

## Are you prepared to do more with less agricultural research?

That's the question farm and research groups are facing as government and industry funding falls

By Jennifer Blair

There will be less government money and a renewed focus on boosting productivity on the farm, but the details of the province's new plan for ag research are still up in the air.

"We'd like to get to a point where we have a long-term vision for agricultural research — one that's designed to be delivered as efficiently as possible, and where farmers and ranchers have a direct voice in how it's being shaped," said Tom Steve, general manager of Alberta Wheat and Barley.

"We have that opportunity before us, and we're looking forward to it."



The province wants its funding research to boost productivity on Alberta farms and plans to work closely with farmer-led research organizations to determine priorities. But it also plans to cut ag research spending by \$34.1 million over the next four years. *Photo: [www.innotechalberta.ca](http://www.innotechalberta.ca)*

The previous NDP government shifted the focus of ag research away from productivity-based efforts, said Steve.

"We had some deep concerns about the direction of the science review under the previous government that was moving more in the direction of sustainability, social licence, and climate change versus productivity-based research, which is really the key to making farmers more competitive on the global market," he said.

"That shift away from productivity-based research was a concern to all of the crop and livestock commissions in Alberta, so now we have an opportunity to reshape how research is done."

The United Conservative government shares the view that research should translate into things that boost the bottom line for farmers, but it also plans to cut ag research spending by \$34.1 million over the next four years.

However, it also expects to get a bigger bang from a smaller buck by working closely with farmer-led research organizations, said the province's agriculture minister.

"We want to be able to partner with farmers so that the type of research the government is funding is, at the end of the day, something that benefits farmers," said Devin Dreeshen.

"It's not that we're just looking at dollar figures — it's actually about outcomes."

### Dwindling dollars

But it takes money to do research and the pool of funding is getting smaller.

Farming Smarter, a producer-led research organization, said funding both from government and from provincial commodity groups is shrinking. Earlier this year, the provincial Agriculture Opportunity Fund “disappeared,” and that was the “core grant for all Alberta farmer-led research associations,” Farming Smarter said in a press release expressing concern about research funding.

“That’s \$1.5 million gone across the province,” said Ken Coles, the group’s general manager.

He also pointed to Alberta Pulse Growers’ decision to discontinue funding for his organization’s knowledge transfer program last year.

“We lost \$50,000 in support for our communication efforts in one year. That’s a big hit and we fear the other commissions may follow suit as they struggle with their own budgets,” Coles said in the release.

Alberta’s commodity groups are primarily funded through checkoff dollars, with a portion of that money going towards research efforts. But when fewer bushels or cattle are sold, the pot of money shrinks.

“We’ve got a limited budget, and our budget this year is actually a little bit lower than last year (because) our acres are down,” said John Guelly, chair of Alberta Canola.

“Our only source of income is the levy, and that’s based on production. So if there’s less production, we’re going to have less dollars, which is going to result in less money that we can put into research.”

Charlie Christie, chair of Alberta Beef Producers, echoed that concern.

“From a budget perspective, we just can’t (do more research),” said Christie, who ranches near Trochu.

“Our cow herd is down, so the marketings are down. So our provincial funding has dropped. When there’s less and less leverage you can get for that dollar, the tougher it is to do much of anything.”

Government funding for research projects has also been dropping both federally and provincially over the past five years.

“We’ve had a period of several years where there’s been uncertainty as to what the government commitment to research is,” said Steve.

“The entire term of the previous government — and even going back into the PC government before that — there was uncertainty as to what they were going to fund and what the ongoing commitments were going to be.”

Before the Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency was dismantled in 2016 and its activities folded into government, the province was investing \$12.9 million in the livestock industry. That dropped to \$7.2 million in 2016-17 and dropped further the following year when a total of \$12.3 million was split between the livestock and cropping sectors (including investment in Genome Alberta).

It’s a similar story with crop research funding. The Alberta Crop Industry Development Fund was also dismantled last year. It had been investing between \$5 million and \$7 million into crop research, with an additional \$4 million to \$5 million invested by Alberta Innovates Bio Solutions.

“There are always concerns about research cuts. We’ve had so many over the last few years,” said Guelly. “The big thing about our research dollars is the leverage (using producer dollars to attract partner dollars), and that seems to be drying up federally and provincially. We used to leverage our dollar at \$9 (partner dollars) to \$1 (producer dollars), and now we’re looking at maybe 2 to 1 at best. It concerns us a bit.”

## Next steps

What happens next is up in the air.

The province says it will shift its own research funding into the federal-provincial Canadian Agricultural Partnership in an effort to streamline how funding is allocated. It is also working with Alberta’s commodity groups on a white paper that will look at what role, if any, the province should play in ag research.

“It may not all be delivered through the provincial ministry,” said Steve, noting Alberta is the only province that funds in-house researchers.

“That’s the conversation that needs to take place — whether or not the government can both fund internal scientists and provide additional funding for research projects. That requires us to take a fresh look at the operating model.”

In some cases, he said, the white paper will “argue strongly” that certain research functions should stay with government, but it will also look at a shared-cost model with universities, the private sector, commissions, and applied research associations.

“At the end of the day, I think government will still be a funder of research,” said Dreeshen, who expects to review the white paper before the end of the year.

“There’s still that role. But it will be about how we can better partner with universities, the private sector, commodity associations, and farmers to have that farmer-led research rather than government priority-led research.”

But these groups may not be able to carry a larger share of the research load. And if those research dollars continue to drop, Alberta farmers could face another hit to their bottom lines, said Christie

“Research is critically important to our industry to keep us competitive with our competitors south of the border and across the country,” he said.

“There’s less and less appetite for these young producers to get into the business, so we need to make sure that we’re competitive with producers from other provinces and countries.

“Without research funding, it makes the competitive atmosphere of our industry that much tougher.”