

Canadian
Agri-Food
Sustainability
Initiative
Final Report

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Executive Summary

Overview

There is increasing demand from consumers, governments, and supply chain actors to demonstrate evidence of sustainable production practices in agricultural supply chains to meet the needs of a growing global population without compromising the environment, society or the economy.

Internationally, companies are reporting on their progress towards Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) performance. In fact, the [International Sustainability Standards Board](#) is soon developing standards for a baseline of sustainability disclosures for all publicly traded entities. Further, mandatory ESG reporting will be [coming to Canada in 2024](#).

In response, multi-national companies are making strides towards increasing the sustainability within their supply chains. Canada’s agricultural sector has taken a leadership role in enhancing sustainable agricultural practices. With many sustainability programs and initiatives across the sector, there is an opportunity to reduce duplication and streamline Canada’s approach to demonstrating sustainable production practices at the farm level, preventing a future where each Canadian commodity has to have its own sustainability standard and reporting framework.

The [Canadian Agri-Food Sustainability Initiative \(CASI\)](#) is a federally-funded project led by the [Canadian Federation of Agriculture \(CFA\)](#) to research and develop an online platform to serve as a hub for sustainability programming in the Canadian agri-food sector.

“There is also a strong desire to address a fragmented landscape of voluntary, sustainability-related standards and requirements that add cost, complexity and risk to both companies and investors.”

- International Sustainability Standards Board



The CASI platform will be an online sustainability portal that will help facilitate alignment with the sustainability demands of global markets and aggregate agriculture sector sustainability data. The platform will help producers identify and understand what is required to complete sustainability programs. Behind the scenes, CASI will benchmark sustainability programs and international standards.

Through the CASI project, the project team completed three main activities:

- **Industry Engagement** including 129 interviews with stakeholders across Canada, five facilitated workshops, and the development of a governance structure to manage CASI in collaboration with a governance committee.
- **CASI Platform Development and Testing** through two national pilot projects with Canadian agricultural commodities.
- **Communications and educational resources** to support knowledge transfer of sustainability in Canadian agriculture (e.g., through the development of timely factsheets on topics related to sustainability and agriculture).



CASI Mission

To facilitate continuous improvement in sustainability across the Canadian agricultural sector; ensuring confidence and trust in the environmental, social, and economic sustainability Canadian agricultural products.

CASI Objectives

- 1) Increase transparency, trust, and sustainability of Canadian agricultural supply systems.
- 2) Streamline sustainability reporting and verification at the farm level.
- 3) Develop sustainability competencies and facilitate continuous improvement across the industry.
- 4) Be a forum for knowledge exchange, mutual benefit, and networking.

Key Findings

Direct link between farm-level practices with National Index Indicators:

- Moving forward, there is an opportunity to explore more intentional linkages between farm-level practices identified through the CASI questionnaire with the National Index.
- CASI can support with aggregating farm-level information to support the Index's goal of communicating sustainability.

Customized reporting dashboards:

- The CASI platform must be able to demonstrate value to different agri-food sector stakeholders. Customized reporting dashboards, each with their own layers of aggregated sector data, will be key tools for unlocking CASI's value potential.

Benchmarking:

- Benchmarking between sustainability standards is foundational to the CASI platform. To tap into the platform's full potential functionality, the benchmarking methodology must be sound, and the IT must be able to support complex benchmarking between standards.

Assurance and verification:

- For CASI to meet its Mission, the sustainable production practices identified through the CASI questionnaire must be verified. Verification can take many forms. A future CASI must assess different verification systems to better understand the best approach.

Next Steps: Moving From Testing to Further Development

Building on the lessons learned from the research and development phase, there are four key concepts that would benefit from further exploration.

Research & Engagement Priority	Description
Developing the platform	Development of a user-friendly platform to optimize coordination between CASI and other programs to facilitate participation in sustainability programs and tools.
CASI questionnaire refinement	Refine the CASI questionnaire by mapping out the concept, drafting an updated questionnaire, and engaging key agri-food sector stakeholders.
Piloting the concept	Test the CASI platform and refined questionnaire with a diversity of Canadian farmers and farm types.
Exploring verification schemes	Conduct research to determine effective verification schemes that work within the landscape of Canadian agriculture and market requirements.

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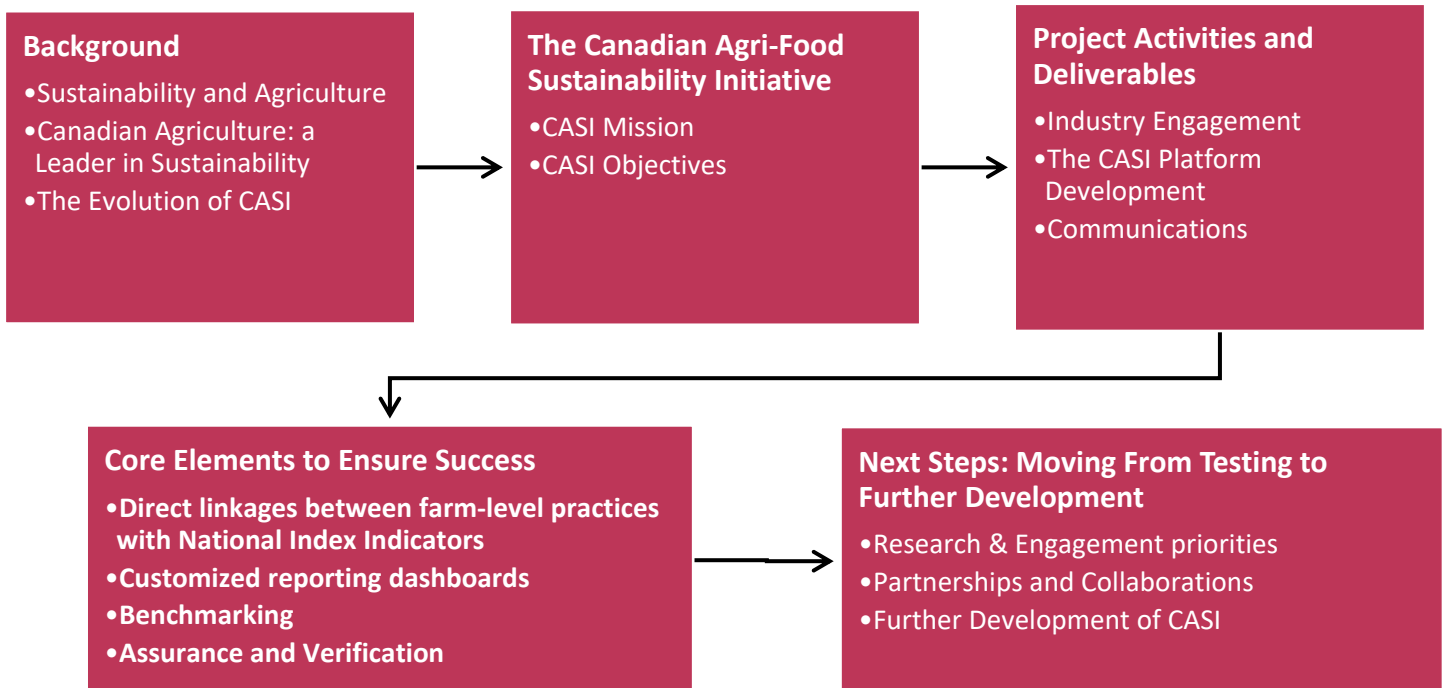
1.0 Introduction

