

What We Heard Report

Pictou Agriculture Policy

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MOPC

March 2026

March 2026.

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01 Introduction



About the Project

The Municipality of Pictou County recently adopted its first-ever Municipal Planning Strategy and Land Use Bylaw, bringing comprehensive land use planning to the municipality for the first time. The new plans were intentionally designed with a “light touch” approach; however, after reviewing the documents the Province has directed the Municipality to update the documents to better protect agricultural land and align with provincial policy, with changes required by Summer 2026.

This project is focused on developing the required updates in a way that both meets provincial requirements and reflects the realities of farming in Pictou County. During earlier engagement, farmers shared concerns that planning could make an already challenging industry more difficult. At the same time, many also expressed worries about residential development encroaching on farmland and saw value in planning as a way to protect agricultural operations from land use conflicts.

Community engagement for this project built on those earlier conversations to support the creation of agricultural policy and regulations that support farmers rather than hinder them.

How Will this Report Be Used?

This report represents “what we heard” during the initial engagement phase of this project and ensures accountability to the community by demonstrating that their ideas have been captured and considered. It also provides community members with an opportunity to learn more about the project and review the public input received so far.

This report - along with background research and analysis - will guide the development of the updated Agricultural Policy.

What is Planning and Why Does it Matter?

Planning is the process by which communities can control change and development in their physical environment. Planning seeks to balance the needs of people, the economy, and the environment by determining where, at what intensity, and in what form certain land uses should take place. It plays a big role in keeping populations safe and healthy and allocates growth through proactive (or deliberate) transportation and infrastructure planning, making it easier and more efficient for people to get around.

Planning matters because...



It **helps us prepare for change** such as environmental change, like sea level rise, or social change, like an aging population.



It **supports our community's character and culture** by promoting good urban design, a quality public realm, and by keeping development consistent and complementary.



It **protects special and sensitive environments** by preventing or limiting development in these areas.



It **helps to protect people** from developing in areas where the natural environment presents a high risk.



It **helps to maintain a healthy, sustainable economy** by ensuring there is a good balance and proximity between places of work and places to live.

The Municipal Planning Strategy (MPS) is the primary planning document for the Municipality. It establishes the vision, goals, and policies for growth and developments. It acts as the road map for guiding decision making related to what we build, where, and at what intensity. It considers many different topics, including (but not limited to) housing, economic development, agriculture, the environment, and infrastructure.

The Land Use Bylaw (LUB) is the companion document to the MPS. It puts the vision, goals, and policies into action through specific regulations related to development activities. The LUB sets out the land use zones (zoning), permitted uses for these zones, standards for development, performance standards, developments to be considered by development agreement, and developments to be considered by the site plan approval process, among other things.

02 What We Did



Engagement Overview

Input from municipal staff, residents, and stakeholders is essential for understanding the key concerns and priorities for the community. Recognizing this, the initial phase of engagement included both in-person and online activities. The project team hosted a series of community conversations across the municipality in February and March 2026, where participants were invited to share their perspectives and insights on agricultural protections and the future of agriculture in Pictou County. A virtual session and online survey were also available for anyone who was not able to attend in-person.

Engagement activities were promoted through a variety of approaches, including:

+ The Municipality's website and social media
+ The project website
+ Direct emails and phone calls to identified stakeholders
+ Post in the Municipal newsletter
+ Advertising through the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture newsletter

How We Engaged



Online Survey with 50 responses

An online survey was available for community members to share their input on what should be included and considered in the Agriculture Policy. The survey was open from February 18 to March 8, 2026.



In-person Sessions

The project team hosted four in-person sessions across Pictou County. The sessions included a presentation that introduced the project, described the planning process, and why we are doing this project, followed by open discussion.

River John
February 24, 2026
Royal Canadian Legion Branch 108
Approximately 15 attendees

Merigomish
February 26, 2026
Merigomish School House Community Centre
Approximately 15 attendees

Scotsburn
February 25, 2026
Scotsburn Fire Department
Approximately 33 attendees

Eureka
March 3, 2026
Eureka Fire Department
Approximately 25 attendees



Online Sessions

The project team hosted an online session on March 2, 2026 for community members who were unable to join an in-person event. Approximately 10 people attended the online session.



