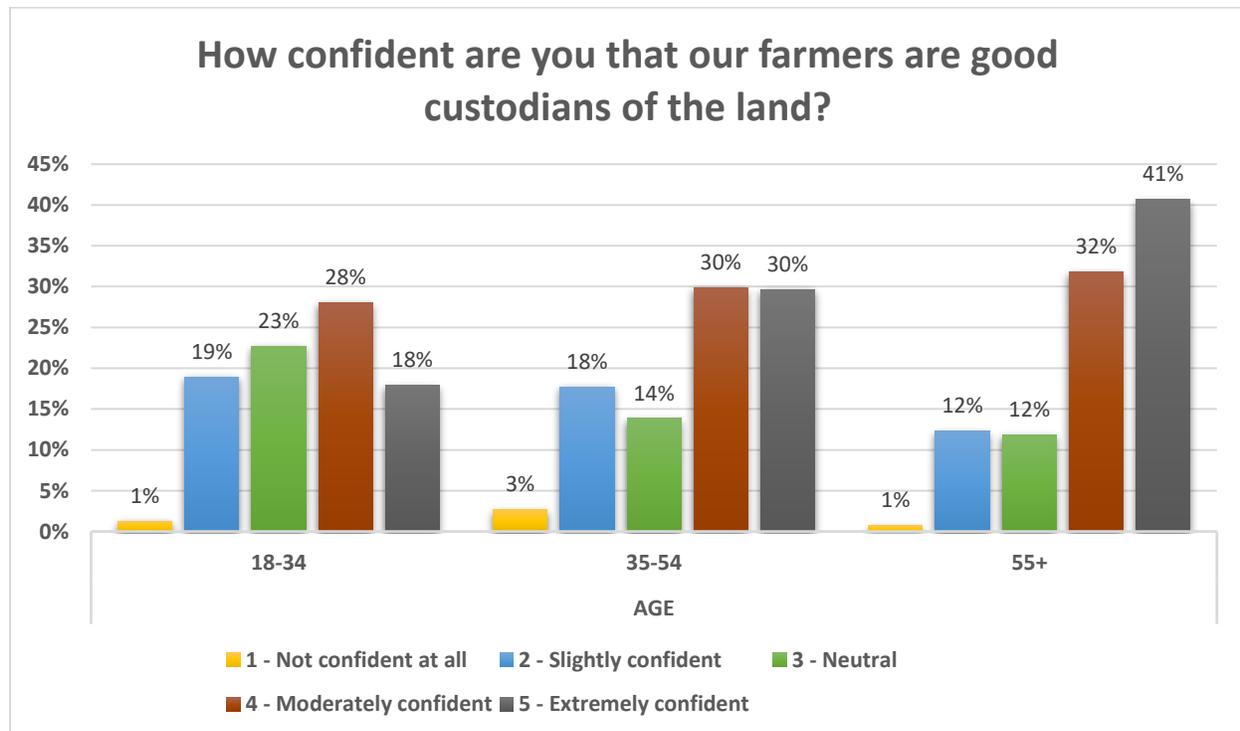Bridging the Rural-Urban Chasm: Dalhousie University Study Reveals Generational Gulf in Confidence Towards Sustainable Farming

