

***The Senate Digs In:  
Getting the Dirt on Soil Health with Senator Rob Black***



Soil is one of Canada's most precious natural resources, forming the very fabric of our ecosystem. It puts food on our plates, purifies our water, protects us against flooding, and helps combat drought. Unfortunately, our soils are in need of immediate help and attention to ensure they can continue supporting and providing for our planet.

Today, we are facing a dire situation as more and more soil is deemed unsuitable for agricultural use. In fact, according to Dr. David Lobb, a soil expert at the University of Manitoba, only 7% of Canada's soil was considered suitable for agriculture in 2016. This comes as a result of many practices of the past and of the present, some of which have had severely detrimental effects on our country's soil health. While it is clear that soil conservation efforts are an integral aspect of a sustainable future for agriculture, I think we can all acknowledge there is more to soil than meets the eye, or the tractor.

Since I was appointed to the Senate of Canada in 2018, I have been advocating for a new study on Canada's soil health. It's evident that our country's landscape has changed and grown in the decades since the 1984 report on the subject was published, and it is unfathomable that we are operating with outdated knowledge on such a critical matter. It's high time this report (that coincidentally is also the *most requested* report on Parliament Hill!) was updated, which is why I am proud to share that the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry will undertake a new soil health study this autumn.

While there was a significant push for soil conservation following the release of the original ["Soil at Risk: Canada's Eroding Future"](#) report, the momentum has since somewhat diminished. A new soil study is extremely timely, as we now face the increasingly visible impacts of climate change, such as the floods and extreme heat that we saw decimate farmland and livestock last summer, a struggling global supply chain, and population growth around the world. Healthy soils can make a difference in our futures, if we put in the effort to make changes now.

I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the efforts of many in the Canadian agricultural community who have worked to implement soil management practices. It is evident that introducing practices such as zero-till methods, which increases the retention of organic matter and nutrient cycling, and in turn increases carbon sequestration, or having perennial forage coverage makes a difference. However, even more needs to be done to return our soils to a stronger, more resilient state.

In our efforts to save our soils, I believe it is worthwhile to look to countries around the world that have taken significant steps to protect their own soils. For example, Australia introduced their 20-year National Soil Strategy that sets out how the country will value, manage, and improve its soil. The goals and objectives in the strategy are aimed at restoring and protecting soil nationally, by driving collaborative and coordinated on-ground action, research, education, monitoring and governance. Ultimately, these efforts will support Australian farmers to regenerate the nation's precious soils and landscapes, and that will make a huge difference in ensuring their agricultural industry remains strong.

If we look to the south, California introduced their Healthy Soils Program as part of the National Cooperative Soil Survey to promote the development of healthy soils on California's farmlands and ranchlands. This program is the first-of-its-kind that provides financial incentives to farmers and ranchers to implement specific management practices that achieve greenhouse gas emission reductions, sequester carbon, and improve soil health on their farms. Both abovementioned programs present opportunities that Canada can learn and benefit from, which will help support our own efforts to strengthen our soils.

I believe it is imperative that all Canadians, not just those involved in agriculture, understand that soil health is influenced by many factors. It is also key that they understand the potential for soil degradation remains a constant threat to the resiliency and sustainability of agricultural and natural ecosystems, which will in turn impact every Canadian from coast to coast to coast. The biggest impact we will see, which we are already seeing as a result of a number of compounding factors around the world, is pressure on our food supply system. To the reader who falls outside of the agricultural sphere of influence, let me be frank: there is *no* food security without healthy soils.

Despite the increasing pressures of climate change, evolving production practices, and a growing global population, we still look to soil to produce most of our food, to clean our air and water, and strengthen our country's biodiversity. If we want soil to continue providing these services, we need all Canadians to work collaboratively to strengthen our soil health. The only question that remains is, how will you dig into this issue to help us achieve the targets that will keep our soil healthy for generations to come?

*If you would like to contribute to the Senate's upcoming soil health study, I encourage you to send along ideas for topics to study regarding soil health or areas of concern through written submissions for the committee's review. We would also welcome suggestions for witnesses and for tours as well. Information can be sent to the Clerk via [AGFO@sen.parl.gc.ca](mailto:AGFO@sen.parl.gc.ca).*

*The Honourable Rob Black is a Canadian senator representing Ontario with strong interests in agriculture and rural communities. Senator Black is a member of and Chair for the Canadian Senators Group (CSG), and Chair of the Senate Agriculture and Forestry Committee.*