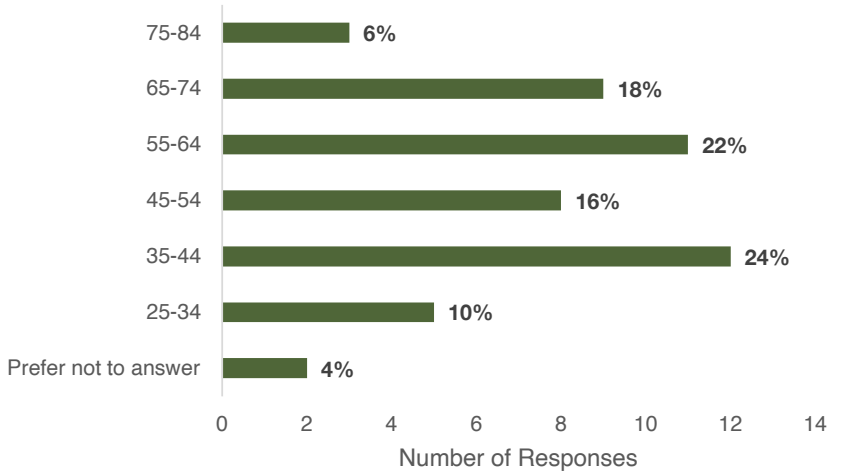
Stakeholder Conversations

Stakeholders and farmers were invited to meet with the project team virtually outside of the in-person sessions. These interviews allowed for more in-depth conversations about specific topics and challenges for the farming community. The project team met with representatives from the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture and the Pictou County Partnership.

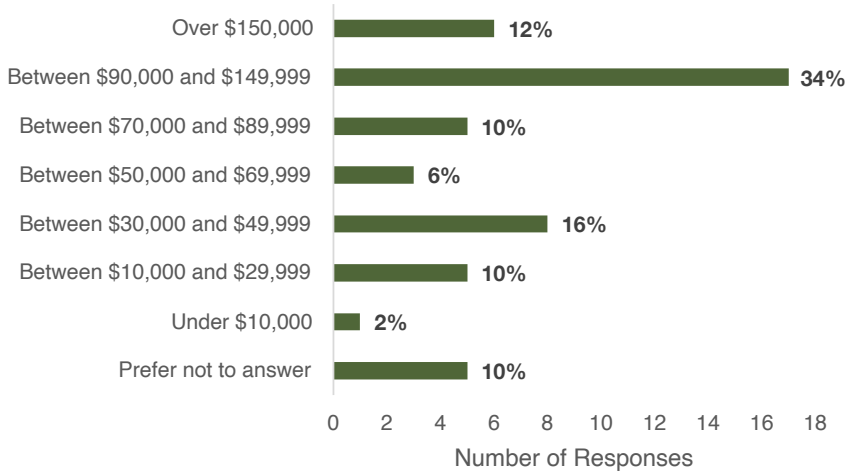
Who We Heard From

Below is a summary of who we heard from through the online survey. Survey results cannot be directly linked to any specific person, but the following data helps us understand who participated in the engagement process and any gaps in community representation.

What is your current age? (50 responses)

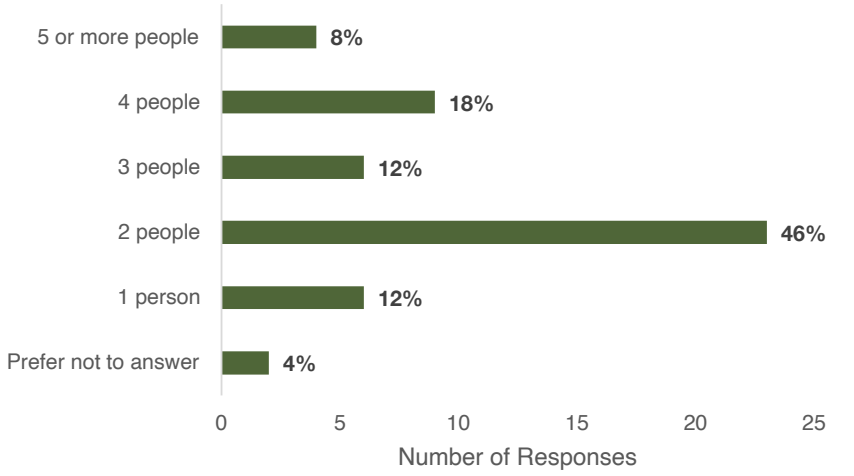


What is your yearly household income (before tax)? (50 responses)