Halifax, February 14, 2024 – In response to recent events in Europe regarding farmers' protests and amidst Canada's ongoing agricultural debate, Dalhousie University's Agri-Food Analytics Lab, in partnership with Leger, has released new research shedding light on the current rural-urban disconnect. The study, based on a survey of over 1,600 respondents conducted in early February 2024, explores the varying perspectives across different generations regarding the stewardship of Canada's farmlands by farmers, uncovering a notable generational gap in perceptions.
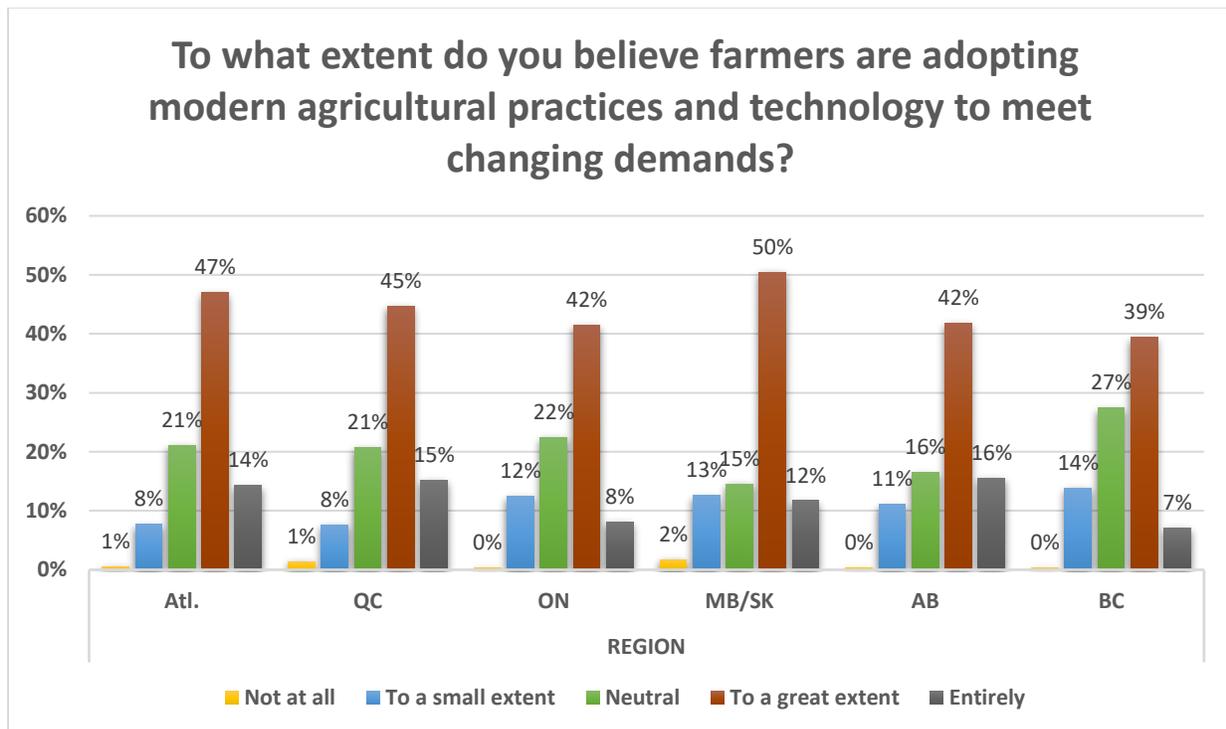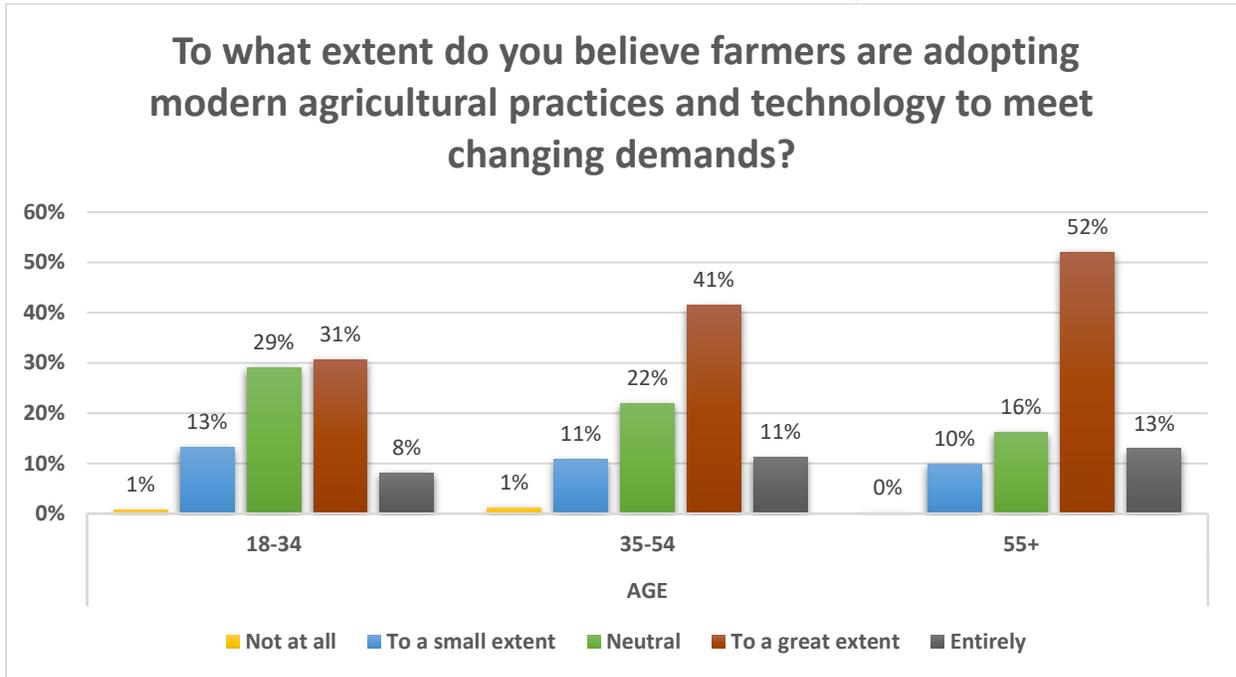
The Age of Sustainable Farming Confidence