The [Canadian Agri-Food Sustainability Initiative \(CASI\)](#) is a federally-funded project led by the [Canadian Federation of Agriculture \(CFA\)](#) to research and develop an online platform to serve as a hub for sustainability programming in the Canadian agri-food sector. The CFA is a unified voice that speaks on behalf of Canadian farmers and is comprised of provincial farm organizations and commodity groups from across Canada. In addition to having members of its board on CASI’s Governance Committee, the CFA board of directors provided final approval on CASI activities. Funding for CASI was provided by the Agri-Assurance Program.

The CASI platform will be an online sustainability portal that will help facilitate alignment with the sustainability demands of global markets. The platform will help producers identify and understand what is required to complete sustainability programs. Behind the scenes, CASI will also benchmark sustainability programs and international standards.

The CFA worked with [Wilton Consulting Group](#) to provide leadership on the research, engagement, and communications aspects of the CASI project. [Anthesis Group](#) provided software development services behind the piloted CASI Platform.

This report summarizes lessons learned from the CASI project from February 2020-March 2023:



2.0 Background

2.1 Sustainability and Agriculture

Sustainability is no longer a “buzz word” in today’s agricultural sector. There is increasing demand from consumers, governments, and supply chain actors to demonstrate evidence of sustainable production practices in agricultural supply chains to meet the needs of a growing global population without compromising the environment, society or the economy.

What is part of the sustainability picture?

Most sustainability programs are designed around the three pillars of sustainable development – economic, social, and environmental¹, also referred to as profit, people, and planet. While the environmental factor has long been considered in sustainability, increasingly, issues such as labour codes, farm transition, animal care, and community engagement are all being assessed in the agri-food marketplace. Each of the three pillars of sustainability are interconnected.

People

The people behind our agri-food system are integral in understanding sustainability. This pillar of sustainability includes topics such as labour practices (e.g., wages, treatment of workers including temporary foreign workers, hiring practices), mental health in agriculture, human and animal health and safety, and community development.

Profit

An agricultural system cannot be sustainable if it is not thriving financially. This pillar of sustainability includes farm profitability, business management planning, and succession planning.

Planet

Because agricultural production is tied to the natural environment, environmental considerations are a large part of the sustainability picture. This pillar of sustainability includes topics such as soil health, water quality, biodiversity, and GHG emissions and carbon sequestration.



¹ www.un.org. (n.d.). Sustainable Development | UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC and SOCIAL COUNCIL. [online] Available at: <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/sustainable-development#:~:text=ECOSOC%20operates%20at%20the%20centre>

There is moral urgency to leverage existing solutions to adapt to a changing climate and mitigate risk. The [International Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC’s\) most recent synthesis report](#) highlights the urgency of actions that can be taken now to improve life for current and future generations. Enhancing carbon sequestration in agriculture is highlighted as one such current solution with high mitigation potential.

“There is also a strong desire to address a fragmented landscape of voluntary, sustainability-related standards and requirements that add cost, complexity and risk to both companies and investors.”

- International Sustainability Standards Board

Internationally, companies are reporting on their progress towards Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) performance.² In fact, the [International Sustainability Standards Board](#) is soon developing standards for a baseline of sustainability disclosures for all publicly traded entities.

Mandatory ESG reporting will be coming to Canada in 2024. The [2022 Federal budget](#) outlines a plan for federally regulated financial institutions to begin reporting on ESG performance based on the [Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures](#) (TCFD) framework.

“As federally regulated banks and insurers play a prominent role in shaping Canada’s economy, OSFI guidance will have a significant impact on how Canadian businesses manage and report on climate-related risks and exposures.”

- Government of Canada Budget 2022 (pg. 106)

In response, multi-national companies are making strides towards increasing the sustainability within their supply chains. As a result, several standards or expectations on how to do better have been established (Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of agri-food sector company sustainability programs.

Company	Example excerpt of Sustainability goal
Costco	Global Sustainability Plan includes goals related to human rights , animal welfare , and environmental impacts and land stewardship .
Kelloggs	Responsibly source 10 of its priority ingredients
Molson Coors	By 2025 , source 100% of its barley and hops from sustainable sources, reduce supply chain carbon emissions by 20%, among other goals.
Maple Leaf Canada	Use science based targets to reduce environmental footprint by 50% by 2025.

² For more information on ESG investing, see the CASI Factsheet on ESG Investing, [here](#).

2.2 Canadian Agriculture: A Leader in Sustainability

Canadian agriculture and agri-food products are widely recognized as safe, sustainable and affordable. Canadian farmers are implementing a range of practices to improve sustainable outcomes. Canada's agricultural sector has taken a leadership role in enhancing sustainable agricultural practices. This leadership is reflected by the many current initiatives across the sector to enhance environmental, social and economic outcomes on Canadian farm businesses.

Nationally, Canada is in the process of developing a Sustainable Agriculture Strategy, this will further support current, or recently completed, program such as:

- The Canadian Agricultural Partnership
- Agricultural Climate Solutions: On-Farm Climate Action Fund
- Living Laboratories Initiative
- 2030 Emissions Reduction Plan

As international markets continue to implement sustainable sourcing requirements, the Canadian agriculture sector must be enabled to respond to these demands. While many advanced programs exist across the country, there is an opportunity to better communicate the outcomes of these programs to meet international market demands. At the same time, many farmers find themselves implementing and managing multiple standards, and sometimes duplicating efforts to meet multiple standard requirements.

