

# Building Public Trust in Food and Farming

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## ■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ It's a changing world ... and agri-food is in the middle of it. Our food has never been safer, yet consumers have never been more concerned.
- ▶ Food affordability and sustainability are top of mind. Consumers want healthy, affordable food ... and food inflation is causing concerns for many Canadians. Additionally, sustainability and the environment remain high priorities for Canadians.
- ▶ Trust in our food system cannot be taken for granted. After considerable improvement in 2020, research shows there was a significant decline in the number of Canadians who feel the food system is headed in the right direction.
- ▶ Big picture first. Canadians are interested in improving the agri-food system as a whole and somewhat less interested in intricate details or specific issues related to agriculture and/or food production.
- ▶ Canadians trust farmers. Canadians continue to trust farmers, and they want to hear from farmers about how their food is produced, processed, and sold ... and everything in between.
- ▶ Turn up the volume. While there are numerous initiatives to share information with the public, these messages are not resonating with Canadians. The agriculture and food system must turn up the volume, speak with a unified tongue, and engage with Canadians.

## ■ Food is Important to Canadians

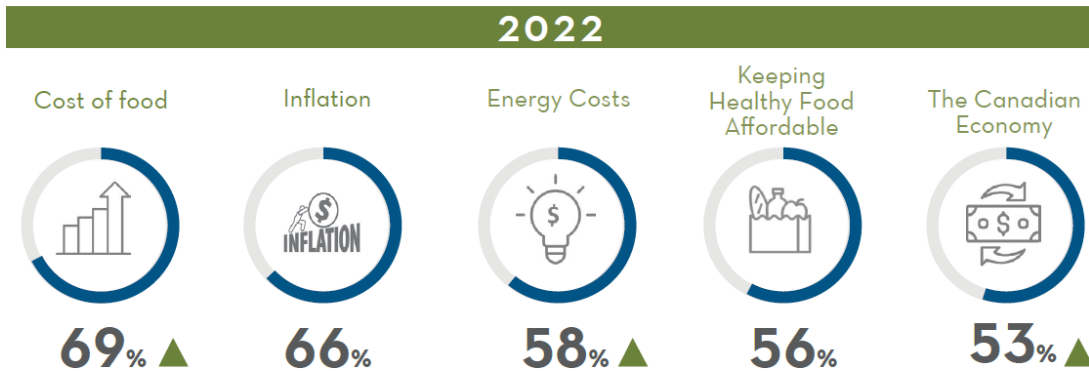
When provided a list of life issues, the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity's (CCFI) Public Trust Research released in the fall of 2022 shows that Canadians are most concerned about the rising costs of food, followed by inflation and keeping healthy food affordable (Figure 1). In fact, food issues ranked as the top issues — above global warming/climate change and energy costs. With clear majorities expressing concerns over food prices and affordability, the respondents suggest that healthy food might be becoming too expensive for many Canadians.

With food and food production high on the minds of Canadians, and with sustainability and environment always in the headlines, the entire Canadian agriculture and food system has a role to play in providing information that is transparent, trustworthy, and provides assurance to Canadians.

## ■ What Information Are Canadians Seeking?

Canadians are seeking a variety of information about food and food production. Interestingly, Canadians are becoming less concerned about intricate details and specific issues like antibiotics and hormones, and more interested in the bigger picture of food production and the agri-food system as a whole. From a trust building perspective, this means there is an opportunity for more simplified messaging that addresses priority issues.

# TOP FIVE ISSUES



\* Numbers reflect the percentage of those who selected an 8-10 (extremely concerned) rating from a scale of 0-10

**Figure 1. Top five issues as voted by Canadians participating in the 2022 Canadian Centre for Food Integrity's (CCFI) Public Trust Research (<https://www.foodintegrity.ca/download-2022-research-report/>).**

Within the past two years, CCFI research shows that three quarters of Canadians have sought information about a food related topic. Among those who have done this, nutrition and healthy eating are at the top of the 2022 list, although down compared with 2021. Nutrition and healthy eating are followed distantly by locally grown food and food safety. Canadians are also seeking information about humane treatment of animals and plant-based alternatives.

Many Canadians are also concerned about the working conditions of agriculture and food system workers. The overall health and well-being of the worker rank highest, but compensation and safety are also cited. Canadians are watching our actions.

## ■ Who Do Canadians Trust?

Although tracking results have remained steady over the years, there are significant decreases in those who trust Canada's agriculture and food system overall (Figure 2). Trust remains strong for farmers. Scientists are also trusted. And politicians continue to be in the basement with government agencies and food processors and manufacturers just slightly above them.

After a significant increase in 2020, there has been a significant drop in the number of Canadians who feel the Canadian food system is headed in the right direction in 2021 and in 2022 (Figure 3). While this isn't good news, it is important to note that the price of food was the major reason for Canadians citing the food system heading in the wrong direction. Again, this points to the importance of communicating with Canadians about the good work that the agriculture and food system is doing every day to produce and deliver abundant, safe, healthy, and affordable food.