The survey uncovers a stark contrast in confidence levels towards sustainable farming practices among various age groups. Young Canadians, aged between 18-34, show a relatively lower confidence level, with less than half (46%) believing in the capabilities of farmers as custodians of the land. In comparison, a robust 73% of the older demographic, those aged 55 and above, express their trust in farmers' guardianship. Middle-aged respondents (35-54 years) hold a moderate view, with 60% voicing their confidence.

How confident are you that our farmers are good custodians of the land?
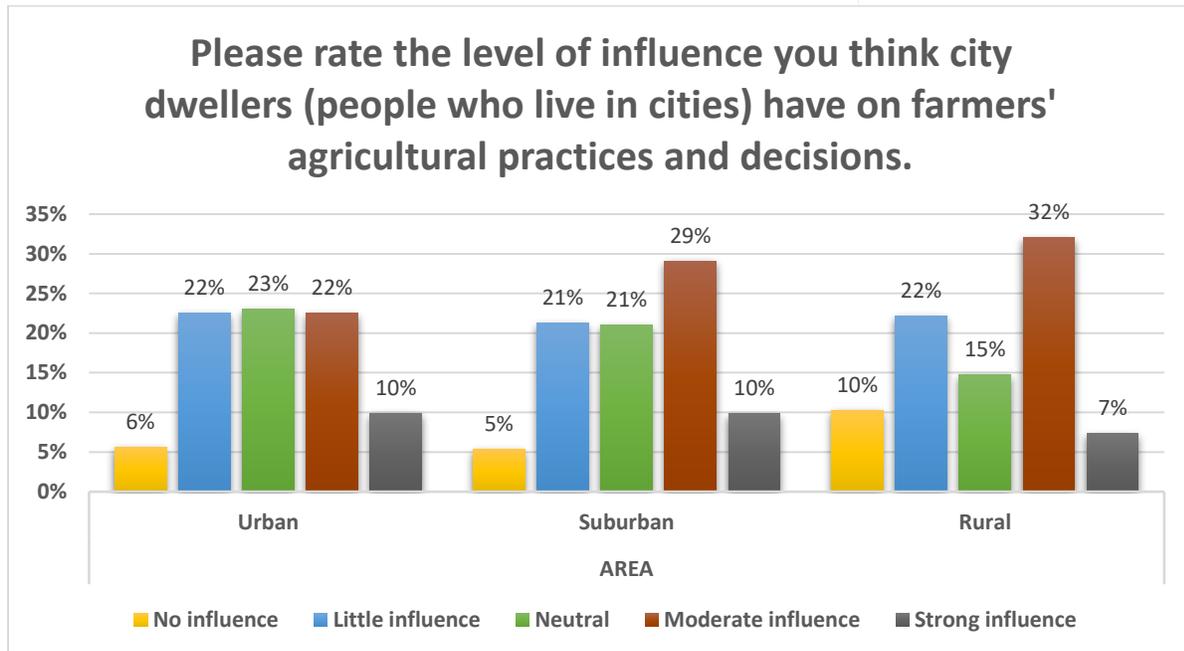
A Regional Look at Modern Agriculture