When new sustainability standards are introduced to Canadian markets, how can farmers leverage their existing efforts to access these markets? The answer to this challenge is a comprehensive approach to recognizing sustainability initiatives and efforts in Canadian agriculture.

Without a comprehensive approach to sustainability, the agricultural sector risks:

- Duplicating sustainability efforts and contributing to the administrative load already experienced by Canada's farm businesses.
- Losing an opportunity to communicate sustainability efforts contributing to Canada's high-quality food and agricultural products with local and global consumers and brands.
- Making it difficult for international brands to source sustainably produced Canadian agri-products.

"Improved coordination across initiatives addressing agri-environmental issues would advance environmental outcomes and proactively leverage opportunities that also provide economic and social benefits to the sector."

- Canadian Sustainable Agriculture Strategy Discussion Document



2.2 The Evolution of CASI

The early beginnings of CASI started in 2016, when a project led by a collaboration of Ontario agricultural sector stakeholders commissioned research to examine the need for a simplified reporting system to meet various sustainability requirements within the industry. The Project, [The Sustainable Farm and Food Initiative \(SFFI\)](#), assessed and tested an opportunity to create a whole farm approach to harmonize various industry and commodity specific standards. Research, engagement and a dairy goat sector pilot project through SFFI demonstrated a willingness and interest in exploring a national approach to the challenge. In 2020, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture was granted funding through the Canadian Agricultural Partnership AgriAssurance program for the CASI project.

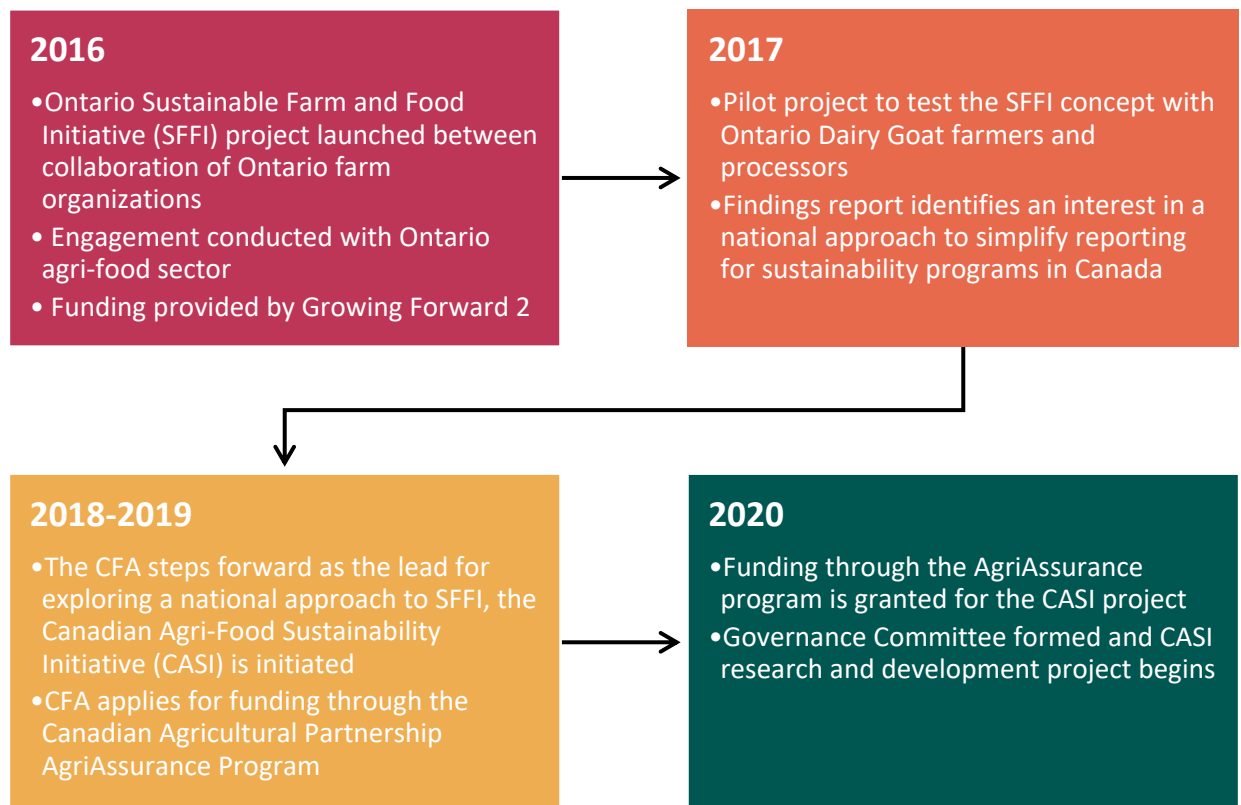


Figure 1. High level summary of the evolution of the Sustainable Farm and Food Initiative, to the Canadian Agri-Food Sustainability Initiative.

3.0 The Canadian Agri-Food Sustainability Initiative

3.1 CASI Mission

To facilitate continuous improvement in sustainability across the Canadian agricultural sector; ensuring confidence and trust in the environmental, social, and economic sustainability Canadian agricultural products.

3.2 CASI Objectives

- 1) Increase transparency, trust, and sustainability of Canadian agricultural supply systems.
- 2) Streamline sustainability reporting and verification at the farm level.
- 3) Develop sustainability competencies and facilitate continuous improvement across the industry.
- 4) Be a forum for knowledge exchange, mutual benefit, and networking.

How does this help Canadian agriculture?

- It will prevent the story of Canadian agriculture from being told for us
- A rising tide lifts all boats; Providing evidence of sustainable production practices should be attainable and accessible for all Canadian commodities, regardless of their market share
- It is a proactive approach to sustainability assurance (voluntary, but available if markets demand assurance of sustainable production practices)
- It will alleviate risk of markets creating new standards and 'imposing' them on Canadian agriculture
- It will maintain the integrity of Canadian production practices (i.e., prevents a race to the bottom)



4.0 Project Activities and Deliverables

Research & Engagement



The details

Interviewees:

- Producers and Producer Groups
- Supply Chain
- Government
- Sustainability Enablers

Factsheets:

- Benchmarking
- Carbon Markets
- Environmental, Social and Governance Investing

Workshops:

- Sustainability Standards: Expectations for Canadian Agriculture and the way Forward (February 1, 2022)
- Environment, Social and Governance Investing and Canadian Agriculture (November 22, 2022)
- CASI and National Index Collaboration Opportunities to Support the Canadian Agri-Food Industry Part 1 (February 7, 2023) and Part 2 (March 3, 2023)

2 Pilot projects:

- Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef certified beef farmers
- Canadian Apple Growers (Ontario, Nova Scotia)
- Farmers tested the platform and shared their insights in a follow up interview

Agri-Food sector engagement:

- Presentations and information sessions
- Interviews and discussions with other ongoing sector initiatives

4.1 Industry Engagement

National Interviews

Interviews with 129 industry stakeholders were held from Summer 2021 to the Spring of 2023. The [What we Heard report](#) summarizes the results from the national interviews, and outlines opportunities for CASI that were incorporated into subsequent research activities. An [Executive Summary](#) and [Policy Brief](#) also provide succinct overviews of the findings from the national interviews (Supplementary Documents pages 1-58).

