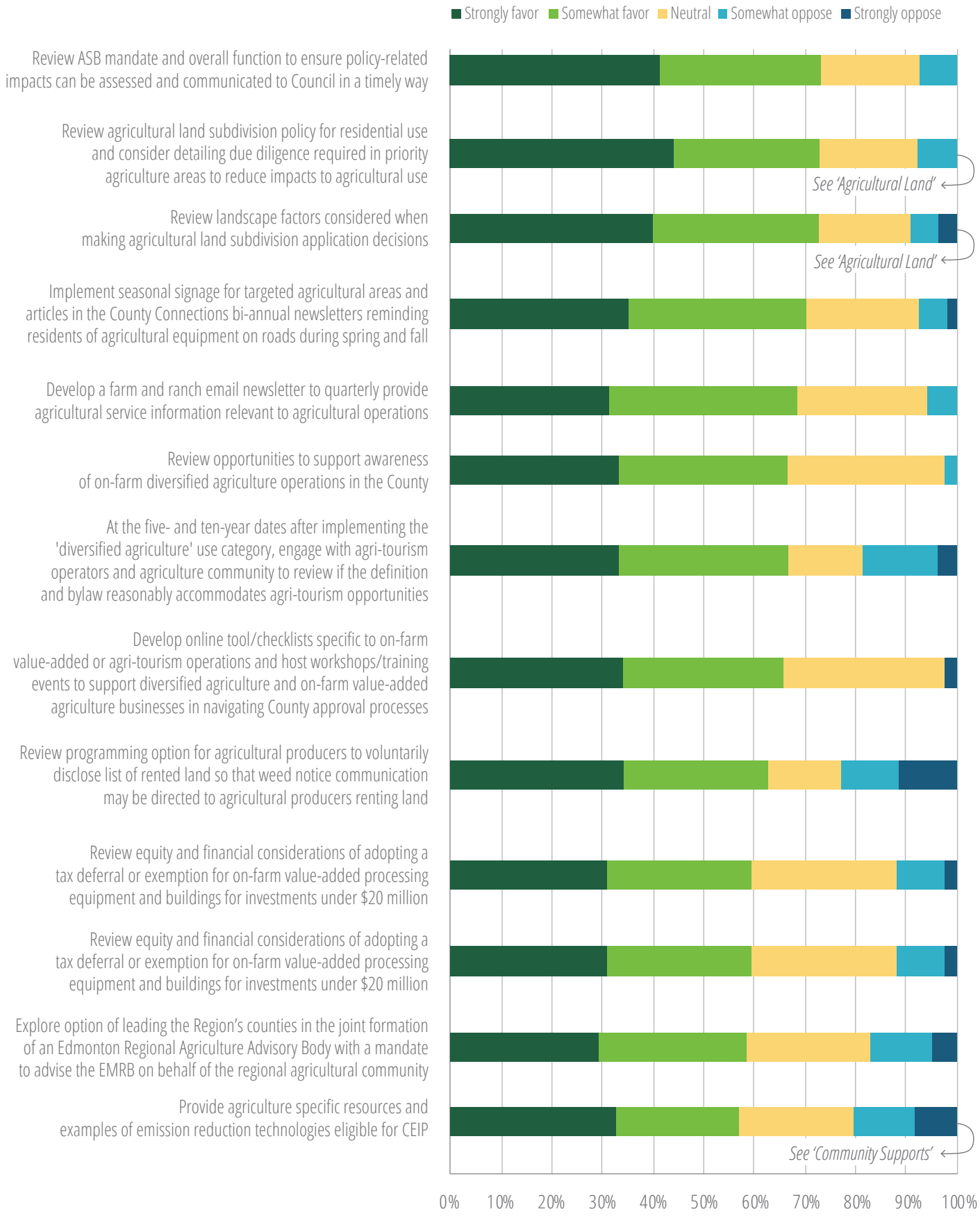
Agricultural Demographic Representation



Action Rating

Respondents were asked to rate a series of 29 proposed actions for the Agriculture Master Plan on a scale from *'strongly favor'* to *'strongly oppose'*. These actions were developed using phase 1's engagement and research findings. The following two pages show the responses for these actions in order from most to least supported.