Across the vast Canadian landscape, the adoption of modern agricultural practices and technology varies, yet an overall 54% of Canadians appreciate these advancements. Manitoba and Saskatchewan stand out, with 65% of their residents fully recognizing the adoption of modern practices. This regional perspective also highlights a generational accord, particularly among the older generation, with 65% acknowledging the shift towards modern agriculture.

To what extent do you believe farmers are adopting modern agricultural practices and technology to meet changing demands?

Region	Not at all	To a small extent	Neutral	To a great extent	Entirely
Atl.	1%	8%	21%	47%	14%
QC	1%	8%	21%	45%	15%
ON	0%	12%	22%	42%	8%
MB/SK	2%	13%	15%	50%	12%
AB	0%	11%	16%	42%	16%
BC	0%	14%	27%	39%	7%

To what extent do you believe farmers are adopting modern agricultural practices and technology to meet changing demands?
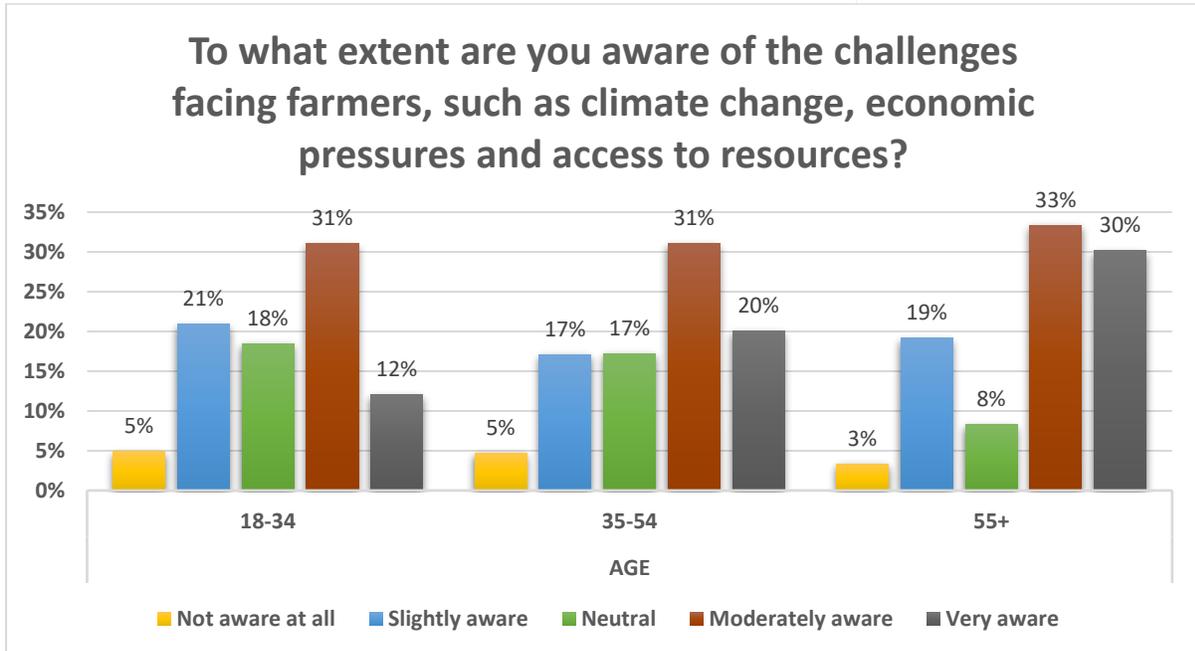

