



## OPINION

# Canada's fields are ready for AI, but is Ottawa?

Agriculture is one of Canada's most innovative sectors. Our national AI policy should reflect that.

Shaun Vey



Opinion

Listening to Canadian farmers is one of the most valuable things I do in my job. These conversations have been a reliable compass throughout my two decades in this industry. Lately, one topic keeps coming up: artificial intelligence. It's no longer abstract. Farmers are asking about it, experimenting with it, and—yes—worrying about it.

That mix of excitement and trepidation is healthy. What isn't healthy is this: Canadian agriculture's AI adoption rate sits at 1.8 per cent, while the broader economy is at 12.1 per cent. The gap creates an opportunity for government to build policy with agriculture as a partner.

### Agriculture earns its seat at the AI table

There's an ongoing perception that agriculture is a traditional sector that's less complex and analytically demanding than others. The reality is farming is among the most data-intensive industries in the country: soil variability, weather patterns, pest pressure, input timing, market signals. Farmers make hundreds of complex decisions every



When Canadian farmers have the right tools and the right environment, they don't just adapt—they innovate and lead, writes Shaun Vey, president of Syngenta Canada. *Photograph courtesy of Syngenta Canada*

season, and every day, often with incomplete information and significant financial exposure.

This is a sector that contributes seven per cent of Canada's GDP, feeds the country, and anchors export trade at a moment when diversification is a national priority. It deserves to be treated like one.

At Syngenta, we've built toward this reality for years. Our Cropwise platform operates across more than 70 million hectares in over 30 countries, delivering AI-powered agronomic decision support, crop health monitoring, and sustainability tracking. Canadian farmers are already inside this ecosystem. In the United Kingdom, we've announced the development of the Biological Sciences Technology and Research centre (BioSTaR). This US\$130-million-facility will place AI at the centre of

global R&D—research that flows directly into the products and tools serving farms here in Canada. We are investing in this future and asking Ottawa to do the same.

### What AI can actually do for a Canadian farmer

Strip away the buzzword, and AI at the farm gate looks like this: knowing precisely where to apply inputs and at what rate, receiving a spray timing recommendation calibrated to tomorrow's weather, catching a disease outbreak in a field before it spreads, and accessing personalized agronomic advice at scale. The vision here isn't an "autopilot" farm; it's about having a highly skilled co-pilot. While the farmer makes the final calls, AI monitors the gauges and analyzes the terrain,

turning raw data into the real-time insights needed to support decision making and steer the operation toward better results.

But the barriers are real. Only 54 per cent of rural Canadians have reliable high-speed internet. Farm data remains fragmented across platforms and providers. And when a new digital tool doesn't perform as promised, the financial risk falls entirely on the farmer. De-risking adoption isn't a subsidy. It's an investment in national competitiveness.

### Ottawa has started, but it's not enough

The federal government deserves credit for meaningful signals. The 2025 federal budget's \$925.6-million AI commitment, rural broadband acceleration, SR&ED expansion, and the

productivity super-deduction all point in the right direction.

But when agriculture receives just one mention in federal AI commitments (i.e., streamlining Canadian Food Inspection Agency trade certificates), that's a footnote, not a strategy.

AI and Digital Innovation Minister Evan Solomon said "adoption moves at the speed of trust." I agree completely. Canadian farmers are ready to trust when the conditions support it. Creating those conditions is precisely where government can lead.

## Three asks from the farm gate

These are offered in the spirit of collaboration, not criticism:

1. **Name agriculture explicitly in Canada's AI strategy.** It belongs there by economic right. Visibility in national strategy shapes funding, regulation, and momentum;

2. **Build a farmer-first adoption framework.** Co-investment models, liability protections, and targeted incentives that lower the risk of trying new tools.

Innovation without adoption is just R&D; and

3. **Regulate with industry, not ahead of it.** Bring agriculture to the table in AI governance design. This means sector-specific risk definitions that prevent agri-tech from being misclassified, practical transparency requirements that build farmer trust without compromising competitiveness, and regulatory harmonization across jurisdictions to eliminate duplicated compliance burdens.

I am genuinely optimistic. When Canadian farmers have

the right tools and the right environment, they don't just adapt—they innovate and lead.

Syngenta's commitment to this country's agriculture is unwavering. We will keep investing in crop protection, seed technology, biologicals, digital tools, AI-powered research, and the farmers who put it all to work.

The invitation to government is sincere: let's build this together before the window to lead closes.

*Shaun Vey is president of Syngenta Canada.*

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