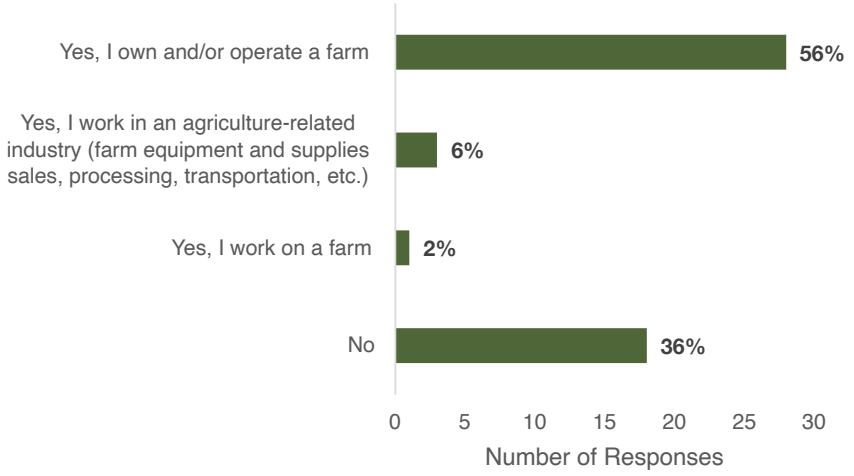


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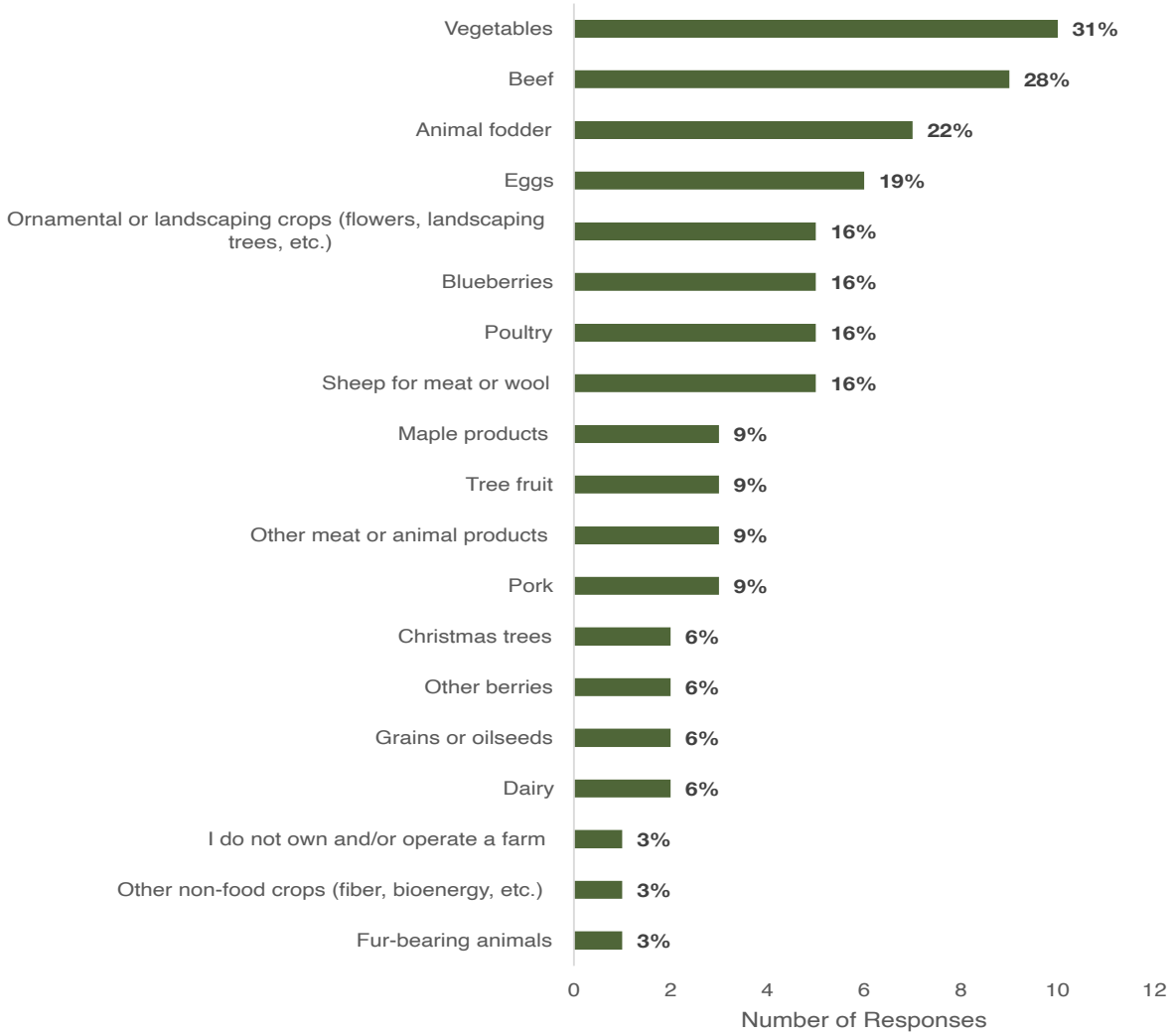
How many people live in your household? (50 responses)



