

# [***Underlying biological system part of soil health measure; Farmers need to own, not rent farmland, says a former NFU leader***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BKF-0YT1-DYWW-809N-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Ottawa -Any assessment of ***soil health*** needs to consider both its organic matter and the biological system underneath it, says Stuart Oke, co-owner of Rooted Oak Farm in North Augusta and a former National Farmers Union leader.

Agricultural inputs will increase yields but not necessarily improve the actual biological activity and ***health of the soil***, he told the Senate agriculture committee ***soil*** study.

"Truly healthy ***soil*** is going to have not only organic matter, but also a complex biological system happening under the ***soil***, which will be able to retain water both in times of flooding and drought and increase yields without needing to over-apply agricultural inputs that are costly for farmers and the environment from an emissions standpoint."

***Soil health*** needs to studied carefully, "and not just say that widespread zero-till practices are good," he said. "They are positive and can lead to very positive outcomes, but if those are coupled with heavy herbicide and fertilizer application, that doesn't necessarily mean that the ***soil health*** will continue to improve and provide those ecosystem services that we know can make farms more resilient."

The best action is adopting practices "which can actually build that microbial and microbiological activity under the ***soil***."

As farmland "is consolidated into fewer hands and the people who are farming, whether they be tenant farmers or very largescale farmers, get further away from the land that they are cultivating and growing on, they are less able to be aware of the needs of that land, but also be present in the communities that surround that land," he said.

Bigger farms also lead to the erosion of rural communities because there are fewer people who need the services available in those places, he said.

A critical issue for younger farmers is the high value of farmland because agricultural input suppliers or middle people in the food chain get most of the value of the crops and products raised on the land.

The NFU has published a report entitled Losing Our Grip that explores "the myriad of ways land has been and is currently being consolidated and otherwise grabbed by an increasingly small number of actors, both domestic and foreign, and how that has created an over-financialization of the land to such a degree that I am genuinely concerned for the future agricultural stewardship of our lands and ***soils***.

"As farmers owe more and more and own less and less and are forced more into the arms of corporations and investors, they lose control of Canada's farms and food land" They will be unable to manage the ***soil*** in a way that will ensure its longterm ***health***.

Inputs only feed the crop "and are no substitute for common-sense practices aimed at feeding the ***soil*** and the increased resilience that comes with long-term ***soil*** improvement," he said.

Canadian farmers face a farm net income crisis. In 2018, for every dollar farmers received, they only kept 6 cents. Farm debt in 2022 was $138 billion compared to $106 billion in 2018.

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