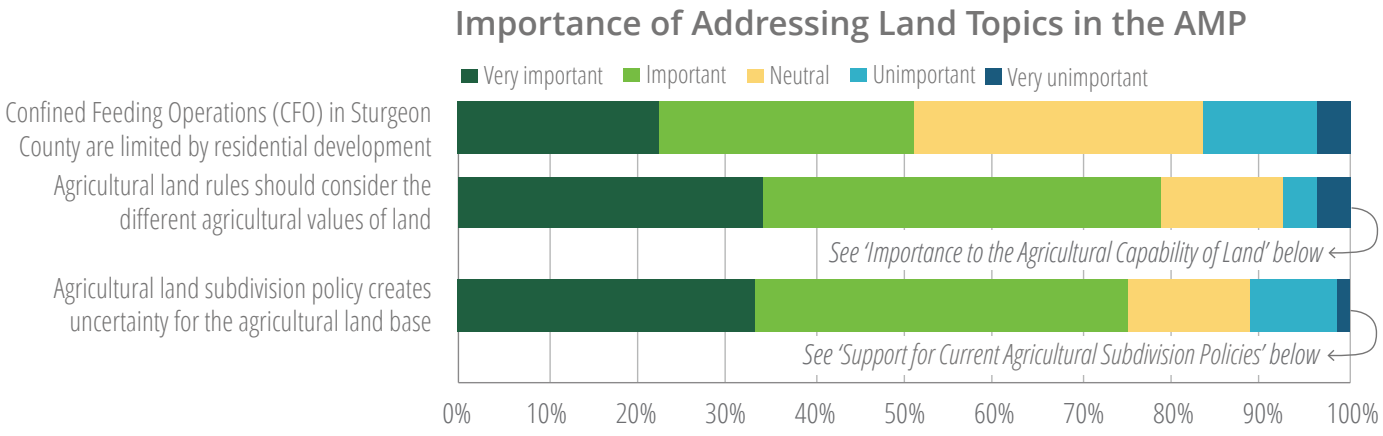

Strongly favor
Somewhat favor
Neutral
Somewhat oppose
Strongly oppose
Review ASB mandate and overall function to ensure policy-related impacts can be assessed and communicated to Council in a timely way
Review agricultural land subdivision policy for residential use and consider detailing due diligence required in priority agriculture areas to reduce impacts to agricultural use
See 'Agricultural Land'
Review landscape factors considered when making agricultural land subdivision application decisions
See 'Agricultural Land'
Implement seasonal signage for targeted agricultural areas and articles in the County Connections bi-annual newsletters reminding residents of agricultural equipment on roads during spring and fall
Develop a farm and ranch email newsletter to quarterly provide agricultural service information relevant to agricultural operations
Review opportunities to support awareness of on-farm diversified agriculture operations in the County
At the five- and ten-year dates after implementing the 'diversified agriculture' use category, engage with agri-tourism operators and agriculture community to review if the definition and bylaw reasonably accommodates agri-tourism opportunities
Develop online tool/checklists specific to on-farm value-added or agri-tourism operations and host workshops/training events to support diversified agriculture and on-farm value-added agriculture businesses in navigating County approval processes
Review programming option for agricultural producers to voluntarily disclose list of rented land so that weed notice communication may be directed to agricultural producers renting land
Review equity and financial considerations of adopting a tax deferral or exemption for on-farm value-added processing equipment and buildings for investments under $20 million
Review equity and financial considerations of adopting a tax deferral or exemption for on-farm value-added processing equipment and buildings for investments under $20 million
Explore option of leading the Region's counties in the joint formation of an Edmonton Regional Agriculture Advisory Body with a mandate to advise the EMRB on behalf of the regional agricultural community
Provide agriculture specific resources and examples of emission reduction technologies eligible for CEIP
See 'Community Supports'
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%