Five Workshops

Social and Economic Considerations for a Sustainable Canadian Agri-Food Sector- Canadian Centre for Food Integrity

On September 23, 2020, CASI collaborated with the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity (CCFI) to co-host a workshop on social and economic considerations for agricultural sustainability. For more information, the recording of the workshop can be viewed in two parts, [here](#) and [here](#). The workshop was supplemented by research conducted by CASI and the CCFI on public perception of sustainability in agriculture. For more information, please see the [Sustainability Insight Report](#). (Supplementary Documents pages 59-71)

Sustainability Standards: Expectations for Canadian Agriculture and the way Forward

The first Canadian Agri-food Sustainability (CASI) workshop focused on increasing our understanding of the complex and rapidly changing global sustainability standards that impact the Canadian agri-food system. Stakeholders from across the Canadian agri-food sector were invited to hear first-hand about industry experiences in meeting sustainability assurance programs. Attendees learned about the complexities of meeting global sustainability standards and why this is important for the continued success of the Canadian agri-food supply chain. For more information, please see the [Summary Report](#), [Information Package](#), and the [recording of the workshop](#). (Supplementary Documents pages 72-19)

Environment, Social and Governance Investing and Canadian Agriculture

The third CASI workshop involved a dialogue to share information about what Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) investing means for the Canadian Agriculture sector. By bringing together industry experts, Canadian agri-food sector stakeholders learned what ESG investing means for Canadian agriculture and more specifically, Canadian farmers. For more information, please see the [Summary Report](#), [Information Package](#), and the [recording of the workshop](#). (Supplementary Documents pages 92-108)

CASI and National Index Collaboration Opportunities to Support the Canadian Agri-Food Industry (Part 1 and 2)

One of the key relationships developed throughout this project is between CASI and the [National Index on Agri-Food Performance](#). The three potential points of synergy between the National Index and CASI are communicating sustainability, aggregating data, and understanding how to leverage the CASI & National Index link (Table 2). Together, these three points of synergy this formed the basis for a 2-part Dialogue between the two initiatives. (Supplementary Documents pages 109-155)

Table 2. Potential points of synergy between CASI and the National Index on Agri-Food Performance.

	National Index on Agri-Food Performance	Prospective Points of Synergy	Canadian Agri-Food Sustainability Initiative
Purpose	Present the sustainability picture (the pilot*) and performance of the Canadian agri-food sector over time.	Communicating sustainability.	Enable farmers to communicate their sustainability performance in supply chains and align with international sustainability standards.
What it looks like	Indicators and metrics for the Canadian agri-food sector (expected to evolve).	Aggregating data.	A platform that enables reporting between/among standards and programs.
Key questions	How can we collect aggregated data to enhance the sustainability picture and performance?	Understanding how to leverage the CASI & National Index link.	How can an online platform enable dual purposes; to help farmers (above) and enhance the sustainability picture (Index)

**The pilot will be launched in Spring 2023, providing a consolidated picture of the agri-food sector’s sustainability credentials from production to retail.*

Key Messages

- ✓ It is not efficient for every commodity to have its own “entry” point for sustainability in the marketplace.
- ✓ We need a voluntary sustainability assessment for Canadian agriculture that aligns with the Index and the Canadian context.
- ✓ And we need a benchmarking tool/methodology to compare it to international standards to facilitate market access and illustrate comparative advantages.
- ✓ Together, CASI and the National Index can help communicate Canada’s agri-food sustainability story; CASI can be the farmer-facing tool that is dual purpose (helps farmers and supports the sustainability story).
- ✓ Data governance will be important moving forward: The Index will not seek individual farmer data. CASI must have robust data/information governance protocols and communicate them clearly to the sector.

Governance Structure to Manage CASI

From 2020 through March 2023, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) led the development and implementation of CASI. CFA was supported in its work by a Governance Committee, several subcommittees, and contractors (Supplementary Documents pages 156-162).

Importantly, CASI’s current Governance Committee has membership from a diversity of agriculture sector stakeholders. The Governance Committee has expertise in each of the three pillars of sustainability. Most of the Governance Committee members are associated with agricultural organizations that represent the interests of Canadian farmers, other Committee members represent other value chain stakeholders including retailers, processors, and lenders. Moving forward, it will be important to maintain such balance and industry representation within CASI’s governance and operation structure.

As CASI moves from testing into further development, an opportunity exists to refine the governance and operational structure to better support the initiative’s expanded scope of work (Figure 2 and Supplementary Documents pages 163-172). The figure shows the proposed governance structure if CASI is to move forward as a stand-alone initiative (e.g., as a not-for-profit structure). However, an opportunity exists for more intentional collaboration with the National Index. (See section 6.2 Partnerships and Collaborations.) In that case, the governance structure for CASI could potentially be simplified and integrated with the National Index structure.