The City's Influence on Rural Farms

Exploring the urban-rural dynamic, the survey probes into the perceived influence of city dwellers on farming decisions. A small yet notable percentage of rural respondents (7%) feel a strong urban influence, contrasting with 32% who see it as moderate. Urban opinions mirror this perception to an extent, though with less intensity, showcasing the nuanced dynamics between urban and rural perspectives on agriculture.
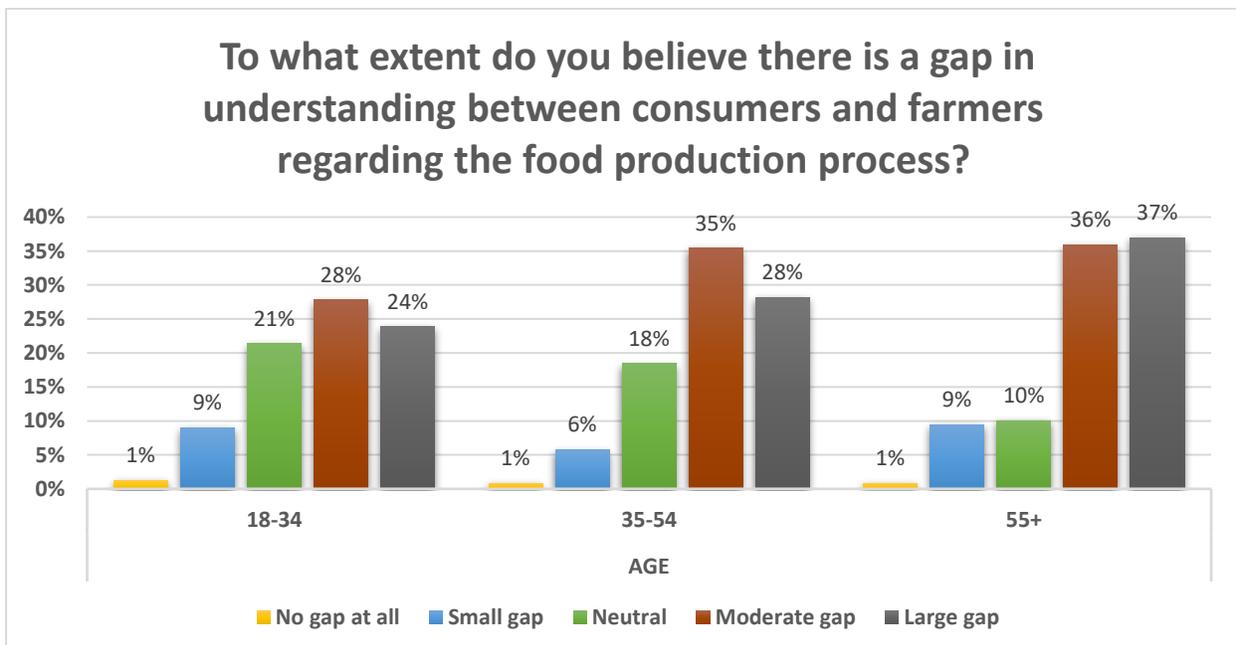
Please rate the level of influence you think city dwellers (people who live in cities) have on farmers' agricultural practices and decisions.

Awareness of Farming Challenges

Awareness of the myriad challenges facing farmers today, from climate change to economic pressures, also varies by age. Older Canadians show greater awareness, with 30% very familiar with these issues, compared to just 12% of younger respondents. This gap highlights the need for increased education and dialogue across generations to foster a deeper understanding of the agricultural sector's challenges.