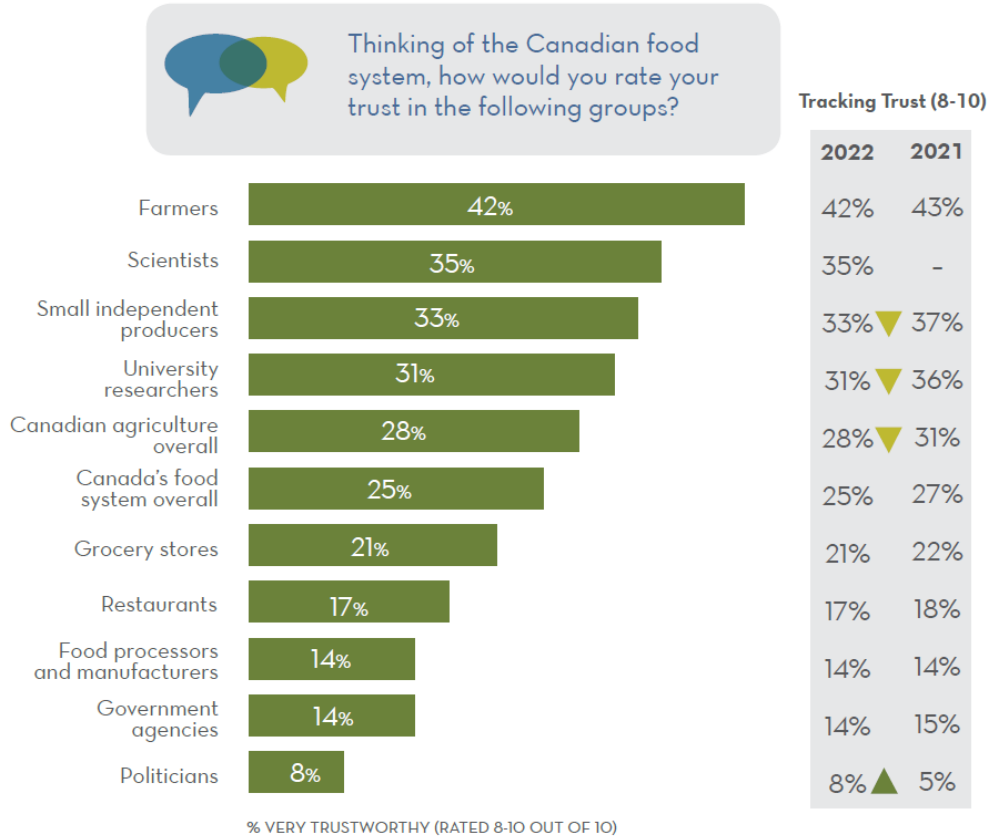


Figure 2. Level of trust in different food organizations as voted by Canadians participating in the 2022 CCFI Public Trust Research (<https://www.foodintegrity.ca/download-2022-research-report/>).

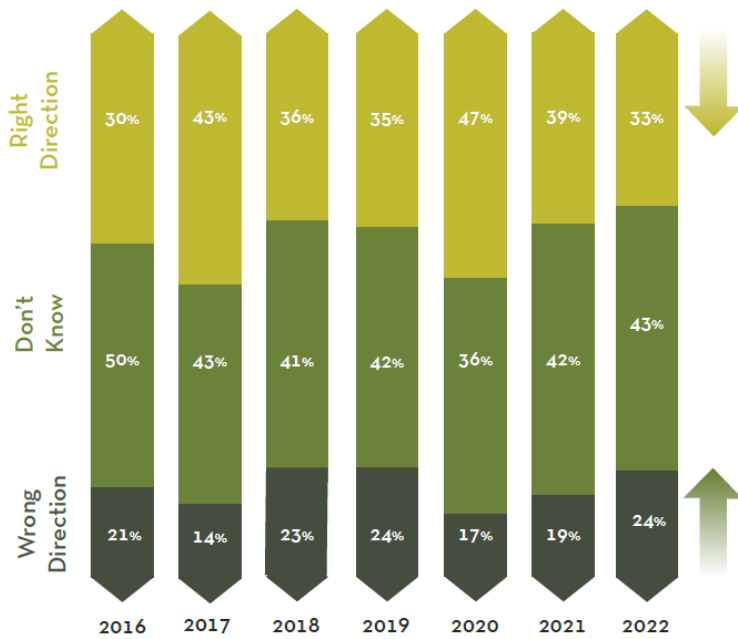


Figure 3. Public sentiment when asked if the Canadian food system is headed in the right direction during CCFI Public Trust research since 2016 (<https://www.foodintegrity.ca/download-2022-research-report/>).