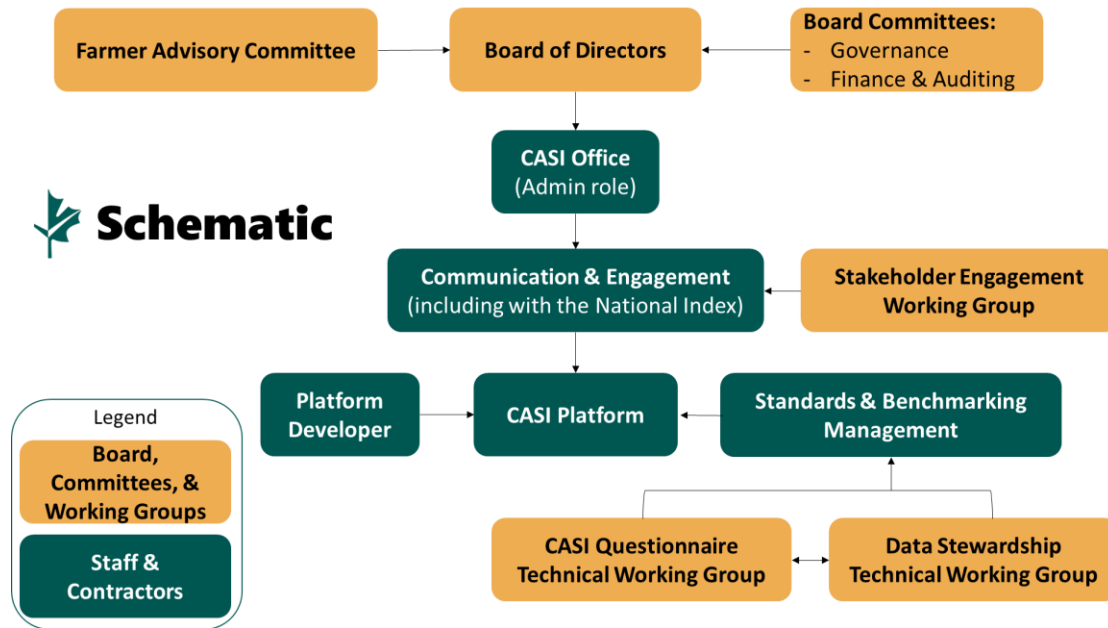


Figure 3. CASI’s proposed governance and operational structure.

As the governing body, the Board of Directors should ensure the organization complies with its bylaws, as well as other relevant legislation. The Board should also monitor CASI's progress towards aims and objectives and provide strategic direction. The board should include representatives from CASI’s key stakeholders, including:

- Producer organizations
- Agri-businesses
- Processors, manufacturers, and distributors
- Retailers and foodservice
- NGOs, academics, and affiliates
- Government (ex-officio)

The Board should be supported by two committees (Table 3).

Table 3. CASI’s proposed Board Committees.

Committee	Purpose
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversees governance structure • Oversees nominations and elections for the board, committees, and working groups • Develops and oversees bylaws and operating procedures
Audit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversees finances • Oversees annual budgets

As producer buy-in is crucial to the development and success of CASI, a Farmer Advisory Committee should provide advice and recommendations on:

- ✓ Updates to the CASI questionnaire and platform
- ✓ Farmer outreach and engagement
- ✓ Emerging opportunities and threats

The number of seats allocated to each sector should strike a balance between the number of farms producing commodities and volume of production of each commodity represented.

CASI’s operations should be supported by three working groups (Table 4).

Table 4. CASI’s proposed Working Groups.

Working Group	Purpose
Stakeholder Engagement Working Group	Provides advice and recommendations on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder relations • Communications
Data Stewardship Technical Working Group	Provides advice and recommendations on data: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewardship • Management • Aggregation • Sharing
CASI Questionnaire Technical Working Group	Provides advice and recommendations related to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benchmarking • Sector-specific practices • CASI questionnaire development and updates • Verification • Reporting dashboard

4.2 The CASI Platform Development

Central to the CASI project was the development and testing of the first iterations of the CASI platform. Each national pilot project consisted of several activities:

- ✓ Engagement with livestock and horticulture sector stakeholders to determine commodities to pilot the platform
- ✓ Selection of relevant sustainability standards to be assessed and benchmarked through the platform
- ✓ Benchmarking the sustainability standards
- ✓ Development of the platform and inputting benchmarking logic
- ✓ Recruiting farmers to participate in the pilot
- ✓ Providing technical support to farmers throughout the pilot
- ✓ Interviewing farmers post-pilot to gather insights and lessons learned
- ✓ Providing farmers with an honorarium for participating in the CASI pilot

For more information on the national pilot projects, please see Supplementary Documents pages 173-194 and 195-218.

Lessons Learned from Pilot Project 1

CASI partnered with the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef for the first pilot project. 9 beef farmers who were certified under the sustainable beef production standard participated.



Figure 4. Overview of how farmers interacted with the CASI platform for pilot 1.

Three key takeaways from Pilot Project 1:

1) Benchmarking between domestic national and regional programs to international standards is challenging.

The costs associated with benchmarking between one domestic sector standard and market-based standards can be high. First, the methodology for benchmarking between two standards should follow good practices. For example, ISEAL recommends that core principles for benchmarking should include stakeholder engagement (e.g., opportunities for input) and impartiality (e.g., completed and/or verified by an impartial party). As standards update and evolve over time, benchmarks too, must be updated to reflect these changes. In many cases, agreements or Memorandums of Understanding between entities are necessary to facilitate buy in on the legitimacy of benchmarking results.

Thinking about the Canadian agricultural sector as a whole, it is inefficient for various commodity-based programs to each benchmark their own standards to other international standards as this would lead to multiple, duplicative, and overlapping programs. This leads us to the following key takeaway.

2) A single, over-arching entry point (questionnaire) for Canadian agriculture is needed.

The benefits of developing a single questionnaire for Canadian agriculture are two-fold. First, a single entry-point can reduce the cost and increase efficiencies to benchmarking Canadian programs to international/market-based standards by preventing a scenario where every Canadian commodity must maintain its own sustainability standard/program. Second, an over-arching entry point can enable Canadian commodities without sustainability programs to demonstrate sustainable production practices.

3) Legislation must be integrated into benchmarking efforts.

It is important to account for Canadian farm practices that are adopted consistently across Canada by virtue of regulation when comparing Canadian sustainability programming to other international or market-based standards. For example, Canadian farmers should not have to answer assessment questions related to topics like forced or bonded labour and following label directions on crop protection products.

Lessons Learned from Pilot Project 2

CASI partnered with the Fruit and Vegetable Growers of Canada to work with Canadian apple growers for the second pilot project. 6 apple growers from Ontario and Nova Scotia participated in the second pilot project. A CASI questionnaire was developed for pilot 2. The CASI questionnaire included direct linkages to the National Index on Agri-Food Performance to understand opportunities for CASI to aggregate practice-based information for the Index.