Do you work in the agricultural sector? (50 responses



If you own and/or operate a farm, what are the main products you farm? Select all that apply. (32 responses)

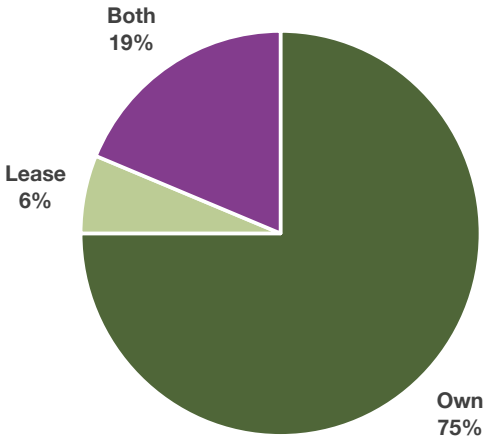


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Approximately how many hectares of land on your farm is used for active farm purposes? (31 responses)

Of the respondents who own or operate a farm, 48% actively farm less than 30 hectares and 26% farm between 30 to 100 hectares. 19% of respondents said they are using between 100 and 200 hectares for active farm purposes.

Do you own or lease the land of your farm? (32 responses)



If you both own and lease the land for your farm, what is the approximate percentage of land that is leased? (6 responses)

Of the respondents who both own and lease the land they farm, 66% are leasing between 50% to 80% of their land. The remaining respondents said they lease approximately 25% of their farm land.

03 What We Heard



This section summarizes the feedback we received across all engagement activities, including the in-person engagement sessions and online survey. All feedback received is valuable and will contribute to developing agriculture policy that compliments the interests and needs of Pictou residents and farmers.

Engagement Highlights

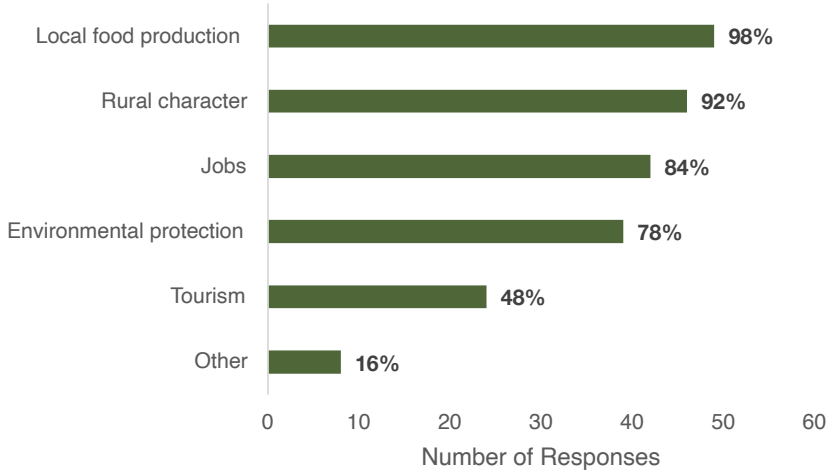
The following are key themes that emerged through the engagement process.