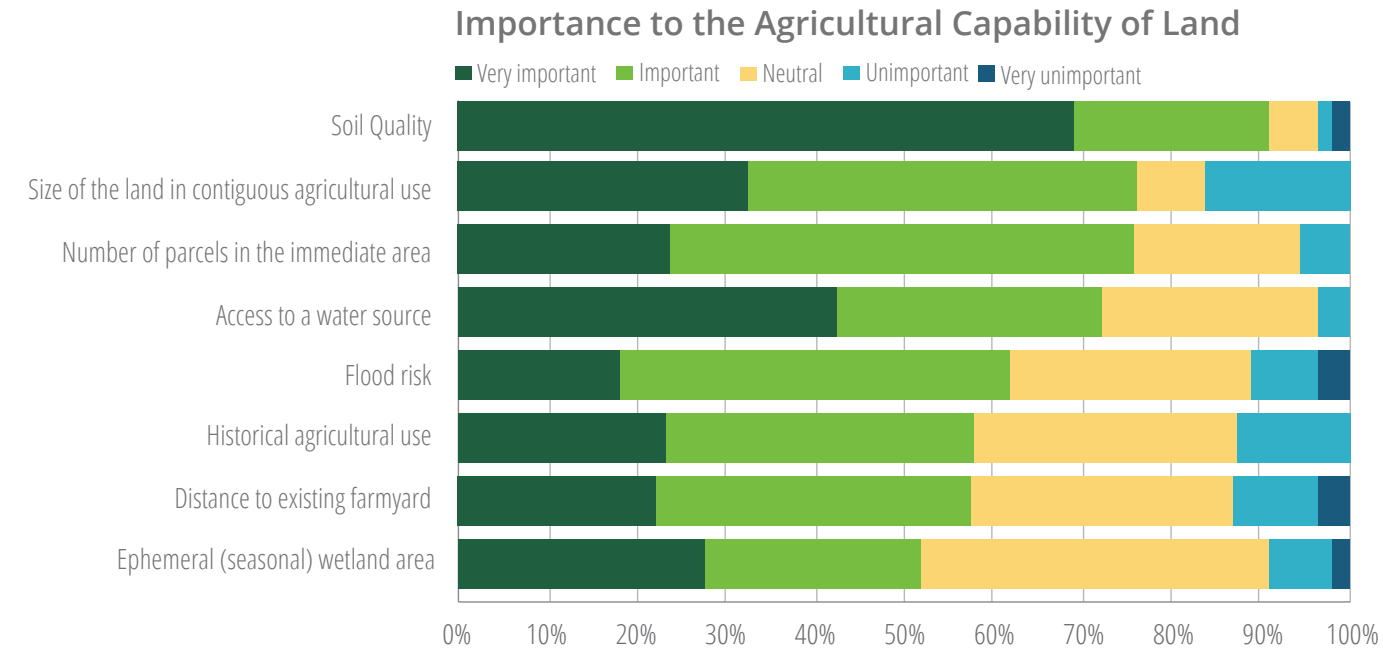
Topic Groups

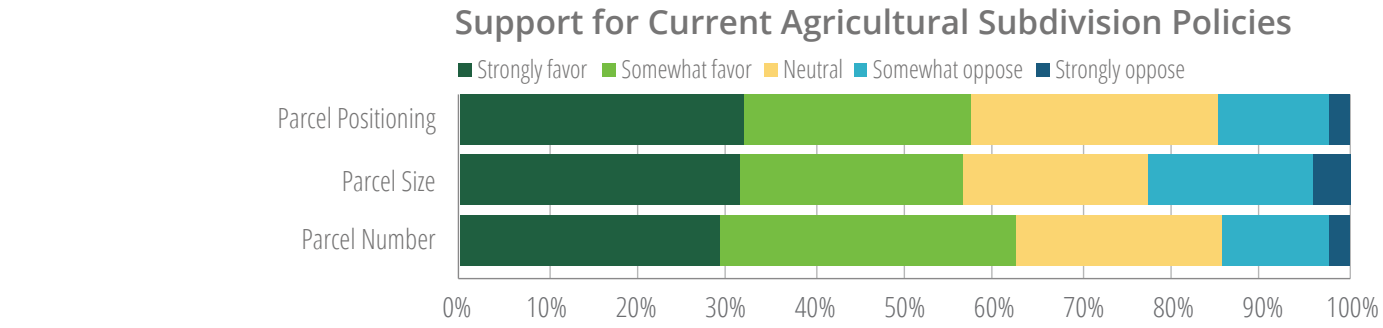
Many of the 29 action questions had a series of follow up questions. The most important thematic areas included: Agricultural Land, Infrastructure, Small Specialty Farms and Value-added Agriculture, Agricultural Services, and Community Supports.

Agricultural Land

Both actions *'Review landscape factors considered when making agricultural land subdivision application decisions'* and *'Review agricultural land subdivision policy for residential use and consider detailing due diligence required in priority agriculture areas to reduce impacts to agricultural use'* were found to be favorable to over 70% of survey respondents. The following graphs report on the importance attributed and level of support survey participants had towards different agricultural land issues.