To what extent are you aware of the challenges facing farmers, such as climate change, economic pressures and access to resources?

Legend: ■ Not aware at all ■ Slightly aware ■ Neutral ■ Moderately aware ■ Very aware

18-34: Not aware at all 5%, Slightly aware 21%, Neutral 18%, Moderately aware 31%, Very aware 12%
35-54: Not aware at all 5%, Slightly aware 17%, Neutral 17%, Moderately aware 31%, Very aware 20%
55+: Not aware at all 3%, Slightly aware 19%, Neutral 8%, Moderately aware 33%, Very aware 30%

AGE

Bridging the Gap in Food Production Understanding

A significant 64% of respondents believe in a notable gap in understanding between consumers and farmers regarding the food production process. This perception is more pronounced among older Canadians, suggesting a pivotal opportunity for bridging communication and enhancing knowledge sharing between farmers and the broader community.

To what extent do you believe there is a gap in understanding between consumers and farmers regarding the food production process?

Legend: ■ No gap at all ■ Small gap ■ Neutral ■ Moderate gap ■ Large gap

18-34: No gap at all 1%, Small gap 9%, Neutral 21%, Moderate gap 28%, Large gap 24%
35-54: No gap at all 1%, Small gap 6%, Neutral 18%, Moderate gap 35%, Large gap 28%
55+: No gap at all 1%, Small gap 9%, Neutral 10%, Moderate gap 36%, Large gap 37%

AGE

This survey not only sheds light on the diverse viewpoints across generations but also underscores the critical role of dialogue, education, and technology in shaping the future of Canadian agriculture. As we navigate the complexities of sustainable farming and climate mitigation, these insights offer a valuable foundation for fostering collaboration and understanding between farmers and the Canadian public.

Janet Music, Research Manager of the Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University: "These findings are incredibly illuminating. The generational disparities in confidence levels towards sustainable farming practices underscore the importance of targeted education and outreach efforts, particularly among younger Canadians."

Dr. Sylvain Charlebois, Director of the Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University: "It's evident that bridging the gap in understanding between consumers and farmers is essential for the future of Canadian agriculture. Moreover, the regional perspective on modern agricultural practices highlights the need for tailored approaches to address varying needs and perceptions across different parts of the country. Overall, this report emphasizes the significance of fostering dialogue, enhancing awareness, and leveraging technology to ensure a sustainable and prosperous future for Canadian farming."

The findings from Dalhousie University's survey underscore the importance of policymakers addressing generational differences in perceptions of farming practices and the urban-rural divide in Canada. This suggests policies should focus on enhancing trust in sustainable farming among younger Canadians, promoting the benefits of modern agricultural technologies, and improving communication between urban dwellers and rural farmers. Additionally, raising awareness about the challenges facing the agriculture sector across all age groups could foster a more informed and supportive public, crucial for implementing effective agricultural and environmental policies.

For more information and access to the full report, please visit https://www.dal.ca/sites/agri-food.html.

About the Agri-Food Analytics Lab

The Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University is a research unit dedicated to providing valuable insights into the food and agriculture sectors. Their interdisciplinary team of experts researches various aspects of the food supply chain, offering data-driven solutions to inform industry stakeholders and policymakers.

Contacts

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Methodology: The survey conducted between February 2 and 4 2024 had a total of 1,614 respondents. This number is both the weighted and unweighted total, indicating that each respondent was counted once in the analysis, and any adjustments made to ensure representativeness did not change the total count of respondents. The margin of error for the survey, assuming a 95% confidence level, is approximately 2.44%. This means that the results of the survey are expected to be within ±2.44 percentage points of what would have been obtained if the entire population had been surveyed, 95 times out of 100.

Disclosure: Funding for the survey was provided by Dalhousie University and Léger.