+ We heard **strong support for protecting agricultural land**. Participants widely recognized the importance of agricultural land to the community. However, many participants emphasized the **need for policies that allow flexibility for farmers and rural landowners.**
+ Many participants raised **concerns that overly restrictive policies could affect farm viability, property values, succession planning, and landowners' retirement needs**.
+ Survey respondents broadly **supported all of the proposed planning tools to protect farm land**, but especially shared **support for measures that limit non-agricultural development and protect top soil**.
+ Many participants supported **allowing land owners to apply for zoning changes or exemptions**, particularly where agricultural potential is limited or where professional assessments demonstrate that land is not suitable for farming.
+ Participants would **prefer that housing growth be directed away from farmland.** Participants were generally supportive of higher-density housing in urban and suburban areas if it would reduce development pressure on agricultural land. This separation of residential properties and farmland would also help to minimize conflicts and complaints between these groups (i.e., residential communities being impacted by the noises and smells that come with farming).
+ Land value and financial security were major themes from the in-person sessions. Some landowners expressed **concern that farmland protection policies could reduce property values or limit opportunities to sell land**. At the same time, some **younger or prospective farmers noted that lower land prices would improve access to farmland**.
+ There is a **need for more support for farmers.** Participants emphasized that farmland protection policies should be accompanied by broader supports for agriculture, such as incentives for farming, programs to help restore and clear farmland, and tools that support farm succession and access for new farmers.
+ **Defining agricultural land is also a challenge**, particularly when considering soil quality, land that is not currently farmed but could be, and forested areas with agricultural potential. Some participants **suggested creating different categories of agricultural land** to better reflect these distinctions and **applying policies tailored to each category, rather than applying the same policies to all agricultural lands**.

Online Survey Results

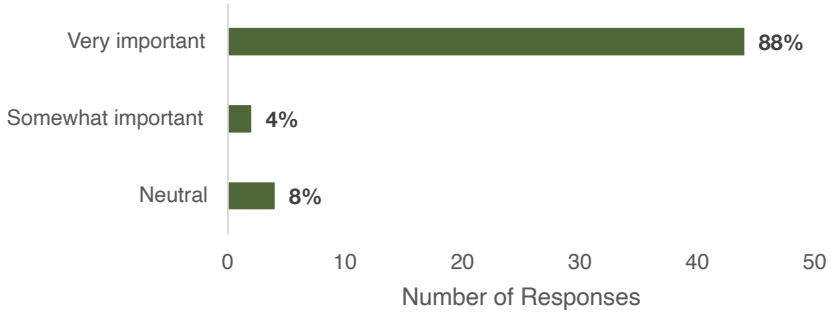
What benefits do you believe agricultural land provides to the community? Select all that apply. (50 responses)

The benefits of agricultural land most identified by survey respondents were local food production (98%), rural character (92%), and providing jobs (84%). Respondents who selected “other” specified the benefits of creating community, a sense of independence, and improved food security.



How important is it to protect agricultural land for future generations? (50 responses)

92% of survey respondents said that protecting agricultural land is very or somewhat important. No survey respondents answered “not very important” or “not important”.