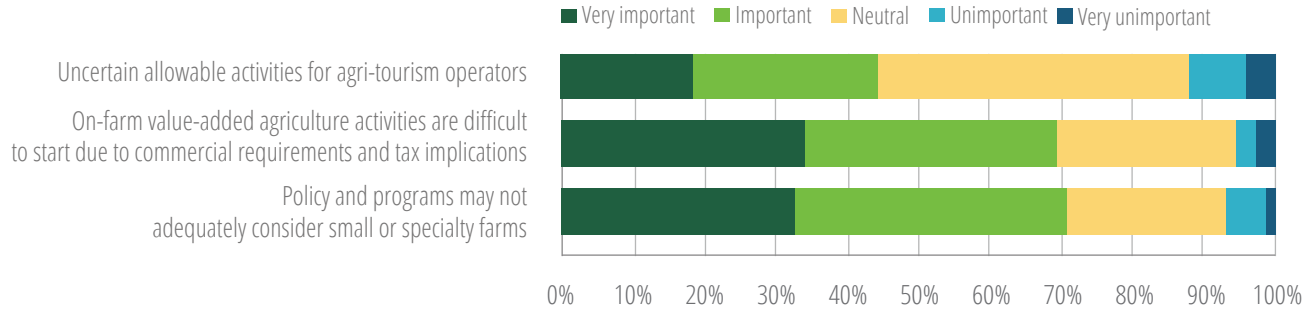




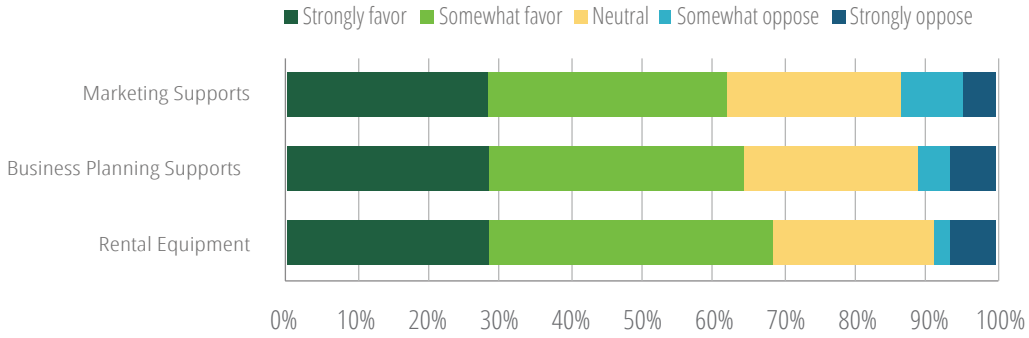
Small/Specialty Farms and Value-added Agriculture

While all supports and programs for small or specialty farms received between 60% and 70% of respondent support, the importance of addressing small/specialty farms and value-added agricultural topics in the AMP had varying levels of importance. Tax implications for value-added agriculture, and policies and programs not adequately considering specialty farms were considered *'important'* or *'very important'* to address in the AMP for 70% of respondents. The uncertainty of allowable activities within agri-tourism however, was only seen as *'important'* or *'very important'* to address by 43% of respondents.

