

Alberta Cooperative Agricultural Extension Frequently Asked Questions

Following are a series of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) regarding the proposed Alberta Cooperative Agricultural Extension system.

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A Few Key Terms

Extension Agent

'Boots on the Ground' extension staff at Commissions, Applied Research & Forage Associations, Agriculture Service Boards, and other trusted extension organizations who provide knowledge transfer services for producers to improve agricultural productivity, profitability, and sustainability.

Community of Extension (CoE)

An organized and coordinated, cross-industry knowledge sharing community, focused on a specific extension area (e.g. drought management). Its purpose is to share leading research, extension tools, techniques, and training to intentionally address producer extension needs.

Extension Methodology Specialist

Leads CoEs, ensuring extension strategies are intentional and outcome based. Provides Extension Agent mentoring and training and develops cross-industry extension plans and extension resources. Connects with researchers to influence social science & economic analysis in research projects.

Knowledge Specialist

Provides highly regarded subject matter knowledge in identified priority areas. Serves as a direct research connector and translator, distilling complex information into easily consumable extension knowledge artifacts. Trains and mentors Extension Agents, in addition to direct producer engagement via organized extension events.

What problem are we trying to solve?

The past few years have seen a shift in the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (AGI) away from government-led research delivery, which involved the dissolution of extension and research-centric business units. The department heard from many organizations regarding key resource and service accessibility gaps in agricultural extension that have emerged since the transition.

Building on recommendations from the 2022 Extension Task Force, the proposed Cooperative Agricultural Extension system aims to close several critical resource gaps and create more extension system resilience by fostering cross-industry extension collaboration and amplifying producer impact, with stable, long-term funding.

How will the new proposed Cooperative Agricultural Extension System Work?

A new, non-partisan organization will be established, whose sole focus is to provide agricultural extension coordination, leadership, and advocacy. It will be led by industry extension service provider members, with producer needs driving short, medium, and long-term extension priorities. A Manager, Extension Methodology Specialists, and various Knowledge Specialists will be retained with stable, long-term funding.

Communities of Extension (CoEs) will be established, providing knowledge sharing, training, and extension tools for existing cross-industry Extension Agents and Specialists, including those from Allied Industry. CoE members share producer priorities and work together to devise efficient and effective strategies to meet producer needs.

Imagine, for example, a cross-industry Drought Management CoE with Extension Agents from crop, livestock, and other areas, coming together to learn and collaboratively develop intentional, impactful extension solutions for producers.

Material generated by these communities will be available to all Extension Agents. Longer-term, agricultural extension training will be integrated into Post Secondary Institute agriculture academic programs to develop the next generation of Extension Agents and Specialists.

What are the benefits of the proposed Cooperative Agricultural Extension system?

By funding and coordinating the most critical Specialists who provide extension tools, mentoring and training, we amplify impact to Extension Agents, who in turn amplify impact to producers. **5-10 Specialists can train hundreds of Extension Agents, who can impact thousands of producers.**

In addition to closing critical Specialist gaps, general extension tools and training improves extension quality and consistency. Extension Agents will increase their expert networks and communities can drive coordinated extension events. It will create potential succession candidates for the currently diminishing Specialist base.

Ultimately, we are providing producers with more trusted and timely information and building extension capacity, all while maintaining member organization brands. This is about focused collaboration and cross-industry extension effectiveness. We are better together!

When will it be implemented?

Initial ramp-up and hiring is planned to occur April – July 2024. Once funding is approved, we will launch a 12-month pilot from August 2024 – August 2025.

The pilot will ‘test drive the car’, establishing initial CoEs with funded Specialists and existing Extension Agents, developing Extension Agent tools and training, a knowledge repository, and a system effectiveness measurement system.

Assuming the pilot is successful, ‘Year 1’ Implementation will occur August 2025 – August 2026, when more Specialists will be onboarded and more CoEs launched for Extension Agents.

How will it be funded?

The pilot and ‘Year 1’ implementation are intended to be funded through Sustainable CAP (S-CAP).

The goal is to have long-term funding in place by April 2026, at which time the program will switch from S-CAP funding to long-term funding. Long term funding is preferably provided directly from AGI and not tied to a specific funding program.

Existing extension organizations provide in-kind investment, such as having Extension Agents actively participate in CoEs, or volunteering as a Cooperative Agricultural Extension board member.

Why do we need a separate organization?

A separate organization ensures a non-partisan approach, solely focused on extension, and not distracted by other organizational priorities or perceived conflicts of interest.

More than 90% of funding is budgeted directly for extension resources. Even the Manager is expected to have an extension background and participate in extension-related activities as the system scales. Administration, at less than 10% of budget, funds basic accounting, legal, human resources, and information technology services to support CoE delivery.

Who will determine Specialist gap priorities, and where will we find them?

Gap priorities will be determined via a cross-industry collaborative approach. The Working Group, consisting of representatives (including active producers!) from Commissions, ASBs, ARAs, Ag. Canada, Universities & Colleges, and RDAR) brainstormed an initial list, which requires further analysis.

We intend to engage industry stakeholders in April 2024 to provide feedback on critical gaps, including regional gaps. This process will inform pilot Specialist and CoE priorities, along with how the proposed model may need to evolve to best meet regional priorities moving forward.

Second only to achieving stable, long-term funding, finding the right Specialists is the biggest challenge. The Working Group is open to creative, flexible arrangements, and will tap all networks to identify candidates once critical gap priorities are confirmed. This may include opportunities to fund existing Specialists within organizations, reaching out to the producer network for ‘trusted’ contacts, and potentially sourcing expertise from outside of Alberta.

Part of the proposed strategy involves focused knowledge sharing and training between Specialists and existing cross-industry Extension Agents, as well as integrating training into Post Secondary Institutes to develop future Extension Agents and Specialists. We need to increase industry extension resilience and have a future-forward strategy to address the shrinking Specialist base.

How can my organization participate?

In the immediate future, the best way to get involved is to attend information sessions and provide constructive feedback, both directly to the Working Group and via surveys to help confirm critical Specialist gaps and potential Specialist resources. Help build awareness and make your organizations and Extension Agents aware of this initiative.

Once the pilot is underway, encourage your Extension Agents to participate in Communities of Extension. Take advantage of Specialists, extension tools and training made available. This is a great opportunity to bring forward your regional producer extension priorities and leverage the power of a knowledge community to help address.

Longer-term, there are opportunities to serve as a board member and help shape extension priorities to ensure maximum producer impact through focused, collaborative, cross-industry extension.

My organization has already invested heavily in extension capacity. How does this help us?

The Cooperative Agricultural Extension system can help your current extension efforts become more efficient and impactful, by providing more knowledge sharing opportunities through the CoEs, with extension training to improve information delivery mechanisms, and by broadening your reach to producers. Your Extension Agents will have access to a larger cross-industry specialist network with increased visibility to leading research and extension resources for your producers.

Who can I contact for other Cooperative Agricultural Extension questions?

Our Working Group members are available and happy to answer additional questions.

Jeremy Boychyn
jboychyn@albertagrains.com

Karin Schmid
karins@albertabeef.org

Tracy Herbert
herbertt@beefresearch.ca

Walter Preugschas
wpreugschas@countybarrhead.ab.ca

Steve Majek
smajek@county10.ca

Dianne Westerlund
cara-dw@telus.net

Greg Newman
gdnemans@gmail.com

Val Carney
carney@ualberta.ca

Andrew Dunlop
andrew.dunlop@lethbridgecollege.ca

Mueen Aslam
mueen.aslam@agr.gc.ca