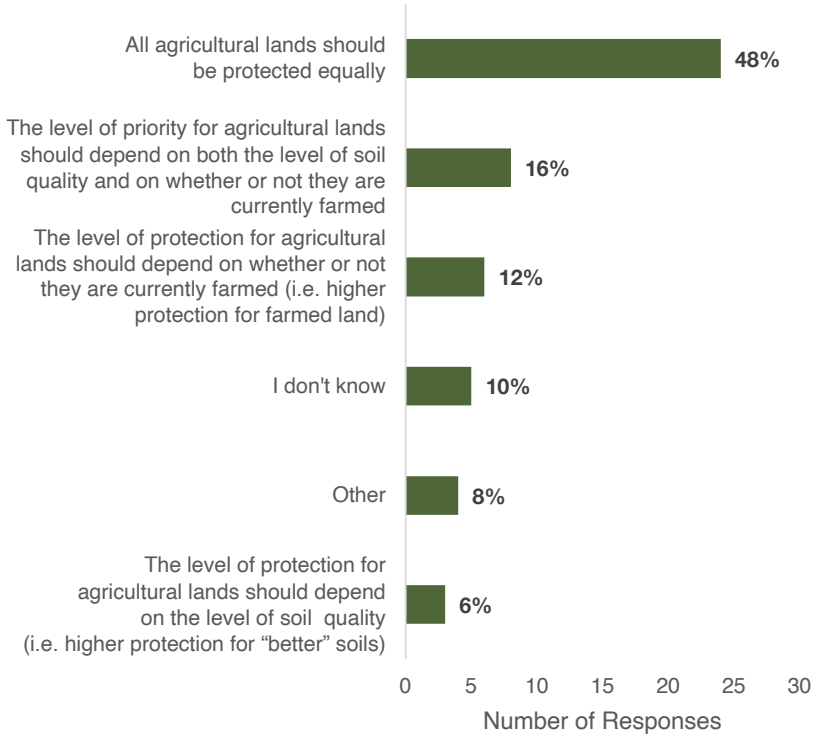


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The Statement of Provincial Interest Regarding Agricultural Land primarily defines agricultural lands based on the quality of soil for supporting agriculture, regardless of micro climates or whether the land is currently farmed. Please select the statement that best represents your opinion. (50 responses)

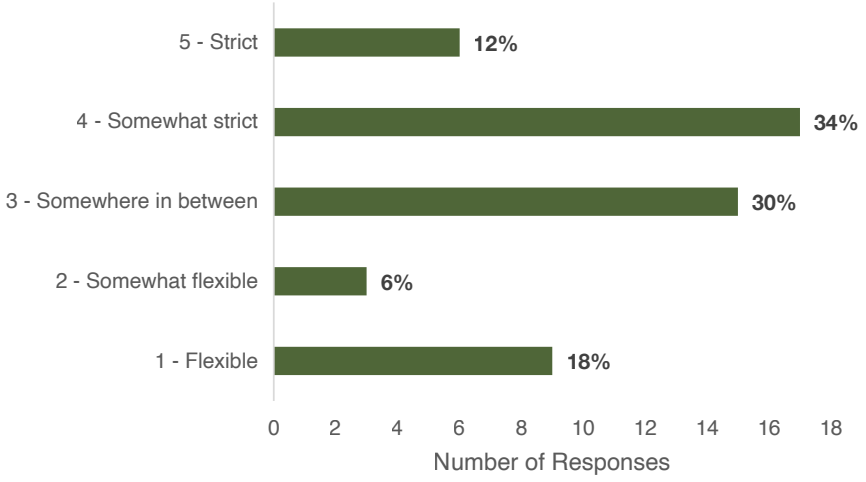
Nearly half (48%) of survey respondents said that all agricultural lands should be protected equally. 16% of respondents feel the level of priority for agricultural lands should depend on both the level of soil quality and on whether or not they are currently being farmed, and 12% said it should depend only on whether or not the lands are currently farmed.

Respondents who selected "Other" suggested that the definition of agricultural land should be based on the quality of the soil and whether or not the land is currently being farmed. Respondents also suggested their answer would be impacted by the level of protection being applied to agricultural land.



Planning policies that protect agricultural lands can sometimes create additional regulations that limit the flexibility for farmers and other rural landowners in agricultural areas (for example, limiting the ability to sell agricultural land for residential development). On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 is maximum protection for agricultural lands but the least flexibility for landowners), how strict should planning policies be?

34% of survey respondents would like policies related to agricultural lands to be somewhat strict, while 30% said they would prefer policies to be somewhere in between strict and flexible. 18% of respondents indicated they would prefer complete flexibility, and 12% said they prefer strict planning policies.



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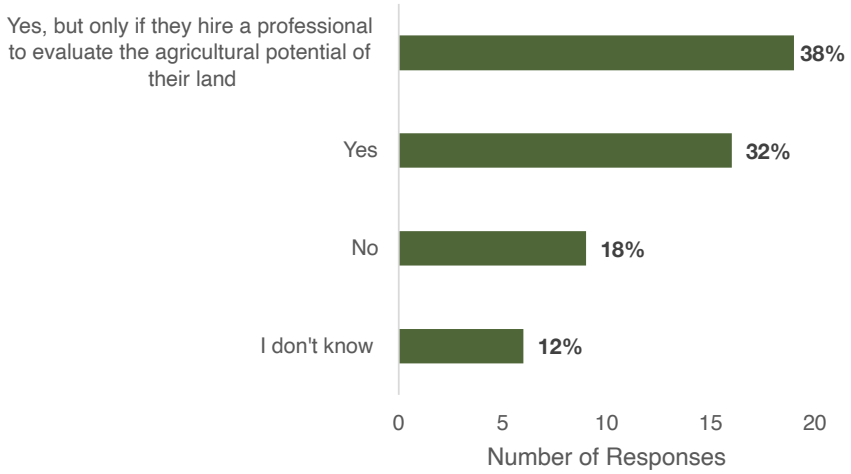
Please indicate your level of support for each of the following planning tools that could be used to protect agricultural land. (Response rates listed in the graph as responses varied by tool)