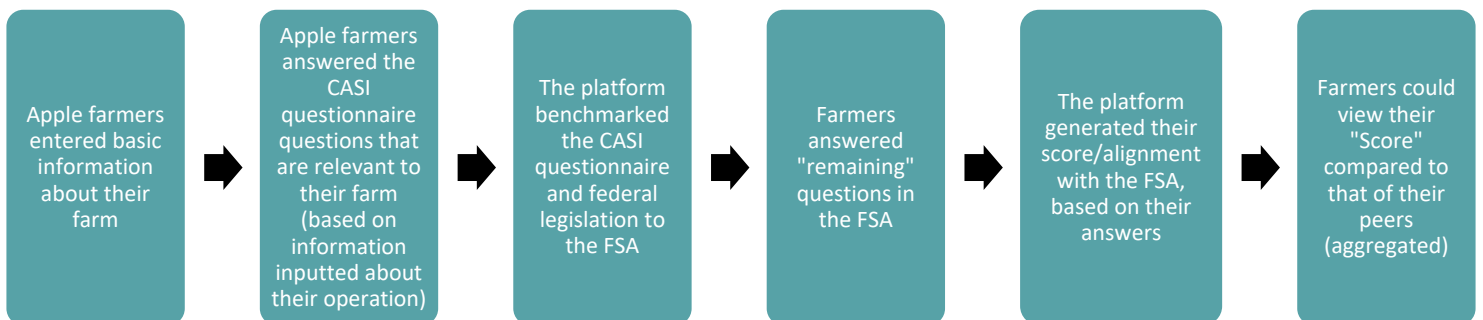


Figure 5. Overview of how farmers interacted with the CASI platform for pilot 2.

Four key takeaways from Pilot 2:

- 1) A CASI questionnaire that is rooted in the context of Canadian agriculture, with linkages to the National Index and market-based standards is a useful tool to assess sustainable production practices.
- 2) A CASI questionnaire should use necessary branching logic to account for practices used by various production systems (e.g., practices to keep soil covered vary between field crop and orchard production systems).
- 3) Provincial and federal legislation must be integrated into benchmarking efforts to recognize national and local regulatory requirements farmers comply with.
- 4) For aggregators to see value in the platform, verification and assurance must be integrated into future testing/development

Benefits of a CASI questionnaire:

- The CASI Questionnaire can serve as a single point of entry for Canadian farm practices to be benchmarked against international standards to demonstrate alignment
- Serves as a starting point for recognition of participation in existing voluntary programs (e.g., 4R nutrient stewardship, Environmental Farm Plan)
- Rewards farmers participating in sustainability programming by benchmarking to other market standards of interest
- Enables sectors without sustainability programs to demonstrate sustainable production practices

3.3 Communications

In this iteration of CASI, a key purpose of the project was communicating with stakeholders and the public throughout the duration of the project, as well as the advertisement and dissemination of CASI. A CASI [website](#) and [Twitter account](#) were launched to help support a cohesive understanding of the project throughout the agri-food industry. The CASI website tells [the story](#) of how the project evolved from an Ontario initiative (the Sustainable Food & Farming Initiative) to CASI. Educational and knowledge transfer materials were developed and shared (Table 5) to provide information on:

- Sustainability standards
- The role of CASI in supporting sustainability across the agri-food industry



Table 5. Educational and knowledge transfer materials developed to share information on sustainability standards and CASI’s role in the agri-food industry.

Title	Description
Frequently Asked Questions	<p>Short answers to a range of commonly asked questions, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where did the need for CASI come from? • What are the benefits of CASI? • How is CASI being developed?
Benchmarking Factsheet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explains what benchmarking is, how it works, and what it means for CASI
What We Heard Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarizes what we heard from agri-food sector stakeholders across Canada • Highlights opportunities for next steps for the CASI platform development and engagement activities through to the Spring of 2023.
Carbon Markets Factsheet	<p>Explains the basics of carbon markets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The two types • How they work • Why they’re important • Two federal carbon offset protocols in development
Environmental, Social, and Governance Investing Factsheet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides an introduction to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investing, which is a financial strategy to support a sustainable future.

CASI also released a series of six newsletters:

- [November 2022](#)
- [June 2022](#)
- [January 2022](#)
- [June 2021](#)
- [April 2021](#)
- [December 2020](#)

These newsletters kept CASI’s over 530 subscribers up to date on the latest news from CASI, as well as links to the latest news and articles that were informing the development of CASI.

5.0 Core Elements to Ensure Success



Core Element 1: Direct Linkages Between Farm-level Practices with National Index Indicators

Moving forward, there is an opportunity to explore more intentional linkages between farm-level practices identified through the CASI questionnaire with the National Index. In the short-medium term, CASI can explore ways to aggregate farm-level data to support the goals of the Index. The Index is looking to evolve its measures over time and, as such, will be seeking out new and better aggregated data on sustainability performance. In the long term, CASI can potentially contribute to translating practice-based information to outcomes-based information to support the Index goals.

Moving forward, CASI can collaborate with the Index to inform future CASI Platform and questionnaire development.

Core Element 2: Customized Reporting Dashboards

The CASI platform must be able to demonstrate value to different agri-food sector stakeholders. Customized reporting dashboards, each with their own layers of aggregated sector data, will be key tools for unlocking CASI's value potential.

FARMERS

- Aggregated farmer data to be able to compare to peers (e.g., like-farms, production systems and provinces)
- Opportunities to link dashboard results (e.g., gaps) with existing programming (e.g., EFP, Canada GAP, CAHRC programming)
- Showcasing alignment with other market-based standards/programs as they become available

VALUE CHAIN

- Aggregated sector-based data based on value-chain segment
- Increases trust in sustainable production practices and competitiveness of Canadian agri-food products

AGRICULTURE SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

- Aggregated sector-based data for commodity organizations
- “levels” the playing field of information related to sustainable production between Canadian agri-food commodities

GOVERNMENTS

- Aggregated data based on province
- Can inform opportunities to support programming to meet sustainability goals and protect market share

Core Element 3: Benchmarking

Benchmarking between sustainability standards is foundational to the CASI platform. To tap into the platform’s full potential functionality, the benchmarking methodology must be sound, and the IT must be able to support complex benchmarking between standards (Table 6).

Table 6. Overview of benchmarking activities for the future CASI platform.