## ▪ How Do You Build Public Trust?

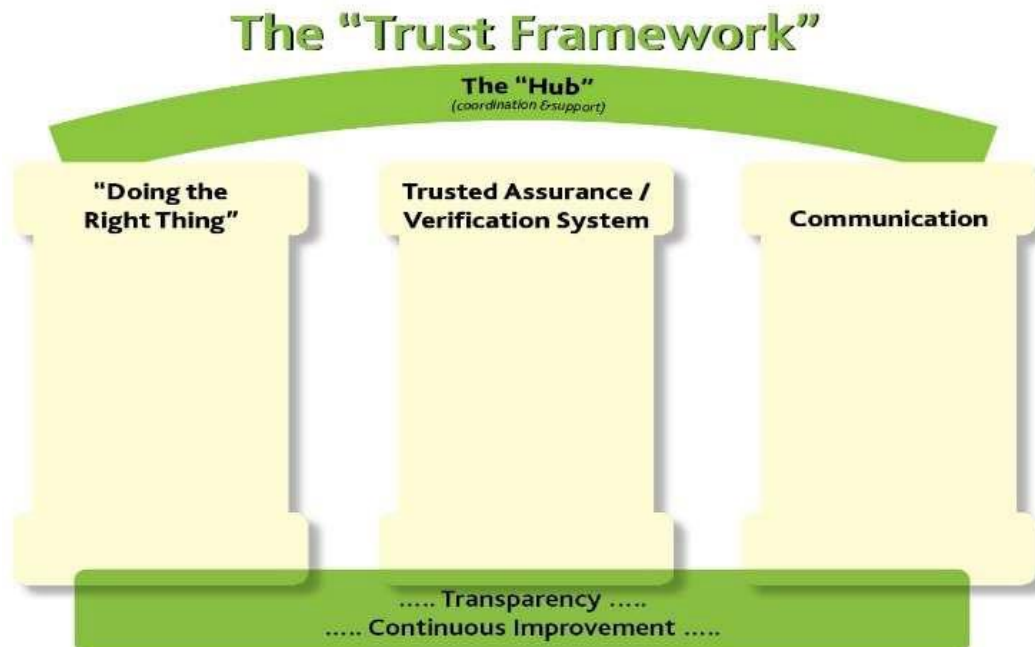
"If there is no trust, there is no us!"

For too long the agriculture and food system has not taken maintaining public trust seriously. Every organization, no matter how large or small, requires some level of trust from their stakeholders — customers, employees, the local community, regulators, legislators — and influencers. And every year, the list of influencers seems longer, and the strength of their voice seems to grow in importance.

Building public trust in food and farming is a global issue. Europe is often the region where issues first begin but North Americans are quickly following.

How do you build public trust? Building trust involves an investment and a long-term commitment. It is not just about giving consumers more science, research, and information; it is about demonstrating that we share their values when it comes to topics that matter to them. And as consumer values change, the agriculture and food system needs to evaluate and modify current practices and alter the way it communicates in order to maintain public trust.

The simplistic 'Trust Framework' illustration outlines the key components when building public trust (Figure 4):



**Figure 4. The "Trust Framework" as presented to the Canadian Federation of Agriculture in Public Trust Performance Metrics (<https://www.cfa-fca.ca/>).**

The framework model includes three pillars, a strong foundation, and an umbrella that coordinates. The first pillar involves 'doing the right thing'; this means an ongoing commitment to follow and document best practices at the farm and throughout the entire agriculture and food system related to production, environment, and social expectations.

The second pillar involves a credible system that can verify that the proper practices are being followed. This can include audits, certification and other assurance systems that provide consumers with a high level of confidence.

The third pillar is communications — meaningful engagement and effective values-based communication presented in a manner that resonates with Canadians.

All three pillars sit on a foundation of transparency and continuous improvement. Transparency is no longer an option in earning trust, and as the adage says, 'in a world where nothing can be hidden, we better have nothing to hide'. And while most Canadians aren't expecting perfection, they are expecting continuous improvement. Again, communication is critical in conveying transparency and continuous improvement.

The final component is a collective and coordinated effort to streamline efficiency and effectiveness. Most consumers don't know the difference between a dairy cow and a beef cow, a wheat field and a pea crop, or a pig barn and a poultry operation; they see a farm and a food system, and they want to know that it is operating properly, delivering safe and healthy food, and has an ongoing commitment to sustainability, people and planet. They also don't want a bunch of different approaches but rather a food production system that delivers consistency and a commitment to excellence.

## ▪ **Turn up the Volume**

Increasingly Canada's agriculture and food system recognizes the importance of public trust. It knows it needs to take trust development seriously to maintain its ability to operate in a profitable manner that aligns with Canadians' expectations. It knows that greater efforts are required to provide the information and address the issues that are on the minds of Canadians, and it needs to 'turn up the volume' so that consumers gain greater understanding and confidence. We also know that this is a big job and one that requires priority and resources.

This job is best achieved when the agriculture and food industries work together and in harmony. As the saying goes, "if you want to go fast then go alone; but if you want to go far then go together".

## ▪ **Resources**

- [The Canadian Centre for Food Integrity website](#)
- <https://www.foodintegrity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2022-ENG-Public-Trust-Research-Report.pdf>





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