Survey respondents were largely supportive of all the listed planning tools, with all of them being strongly or somewhat supported by at least 67% of respondents. The most preferred planning tools that could be used to protect agricultural land were **prohibitions on topsoil removal** (52% strongly support), **limits on commercial development in agricultural areas** (51% strongly support), and **limits on industrial development in agricultural areas** (48% strongly support).



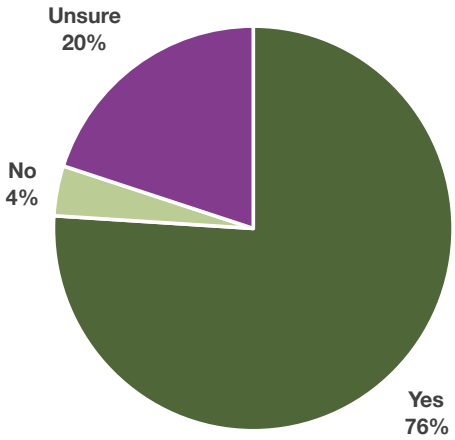
Planning documents often include the ability for a landowner to ask Council to consider allowing development that would not otherwise be permitted by their zoning (e.g., through a "rezoning" or a "development agreement"). Should MOPC's agricultural land policies allow land owners of agricultural lands to ask for a relaxation of zoning rules? (50 responses)

70% of respondents are supportive of allowing agricultural land owners to ask for a relaxation of zoning rules, but more than half of those respondents said they should be required to hire a professional to evaluate the agricultural potential of their land.



Would you support higher-density residential development within urban and suburban areas within the municipality if it reduced pressure to develop on agricultural land?

Most survey respondents (76%) indicated they would support higher-density residential development within the urban and suburban areas of Pictou County if it reduced pressure to develop on agricultural land.



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Is there anything else we should consider as we develop policies to protect agricultural land in MOPC? (24 responses)

Respondents were asked to share any additional comments or considerations. All responses were analyzed and themed. Key themes are described below:

Protection of Agricultural Land

+ Many respondents emphasized the importance of protecting agricultural land, noting that once farmland is developed it is permanently lost to food production. Several participants highlighted the value of preserving high-quality soils (particularly Class 2 and 3) and protecting both currently farmed land and land considered to have "agriculture potential". Some participants also suggested exploring programs that would encourage unused or forested lands that were historically farmed to be restored for agricultural use.
+ Some respondents also highlighted the relationship between agriculture and environmental protection, noting the importance of protecting wetlands, watersheds, groundwater, biodiversity, and wildlife habitats alongside agricultural land.

Balancing Protection with Farm Viability

+ While there was strong support for farmland protection, many respondents expressed concern that additional planning restrictions could negatively impact farmers' financial viability, property values, and financial security for retirement. Some participants felt that policies should prioritize incentives for farming rather than restrictions for land uses. Some felt that landowners should have the flexibility to sell portions of their land, develop secondary dwellings for family members, and run businesses that support agriculture.

Supporting the Agricultural Economy

+ Participants noted the importance of allowing agriculture-related businesses in agricultural areas to support farmers, including farm shops, mechanic and repair shops, hatcheries, and abattoirs.
+ Several respondents also emphasized the need to support farm succession and making it easier for new and young farmers to access land. Some respondents also expressed interest in exploring agricultural easement programs that can financially support long-time farmers while still making farming accessible to young families.

Housing and Development Pressures

+ Respondents acknowledged the need for housing and economic development, but emphasized that growth should be carefully managed to avoid unnecessary loss of farmland. Some suggested prioritizing and incentivizing housing within existing towns and developed areas rather than converting agricultural land.

