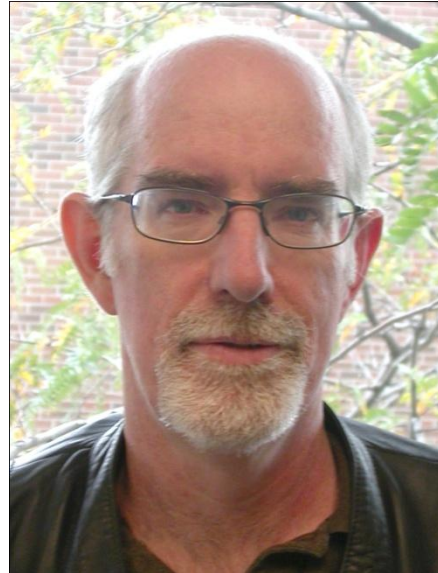


To grow sustainable agriculture, Canadians need greater help when transitioning to organic farming

**An interview with Rod MacRae,
teacher and researcher
on sustainable agriculture**



Rod MacRae is the son of an agricultural biochemist and a dietician. His father, first a McGill professor, became the principal of NSAC (from 72 to 89). As a child, he used to work on the family dairy farm in Cape Breton. But he first started studying in History at Acadia, in Wolfville NS; “I tried to avoid agriculture; children don’t want to follow their parents” says MacRae.

But after a work placement in West Africa on an agricultural development project, he realized, in the middle of doing his bachelor’s degree, that he wanted to study agriculture. So he got a masters degree in soil and science from McGill University. Switching gears again after finishing that, he realized that he was mostly interested in social, economical and political dimensions of agricultural changes. So he completed in 1991 his PhD thesis on socio-economic and institutional barriers affecting farmers transitioning to organic farming. “I was arguing that there were major institutional barriers to organic transition within government, science institutions and agribusinesses; my thesis was on how to change these institutional dynamics to make them more supportive of organics.”

And still today, though progress has been made removing those barriers, the support is not anywhere near as robust as it could be. There are extension agents in almost all the provinces and basic research and extension infrastructure have been improved. The Organic Science Cluster involving researchers from all across the country has been created. But the absence of support for the transition process remains a substantial barrier. The current extension model works well when you want to apply a discrete approach or technology, but it does not work well when embracing a system. And this is what organic is about.

“It is crucial to implement dedicated transition advisory services comparable to what is done in the EU where farmers can get support to develop a transition plan” comments MacRae.

And to really apply his theoretical work, he wrote with colleagues at OACC and World Wildlife Fund a paper on [Ontario goes organic](#) where they listed 32 major policy changes that would be required to advance organic farming in Ontario.

His involvement in the development of organic agriculture started with revising the definition of “organic” in the AAFC Guide for food advertising and labeling in 1987 – before CFIA was created and when AAFC was still doing a lot of the functions that CFIA is now responsible for. The definition of organic was not very good and the original organic sector collaborative work was to change this definition; out of that came the issue of unifying the sector and creating national organic standards. But MacRae found this process to be very painful. “People would not cooperate as there was a lot of antagonism amongst the organizations and interpersonal conflicts that soured everybody’s willingness to work together; this ugly situation made the process very slow.”

Nonetheless, MacRae is now happy with the progress made since the early 90s; major improvements are still to be made, such as biodiversity conservation on farms, the optimization of the so-called non productive spaces on organic farms, such as wetlands; there are also issues around labor and equity and with animal welfare to sort out, and challenges related to scale, standards, cost of certification, and the ability of CBs to provide services at an affordable price in a way that they can be economically viable. But MacRae is feeling very optimistic about the future of organic farming and he appreciates working directly on-farm with farmers.

“Organic is appealing because of the financial possibilities; there are major input cost reductions and a premium to be earned when you are certified. Organic is not the ultimate expression of sustainability but it offers a nice balance between ecological dimensions and the financial ones so that people can make a living while doing it.”

Along with [teaching at York University](#) and advising graduate students, MacRae does research on the transition to other forms of sustainable agriculture, including advanced integrated pest management, or advanced pasture based systems. He is also concerned with the government focus on GMOs for developing the Canadian agricultural industry.

“The focus on GMOs is a very particular kind of policy construction. The whole regulatory apparatus on GMOs in the Western world, including Canada, is based on false assumptions. The flawed concepts of substantial equivalence and familiarity adopted from chemical assessment are not relevant when looking at the ecological implications that GMOs have”, comments MacRae. “Those flawed concepts are used to facilitate commercialization” adds MacRae. “And the government still largely believes that the organic market is a niche market, not a transformative process for creating a more sustainable food system; it is going to take years before it happens with the current focus on GMOs”.

His long-term hope, unlikely to be achieved before he retires, is to have a sustainable food system in Canada, where everyone has access to an affordable diet produced in a sustainable

way. Organic would occupy from 10 % to 20 % of the market, leading all the other schools to more sustainable practices.

He watches movies and TV shows with his 12 year old on leisure time. “You can imagine what kind of shows they are: action and adventure shows!” says MacRae, laughing out loud, surely an adept of “sustainable” education.

Rod MacRae is one the researchers participating to the Organic Science Cluster. For more information on his research activity, click on

http://www.organiccentre.ca/OSC/Subproject_E/osc_activity_e2.asp