

# Summary of the Evaluation of Statistics Canada's 2021 Census of Agriculture

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Statistics Canada has a mandate and legal obligation under the *Statistics Act* to conduct the Census of Agriculture (CEAG) every five years. The CEAG provides a comprehensive profile of the physical, economic, social and environmental aspects of Canada's agriculture industry. It is the only data source that consistently provides high-quality detailed statistical information on agriculture for small geographic areas and collects a wide range of data at the national, provincial and subprovincial levels.

The CEAG provides both a snapshot in time of the agriculture industry and changes over time that are essential to inform public and private decision making. Its expected outcomes are to provide high-quality data and information that is accessible, available and relevant to all data users <sup>1</sup>. In addition to achieving the CEAG outcomes, the 2021 CEAG was expected to

- decrease response burden on farm operators
- increase integration with Statistics Canada's centralized infrastructure
- increase harmonization between the methods, concepts and processes of the CEAG and other economic statistics programs
- publish more data without compromising the confidentiality of respondents
- align the business model with Statistics Canada's modernization objectives <sup>2</sup>.

The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Treasury Board Policy on Results and Statistics Canada's Risk-Based Audit and Evaluation Plan (2023/2024 to 2027/2028). The objective of the evaluation is to provide credible and neutral information on the ongoing performance of the CEAG and to identify potential areas to consider for the CEAG's next cycle.

## Key findings and recommendations

The CEAG program achieved its expected outcomes of providing high-quality data and information that is accessible, available and relevant to all data users with the timely delivery of the 2021 CEAG.

Compared with 2016, the 2021 CEAG both sustained and improved on various factors that contribute to producing high-quality data and to their relevance to users, their availability and their accessibility. The 2021 CEAG made progress on its objectives to improve operational efficiencies through integration with Statistics Canada infrastructure, increase harmonization with other economic statistics programs and reduce response burden. As with transformational changes, full potential benefits will be realized moving forward as the processes and activities become fully integrated and more familiar to staff.

In general, the main overarching planning processes for the 2021 CEAG were similar to the 2016 cycle, with the addition of several significant methodological and operational changes: the change in the farm definition, the migration to the Integrated Business Statistics Program, the continued development of the electronic questionnaire and adaptations made because of the pandemic. The risk management process contributed to achieving expected results, as well as mitigating the risks that are specific to the changes made in the 2021 cycle. The significant number of changes for the 2021 CEAG made planning more challenging because of some unpredictable implications from the changes, and staff turnover added additional planning constraints. These large-scale changes implemented for the 2021 CEAG have also fundamentally altered many processes, establishing a new baseline moving forward.

Overall, the 2021 CEAG communication strategy and activities were effective in maintaining, and in some cases improving, awareness of CEAG products. New and improved tools increased awareness and facilitated users' understanding of how to interpret CEAG data. Some areas noted for consideration for subsequent cycles of the CEAG are continuing to amplify the CEAG through various communication and engagement channels; empowering users to access, use and interpret the data; and providing clearer information and guidance on changes.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

### **Recommendation 1**

The Assistant Chief Statistician (ACS), Economic Statistics (Field 5), should

- a. ensure that the process in place to regularly review resources includes revisiting the balance between upcoming and planned deliverables (including those for communication and engagement) and the corresponding challenges versus available time and resources
- b. in addition to the regular review process, given that the 2026 CEAG is not expected to include any new large-scale changes, verify that the planned levels and allocation of resources are correctly aligned with the new baseline resulting from the changes made for the 2021 CEAG; this will help ensure that future core activities are resourced appropriately.

### **Recommendation 2**

The ACS, Economic Statistics (Field 5), should ensure that effective training, retention and succession plans are developed, reviewed regularly and aligned with future needs of the CEAG program.

### **Recommendation 3**

The ACS, Economic Statistics (Field 5), should ensure that the CEAG has a communication and engagement plan in place that includes

- a. varied communication approaches to broaden reach and clearly communicate the CEAG's intentions and plans, including the corresponding benefits, to increase stakeholders' understanding and acceptance
- b. adequate approaches to improve data users' awareness of and engagement with CEAG data, to further support CEAG tool usage and data interpretation, including working with users with less statistical capacity.

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## Footnotes

- 1 Data users include farm operators, agricultural producer groups, federal and provincial governments, Statistics Canada, businesses, academics, and the media.
- 2 The five pillars of modernization include user-centric service delivery, sharing and collaboration, leading-edge methods and data integration, statistical capacity building and leadership, and a modern workforce and flexible workplace.

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