

Agriculture in the North: A New Strategy of Indigenous Land Dispossession



by Sarah Rotz & Daniel Rück

FARMING HAS LONG been romanticized as an ideal practice and way of being in Canada. Media and literature portray a largely positive and wholesome view of agriculture, which has little to do with the contemporary realities of industrial agriculture that produces much of our food.

Agriculture can take many diverse forms, but industrial farming specifically has evolved through the settler colonial and patriarchal mythology and materiality of nation-building.

Meanwhile, little attention is paid to how governments and industry continue to take land from Indigenous nations for large-scale, industrial farming — a practice rooted in a culture of extractivism, marked by “a high pace and large scale” of taking.¹

Such extractivist logic and culture have enabled the settler invasion across Canada for at least two hundred years, from farming and fishing to logging and mining. Settlers have often understood agriculture through economic principles and as a means of profit-making, which, over time, has led to unsustainable industrial scale, export-oriented farming systems, and farmland consolidation. While non-extractive forms of agriculture exist and persist, settler-led, industrial-scale, extractive agriculture now dominates agri-food economies in Canada.

While this type of agriculture is widespread in more southern areas, to date, the extent of this type of agriculture has been quite limited in the northern regions of Canada. For northern Indigenous communities, fishing, harvesting, hunting, and trapping have historically been the primary forms of food growing and gathering. Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, growers, and activists² have shown that Indigenous and non-extractive food ways have many shared values concerning “the webs of mutual care between humans and ecosystems” that “inform careful stewardship that also provides fish, game, and other wild foods.”³ That said, as climate change brings warmer weather and longer summers, and as land prices continue to rise, there is a growing push to expand agriculture to previously non-agricultural communities in the boreal forest regions of Canada.

The New Land Assembly

In Ontario, this push for agricultural expansion, made possible by climate change, is happening from Kenora and Thunder Bay in the northwest to the “Great Clay Belt” region around Timmins, Cochrane, and Nipissing in the northeast. The Clay Belt is an area of some 180,000 square kilometres, stretching a thousand kilometres from Hearst, Ontario to Senneterre, Quebec. On the Ontario side of the border, the region falls mostly under Treaty 9, negotiated between the Crown (Canada and Ontario) and Anishinaabe and Nêhiyaw (Cree) nations in 1905 and 1906.⁴ In several regions of northern Ontario, including the Clay Belt, settlers attempted farming in the early twentieth

century but largely abandoned it for more lucrative mining and logging initiatives. As landowners ceased agricultural cultivation, many of them sold harvesting rights to logging companies or had land reverted to “The Crown.”

In today’s renewed attempt at agricultural expansion in the North, there are new institutions involved; financial markets and investment are now far more entrenched than they were a hundred years ago, and are capitalizing on the opportunity.

In the Clay Belt, municipal elected officials and regional economic development organizations (with the support of the province) are promoting ‘large-scale’ agricultural expansion to investors as a new economic frontier. In doing so, they take on a similar tone to the kinds of agricultural industrialization and farmland financialization that have been observed in other places, including southern Ontario, Western Canada, and globally⁶

It is useful, then, to situate this renewed push for agriculture not only within a settler colonial context but within evolving political economies of capitalist land relations.

Proponents of agricultural expansion in the Clay Belt are pursuing a strategy of “land assembly” to promote agricultural development and encourage investor interest in Northern agriculture schemes. Land assembly (also known as block assembly) is a process of combining adjacent parcels of land to form a single, larger property. This is a common practice for commercial and industrial development by investment firms and is sometimes used in more remote regions for extraction projects, such as mining, that require large areas of land. Land assembly creates an asset from land that is perceived by project proponents as “unproductive” or “underutilized.”⁷

Clay Belt land assembly project proponents describe the land as holding “untapped potential” for agriculture. It is “a place where you can go and expand.” One of the project’s goals is to “establish agriculture as a third economic pillar to mining and forestry” in the Clay Belt.⁸ Proponents want to capitalize on an estimated 435,000 hectares of private lands

with farming potential⁹ They argue that as investor interest in agricultural land grows, reforested land (described as “underdeveloped” land) should be promoted for agricultural development.¹⁰ Given the failed history of farming in the region, proponents hope that land consolidation will encourage financial investment in a way that creates a future for agriculture more akin to that of southern Ontario, just through different means: Rather than 1500-acre fields of grain corn, or soy, the commodities promoted in the north are beef and, increasingly, “cool season” grains such as oats, barley, and wheat.

One key goal of land assembly is financialization. That is, to bring financial institutions, actors, markets, and operations into the purview of the land in question — in this case, through the prospect of land transformation for agricultural development. With the goal of converting land from scattered forest lots into larger agricultural plots, organizations including the Northeast Community Network (with support from local and provincial governments) plan to promote land to financial actors as a higher-value asset capable of generating attractive revenues. If investors buy into the agricultural expansion program, financial operations gain importance across the region, meaning that profit-making activity may increasingly occur in the realm of finance rather than in farming or forestry itself.¹¹ Financialization, then, is a system and strategy of economic accumulation, and land assembly is a means of getting there.