In-person and Online Session Feedback

The project team hosted four in-person sessions and one online, interacting with approximately 100 community members. Below is a combined summary of what we heard at these events.

Land Value

+ A major theme throughout our discussions was the impact that agricultural protection policies could have on the value of land. Various participants expressed that their land is their greatest financial asset, noting that placing restrictions on subdivision and/or development could reduce property values and limit their ability to sell portions of land to support their retirement. Some suggested allowing limited opportunities for landowners to sell at current market prices, while others emphasized that individuals should have flexibility in deciding how their land is used.
+ Alternatively, many participants, especially younger farmers, were more supportive of restrictions, as lower land values would allow them to enter the market at a more accessible price.

Supporting the Economy

+ Several participants emphasized the need to balance agricultural protection with economic development. Some expressed concern that the municipality is experiencing an economic decline and needs to attract new businesses, employment opportunities, and younger residents. In this context, some felt that limiting development on agricultural land could restrict opportunities for economic growth.
+ Participants noted that agricultural land in the region may not be as profitable as in other parts of the province, making it difficult to justify strong restrictions without broader economic supports.

Defining Agricultural Land

+ Participants highlighted challenges associated with defining what should be considered agricultural land. Some questioned whether forested lands that are not being actively farmed should be included in the definition, as clearing the land for agricultural purposes would be costly and impractical.
+ To address the dynamic nature of the land, some participants suggested creating categories for various definitions, such as active agricultural land, potential agricultural land, and rural land. Additionally, it was brought to our attention that our existing active agricultural land map has some inaccuracies.

Opposition to Buffer Areas

+ Many participants expressed concerns over the buffer-based approach from roads that were proposed in one of the three options for defining agricultural land. Some felt the approach could create operational challenges for farmers, including limitations on spreading manure, applying pesticides, or operating machinery near the buffer areas. Others worried that establishing buffers could set a precedent for additional regulatory constraints in the future.

Flexible and Context-Sensitive Approaches

+ We heard an interest in more flexible approaches to agricultural land protection that reflect local conditions. Suggestions included prioritizing protection for active farmland, applying different levels of protection based on soil quality, directing development toward lands along the coast or forested lands, and allowing case-by-case review processes for exemptions or rezonings. Participants also recommended reviewing policies from other jurisdictions to identify approaches that may be more appropriate locally.

Provincial Support

+ Participants highlighted that farmland protection policies should be accompanied by stronger support for the agricultural sector. Some expressed concern that the Province is encouraging agricultural protection while not providing sufficient support for farmers. Suggestions included financial incentives or grants to help clear and maintain farmland, programs to encourage farming, and promoting tools such as land trusts or land banks to support agricultural preservation.

Stakeholder Conversations

Key stakeholders were invited to meet with the project team. These interviews allowed for more in-depth conversations about specific topics and challenges for the farming community. The project team met with representatives from the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture and the Pictou County Partnership. Below is a combined summary of what we heard through the stakeholder interviews:

There is a need to protect agricultural land

+ Stakeholders acknowledge the need to protect agricultural land, especially lands that are currently being actively farmed (which is less than 5% of the provincial land mass). It is understood that once farm land is gone, there is no converting it back.
+ Stakeholders are interested in exploring programs like the Nova Scotia Farmland Trust to support farmers who are looking to retire and those looking to start farming.

Need support for clearing agricultural land

+ While protecting agricultural land is seen as being important, there is a difference between “agricultural land” and “available agricultural land”. Land that was once farmed but has since grown over is often inaccessible for farming due to the costs associated with clearing the land.

Need to think of the future

+ Stakeholders said community members need to be thinking of the long term, at least the next 50 to 100 years.
+ There needs to be supports for better succession planning. Stakeholders would like to see allowances for additional dwellings for family members, but they also understand that subdivision for family dwellings can create challenges in the future when agriculture properties are being sold.
+ It is estimated that 27% of farmland will change hands province-wide in the next decade due to farmers entering retirement. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of making farming accessible to future generations.

Support for Kings County model

+ Stakeholders see Kings County as having the best policies for agricultural land protection. They like how their policies protect land and ensure long-term food security, but acknowledge that some more stringent regulations would be appropriate for the Pictou County context.

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