Benchmarking Activity	Purpose/Benefit
Existing domestic programs and standards to the CASI Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduces the number of questions in the CASI questionnaire farmers will answer. • Provides recognition of existing practices used via other programming (e.g., Environmental Farm Plan, Canada GAP). • Allows farmers to focus on areas for improvement by reducing duplication between standards and programs.
The CASI Questionnaire to other international or market-based programs/standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitates market access opportunities • Provides an entry point for comparing Canadian agricultural practices with market-based demands

Future CASI delivery practitioners must be able to demonstrate competencies related to benchmarking practices. In 2019, ISEAL Alliance developed the Sustainability Programming Good Practice Guide for Benchmarking. The guide is based on research and engagement with global stakeholders including academia, industry, not-for-profit groups, governments and more. Based on this work, seven core principles for benchmarking were developed:

“At its best, [benchmarking] has the potential to improve the rigour and effectiveness of the benchmarked entities through a ‘race to the top’”

Sustainability Programming Good Practice Guide for Benchmarking (page 7).

- **Transparency:** Information on the program is available and accessible to interested stakeholders.
- **Rigour:** Benchmarking is robust and is enabled to be implemented consistently by stakeholders.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** There should be opportunities for stakeholders to provide input into the process.
- **Accessibility:** Benchmarking program structures should not create barriers to participation and should minimize the administrative burden for standards or programs being benchmarked.
- **Impartiality:** Conflicts of interest should be identified and mitigated.
- **Efficiency:** Benchmarking programs should be simple and reduce duplication of efforts.
- **Improvement:** Benchmarking should incentivise progress towards improving sustainability outcomes.

Future benchmarking initiatives through the CASI platform should seek to follow such recognized international best practices.

Future refinements to the design of the CASI questionnaire should include the ability to benchmark between other standards as a key consideration. For example, questions framed as “select all that apply” are difficult to benchmark to binary yes/no questions from an IT perspective.

Core Element 4: Assurance and Verification

Overwhelmingly, throughout the CASI project we heard that for CASI to meet its Mission, the sustainable production practices identified through the CASI questionnaire must be verified.

Verification can take many forms. A future CASI must assess different verification systems to better understand the best approach.

Why verification?

- It is a necessary step in any sustainability program to enable market access.
- It avoids the risk of greenwashing (a form of advertising that misleads the public into thinking products are sustainably made without any evidence to back claims).
- It can enable more trustworthy data for the Index and ultimately, enable Canada to take charge of its own sustainability narrative.

“The message is simple – [evidence of sustainability] is now a requirement to do business. For us, we’ve positioned it this way. We can see consumers in the future being willing to pay more for 100% Canadian sustainably produced products. We don’t know if it will happen, but we are ready. It’s about doing it ourselves before someone else tells us what to do and how.”

- Producer Group Interviewee



6.0 Next Steps: Moving From Testing to Further Development

6.1 Research & Engagement Priorities

Building on the lessons learned from the research and development phase, there are four key concepts that would benefit from further exploration (Table 7). Each concept is described in greater detail, below.

Table 7. Research & engagement priorities for CASI moving forward.

Research & Engagement Priority	Description
Developing the platform	Development of a user-friendly platform to optimize coordination between CASI and other programs to facilitate participation in sustainability programs and tools.
CASI questionnaire refinement	Refine the CASI questionnaire by mapping out the concept, drafting an updated questionnaire, and engaging key agri-food sector stakeholders.
Piloting the concept	Test the CASI platform and refined questionnaire with a diversity of Canadian farmers and farm types.
Exploring verification schemes	Conduct research to determine effective verification schemes that work within the landscape of Canadian agriculture and market requirements.

Developing the Platform

The CASI platform will be designed with the four core elements in mind (see section 5.0 Core Elements). The platform will be user-friendly and will facilitate participation in sustainability programs and tools.

Key considerations for the development of the CASI platform include:

- ✓ Alignment with CASI's core elements (section 5.0.)
- ✓ Simple, easy to use interface for farmers to complete the CASI questionnaire and explore dashboard results
- ✓ Optimizing coordination between CASI and other sustainability programs and tools

"Other people are writing the agenda on sustainability. Large companies are creating new sustainability standards – urgency is necessary to keep up with market demands coming in the near future."

- Workshop participant

CASI Questionnaire Refinement

The CASI questionnaire developed and used in the second pilot project was developed and tested without engaging with agri-food sector stakeholders outside of the internal CASI pilot project team. As such, it will be important to revisit the CASI questionnaire and refine the content based on stakeholder engagement and feedback.

The development and refinement of the CASI questionnaire could consist of 4 steps:

- a) **Development of a CASI questionnaire concept map:** The concept map can demonstrate the flow of the CASI questionnaire from a user standpoint. Since the CASI questionnaire will be designed for any farmer in Canada producing any commodity, a concept map can outline an aggregate view of how and where the CASI questionnaire will branch based on farm type. This research phase will involve close engagement and collaboration with other ongoing sustainability initiatives.
- b) **Development of the draft CASI questionnaire:** Once the concept map is complete, the development of the questionnaire content can commence. Building off of the successes of pilot project 2, the CASI questionnaire will be designed to be relevant for any Canadian-grown/raised commodity. The CASI questionnaire will make intentional linkages to the National Index to support the translation of aggregated sector information to enhance the sustainability story.
- c) **Engagement period:** The draft CASI questionnaire should be refined based on industry feedback. While the full scope of engagement can be determined at a later date, the CASI questionnaire should be reviewed by key sector stakeholders including national and provincial commodity organizations and other domestic agricultural sector sustainability initiatives (e.g., the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef, Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Crops, etc.). This step will be crucial in building stakeholder buy-in on the CASI concept. The engagement findings will be made publicly available to ensure a transparent process.
- d) **Finalize CASI questionnaire:** The CASI questionnaire will be finalized using the feedback gathered in the previous phase. The steps taken to incorporate the feedback received in the previous phase will be published on the CASI website. The final CASI questionnaire will be ready to test with any Canadian-produced agricultural commodity.

“All three pillars of sustainability are very important. Sustainability programs often started with a one pillar focus but have evolved to include all three pillars. You cannot drive one pillar in one direction and leave the others behind. (E.g., you can’t pursue an environmental objective that puts farmers out of business.)”