Northern Farming: Questions and Considerations

Several key questions arise when examining such projects in settler colonial contexts like Canada. First, what forms or models of agriculture are being promoted and prioritized? Put differently, whose interests drive the project, and whose futures does it shape?¹² Second, to what extent does the proposed model reproduce historical settler land relations and further Indigenous land dispossession? Like other experts in the field, we believe that these kinds of projects — depending on their nature and process — “will either entrench settler colonialism and the neoliberal food regime or open towards an alternative future of Indigenous and northern food sovereignty.”¹³ Our research so far has shown that seemingly new and innovative projects, such as land assembly for agricultural expansion, have not moved far beyond their colonial roots. Land theft, extractivism,

and dispossession have been co-constitutive to settler colonial farming and agricultural expansion for centuries, and projects such as this one appear likely to continue this relationship. For instance, project proponents have said they expect to leave land purchases “up to the free market,” which would hand over access and ownership to the highest bidder. In the words of one proponent, “We’ll make the blocks available, and advertise that the area is pro-agriculture, and make it an inviting atmosphere.”¹⁴ This approach raises important questions about the future of Indigenous treaties and inherent rights, leadership, jurisdiction, and sovereignty in the region, which would need to be carefully addressed before moving ahead.

An important aspect of this form of agricultural development is the longer-term project of land privatization. As proponents explain, “The land assembly project is a first step towards tackling a longstanding issue among many in the Clay Belt: converting Crown land into private land for agricultural purposes.”¹⁵ This perspective equates agricultural development with private property expansion. The association of agriculture with private property is not new or unique to this situation, but it is significant given the centrality of land and property privatization for settler colonialism.¹⁶ Although there may be possible ways forward that do not involve land privatization, consolidation, and conversion, there is no evidence that decision-makers have seriously considered these, and especially not within the larger economic visions of First Nations of the region.

Our research also highlights important concerns on the part of Indigenous communities with agricultural expansion. Interview respondents make clear connections between settler-designed and led agricultural projects, and practices of extractive cultivation, chemical agriculture, and agri-food export production in service of settler-dominated economies. Furthermore, they point out that such projects are usually achieved at the expense of Indigenous goals, practices, and governance of land and habitat. Scientific research has also shown that land conversion from forestland to agriculture significantly impacts soil health, reducing soil organic matter from approximately 15 percent to 6 percent.¹⁷ Research in boreal regions has also demonstrated significant impacts of agricultural pesticide application on soil organic matter levels, microbial and earthworm presence, water health, and long-term pesticide residues in the soil and water

runoff.¹⁸ Furthermore, the increased use of phosphorus fertilizers, synthetic pesticides, and fossil fuels for conventional agriculture negatively impacts soil and water systems when compared to organic systems.¹⁹

It should be clear, then, that land conversion and agricultural development projects are grounded in certain assumptions that should be discussed and debated. Specifically, they necessitate one vision, system and a series of conditions at the expense of others. They involve investment in expanding settler agri-food philosophies, structures, systems, and economies: a private property farming model, forest land clearing, simple cropping systems and rotations, and corporate agri-food involvement. They require consolidated and concentrated land and input supply, research and development, and food service and retail to support the project’s objective to integrate the industry into the provincial food production economy.

In the context of ongoing settler colonialism, settler agriculture premised on further land conversion, consolidation, and/or privatization may become another assault on Indigenous sovereignty and foodways.

Indeed, the solution is not to truly acknowledge Indigenous land jurisdiction or to take direction from Indigenous treaty partners.²⁰ Surely some First Nations in the region would like to make agriculture a part of their own development strategies, but we find that municipal and provincial organizations rarely open the door to authentic Indigenous design and leadership in matters of food and agricultural development.

The World Building and Breaking of Industrial Agriculture

Food growing and gathering are essential to human life, but are becoming increasingly unpredictable as climate change intensifies. Agriculture is not inherently problematic; it can take many diverse social, political and ecological forms, ranging from ecologically restorative to extractive, with many models in between. Food growing and gathering that is designed and led by Indigenous nations and communities, who have jurisdiction and authority over their traditional territories, may offer

leadership and knowledge to address the global climate crisis while supporting biodiverse local habitat.

Communities in northern Ontario have an opportunity to choose a different future from the one that has unfolded across southern Canada and the U.S. While climate change is a disaster for many creatures and communities, this could be a time to build genuine and lasting relationships between settler and Indigenous communities and to discover different political and decision making pathways.