Importance of Addressing Small/Specialty Farms and Value - added Ag. Topics in the AMP



Support for Services and Programs for Small or Specialty Farms



Infrastructure

Road infrastructure and farm access were common themes in phase 1 of engagement. To follow up on these topic areas, the validation survey asked a series of infrastructure questions related to public safety. In the survey, over 90% of respondents stated that it is important to address that rural crime is an increasing issue for farm equipment and properties. By comparison, over 60% noted the importance of addressing the issue of roads being too busy to safely transport agricultural products and equipment, and less than 40% noted the importance of field access not being sufficient for safe transportation.

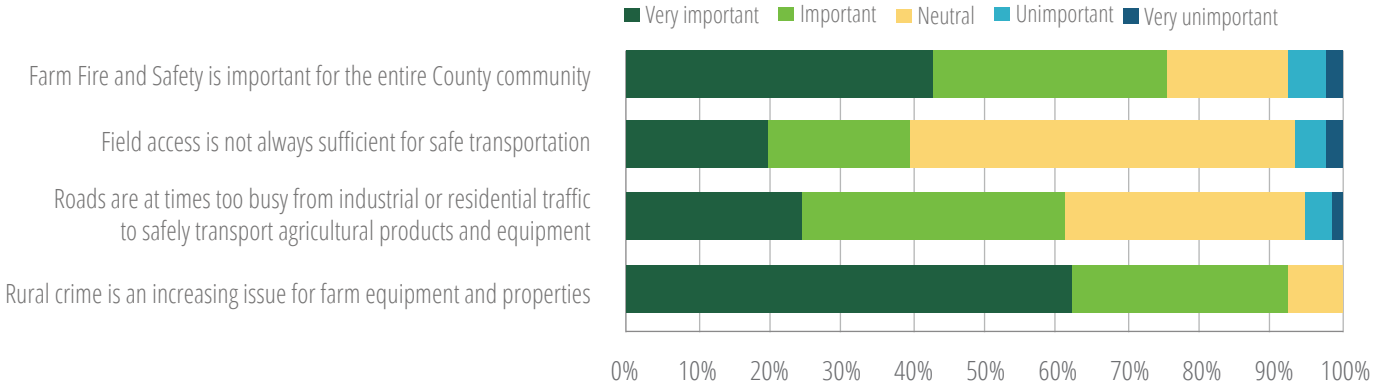
Agricultural Services

Over 50% of survey participants identified that it is important to address the current disconnects and gaps in services and policies for agricultural matters in the upcoming AMP. Understanding the importance of crime being an increasing issue, and ensuring that county services best serve the agriculture community, it makes sense why service-related actions were highly supported by survey respondents. Improved agricultural waste management considerations and hosting events on crime-mitigation strategies both had strong support (over 70%) from respondents.

Community Supports

Community support actions were both highly supported and partially opposed depending on the subject matter area. The action to *'Provide agriculture-specific resources and examples of emission reduction technologies eligible for CEIP'* had the lowest level of support of any action (though still over 50% supported). The action to *'Work with School Boards in Sturgeon County to facilitate and support County farmers presenting to kids or hosting tours. Working with school boards to connect the curriculum of math, science, and social studies to agriculture'* was among the most supported actions. Ensuring community education and support offerings align with agricultural community needs will factor into the final AMP's direction.

Importance of Addressing Transportation and Safety Topics in the AMP



Importance of Addressing Initiatives and program Topics in the AMP