- Supply Chain Stakeholder Interviewee

Piloting the Concept

Once the CASI questionnaire is developed and the platform has been tested internally, the CASI questionnaire and platform will be piloted with the sector. We recommend the CASI platform and questionnaire be piloted with a diverse group of producers. To test its full capabilities and get a sense of the functionality, ideally, the platform would be piloted by:

- ✓ Farmers who produce more than one kind of commodity in any one growing season
- ✓ Farmers who run operations of a diversity of sizes
- ✓ Farmers including those who produce livestock, horticultural crops, field crops (for food, feed and fuel) and greenhouse crops
- ✓ A diversity of production system types (e.g., organic, conventional)

The pilot phase should include engagement with other sector initiatives to test and improve the value for all Canadian agri-food sector stakeholders. For example, piloting should include testing aggregating data capabilities for:

- ✓ The National Index
- ✓ Commodity organizations
- ✓ Supply chain actors (e.g., a processor or retailer)
- ✓ Governments and other agricultural sector stakeholders (e.g., provincial farm organizations and government stakeholders to identify programming opportunities)

Exploring Verification Schemes

We heard clearly from agri-food sector stakeholders that verification of sector sustainability information is critical from a trust perspective. To build our sustainability story at the farm level, reporting sustainability information about farm-level practices must be verifiable. This will not only build rigour and integrity into the system but will also help to avoid any potential accusations of 'greenwashing'.³

CASI Objective #1

Increase transparency, trust, and sustainability of Canadian agricultural supply systems.

Verification schemes must be explored in the development of CASI 2.0. Consideration should be given to:

- ✓ Minimize cost and maximize accessibility for farmers
- ✓ Ensuring a transparent, rigorous process to enhance trust in CASI
- ✓ How existing domestic programs that are not verified (e.g., EFP) could be integrated through the CASI questionnaire and eventual verification system
- ✓ Collaborating with ongoing domestic sustainability initiatives to reduce duplication and find synergies where appropriate
- ✓ Identifying a verification scheme that will satisfy market demands for sustainable production practices without compromising the above considerations

³ Greenwashing is [defined](#) as the act or practice of making a product, policy, activity, etc. appear to be more environmentally friendly or less environmentally damaging than it really is.

6.2 Partnerships and Collaborations

One of the original goals of CASI was to foster collaboration and shared learning around sustainability in the Canadian agri-food sector. This goal was met successfully through industry participation on the Governance Committee, through the five workshops, as well as the two pilot projects (page 14).

Moving forward, it will be critical to continue with the collaborations formed so far, enhance these existing relationships, and expand the CASI network. Given the complexity of the sustainability landscape in the Canadian and global agri-food system, it is important that the sector work together towards a cohesive approach for the development of a comprehensive sustainability platform.

As discussed, this initial phase of research and development for CASI was hosted by the CFA which automatically creates linkages with the provincial federations of agriculture, as well as other CFA members. This is valuable as the federations ensure a farmer-facing lens is applied at all times throughout the development of the platform.

6.3 Further Development of CASI

The further development and implementation of CASI will help to attain the vision set out in the Guelph Statement, as CASI will facilitate continuous improvement in sustainability across the Canadian agricultural sector. Through collaboration with the potential Centre for Agri-Food Benchmarking, this continuous improvement will be tracked and communicated to industry stakeholders, as well as domestic and international markets.

CASI also supports the aims of a [Sustainability Agriculture Strategy](#), which is under development “to provide an integrated and coordinated approach to improving the agriculture sector's environmental performance and supporting its long-term vitality.” CASI is referenced in the Strategy's Discussion Document as an example of industry-led work for sustainability reporting.



“Canada is recognized as a world leader in sustainable agriculture and agri-food production and drives forward to 2028 from a solid foundation of regional strengths and diversity, as well as the strong leadership of the Provinces and Territories, in order to rise to the climate change challenge, to expand new markets and trade while meeting the expectations of consumers, and to feed Canadians and a growing global population.”

- [The Guelph Statement](#)

As CASI moves into further development, joint investment from government and industry is crucial to support this work. For example, the organization leading the next iteration of CASI will apply for [AgriAssurance](#) funding, which supports the creation and adoption of assurance systems for Canada’s agriculture and agri-food industry. CASI’s activities closely align with many of the priorities for AgriAssurance (Table 8).

Table 8. CASI’s contributions to addressing AgriAssurance priorities.

AgriAssurance priority	CASI’s contributions
Provide confidence to buyers and consumers regarding market attributes and quality standard claims about Canadian agricultural and agri-food products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Streamline farm-level data collection and aggregate this information for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Supply chain stakeholders, who can then share the sustainability story with their buyers and consumers ✓ CASI could also develop a memorandum of understanding to share aggregated information with the potential Centre for Agri-Food Benchmarking, which could use the information to inform the National Index on Agri-Food Performance ✓ CASI’s questionnaire will be benchmarked against international standards, which will help facilitate market access ✓ Exploring assurance and verification options for CASI will increase transparency, trust, and strengthen sustainability of Canadian agricultural supply systems
Help industry respond to emerging consumer concerns in areas such as animal welfare and environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The diversity of stakeholders involved in CASI’s governance will be well-positioned to identify emerging consumer concerns ✓ CASI’s questionnaire will be updated as needed to ensure the data is collected on key topics of concern to consumers ✓ Industry stakeholders can use CASI’s reporting dashboards to identify priority areas for education and programming
Help industry advance existing assurance systems in the areas of food safety and traceability or create efficiencies by integrating assurance systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CASI will serve as a single, overarching entry point (questionnaire) for Canadian producers ✓ CASI’s questionnaire will be benchmarked to existing domestic programs and standards (e.g., Environmental Farm Plan, Canada GAP), which will streamline the process for producers to complete the questionnaire
Align with federal/provincial/territorial cost-shared programming, integrating assurance systems throughout the value-chain and leveraging digital platforms and technologies to increase proactive risk management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ CASI’s customized reporting dashboards will enable: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Peer-to-peer benchmarking for producers, which they can use to identify opportunities for improvement in their operations ○ Aggregated data collection for supply chain stakeholders, who can use the information to identify priority areas for programming to support their growers in implementing beneficial management practices

The transition to the new governance and operational structure (see Section 4.1 Governance Structure to Manage CASI) will assist in the transition to CASI's eventual self-sufficient structure. The new structure will bring a broader diversity of industry stakeholders to the table, allowing them to participate in the co-creation process and to ensure their market access needs are addressed through CASI. Once the platform is expanded to include all four of Canada's agri-food sustainability indicators (i.e., environment, economic, food integrity, and societal well-being) and a verification scheme, CASI can develop and implement a paid membership structure for:

- Producer organizations
- Agri-businesses
- Processors, manufacturers, and distributors
- Retailers and foodservice
- NGOs, academics, and affiliates

This paid membership structure will support CASI's operations, as CASI will streamline reporting, data aggregation, and "telling the story" for industry stakeholders.

Funded in part by the Government of Canada under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership's AgriAssurance Program, a federal, provincial, territorial initiative