Sadly, we see decision makers bending to the powerful market, political, and ideological forces driving them along the same old settler colonial path of industrialization, consolidation, and financialization. These colonial forces are, in effect, processes of world-building and world-breaking, and other futures and political authorities have not been meaningfully considered. In fact, it's hard to see how these emerging strategies differ substantially from the way colonization was accomplished in the past. For instance, how is introducing beef into increasingly threatened moose and caribou habitat qualitatively different from the replacement of bison with cattle on the Prairies, which devastated bison-reliant Indigenous nations (such as the Cree, Dene, Dakota, and Lakota, among several others)?²¹

Many Indigenous peoples and allies argue that we should respond to the climate crisis by better understanding and supporting moose and caribou habitat and populations (and biodiversity generally) instead of furthering land clearing, conversion, and environmental destruction. And while many Indigenous peoples and allies are also calling for greater capacity for food growing and gathering across Canada, they are calling for this within a larger political context of Indigenous sovereignty and jurisdiction – something that settlers will need to come to terms with.²³

Settler colonial agriculture has and continues to be a key means of enclosing land and resources for settler livelihoods and economies, and frequently, it does so in ways that expressly destroy Indigenous life and foodways – and Indigenous world-building.

The industrial model of agricultural expansion, by design, makes it nearly impossible for the sustainable co-existence of other habitats (especially habitats that can maintain the complex web of other-than-human relations native to those regions), and in turn, destroying the livelihoods and practices of peoples that rely on them. As a result, industrialized agricultural expansion and world-building has meant dispossession and disaster for many Indigenous peoples, the land, and all those striving to rebuild and nurture vital habitat. This, in addition to the impending destruction of climate change, might lead us to seek a different distribution of decision-making, power, and jurisdiction to avoid repeating past mistakes. Rather than further investment into colonial agri-food industrialization, how can we support Indigenous designed and led models of food growing and gathering?

CITATION

Rotz, Sarah & Daniel Rück. "Agriculture in the North: A New Strategy of Indigenous Land Dispossession" Yellowhead Institute. 07 May 2024. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2024/05/02/agriculture-in-the-north/>

Endnotes

¹ Pasternak et al., “Infrastructure, Jurisdiction , Extractivism : Keywords for Decolonizing Geographies,” 6.

² Laforge et al., “The Future of Agroecology in Canada: Embracing the Politics of Food Sovereignty”; Marney et al., “Agroecology in Canada: Towards an Integration of Agroecological Practice , Movement and Science”; Francis et al., “Agroecology : The Ecology of Food Systems”; Coté, “‘Indigenizing’ Food Sovereignty. Revitalizing Indigenous Food Practices and Ecological Knowledges in Canada and the United States”; Figueroa-Helland, Thomas, and Aguilera, “Decolonizing Food Systems: Food Sovereignty, Indigenous Revitalization, and Agroecology as Counter-Hegemonic Movements”; Morrison, “Reflections and Realities: Expressions of Food Sovereignty in the Fourth World”; Morrison, “Indigenous Food Sovereignty: A Model for Social Learning.”

³ Price et al., “Agroecology in the North: Centering Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Land Stewardship in Agriculture ‘Frontiers,’” 1196.

⁴ Long, Treaty No. 9: Making the Agreement to Share the Land in Far Northern Ontario in 1905.

⁵ Ontario. (2022). Ontario Strengthens Agriculture, Forestry and Recreation Sectors | Ontario Newsroom.

⁶ Le Billon and Sommerville, “Landing Capital and Assembling ‘Investable Land’ in the Extractive and Agricultural Sectors”; Langford, *Assembling Financialisation: Local Actors and the Making of Agricultural Investment*; Sippel, Larder, and Lawrence, “Grounding the Financialization of Farmland: Perspectives on Financial Actors as New Land Owners in Rural Australia”; Sommerville and Magnan, “‘Pinstripes on the Prairies’: Examining the Financialization of Farming Systems in the Canadian Prairie Provinces”; Desmarais et al., “Investor Ownership or Social Investment? Changing Farmland Ownership in Saskatchewan, Canada”; Fairbairn, *Fields of Gold: Financing the Global Land Rush*; Fairbairn, “‘Like Gold with Yield’: Evolving Intersections between Farmland and Finance”; Ouma, *Farming as Financial Asset: Global Finance and the Making of Institutional Landscapes*.

⁷ Ross, “Clay Belt Municipalities Have Acres of Farm Land to

Promote”; Fagan, “Digging into Land Assemblies .”

⁸ Autio, “Sowing Seeds to Grow Northern Agriculture”; Timmins, “Highlighting the North’s Agricultural Potential ... One Farm at a Time!”

⁹ Personal communication with one of the interviewees

¹⁰ Ross, “Clay Belt Municipalities Have Acres of Farm Land to Promote.”

¹¹ Langford, *Assembling Financialisation: Local Actors and the Making of Agricultural Investment*, 11.

¹² (Duncan, et al., 2022; Rotz, 2017)

¹³ Price et al., “Agroecology in the North: Centering Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Land Stewardship in Agriculture ‘Frontiers.’”

¹⁴ Autio, “Sowing Seeds to Grow Northern Agriculture.”

¹⁵ Ross, “Clay Belt Municipalities Have Acres of Farm Land to Promote.”

¹⁶ Pasternak, “Property as a Technique of Jurisdiction”; Harris, “How Did Colonialism Dispossess? Comments from an Edge of Empire.”

¹⁷ Benalcazar et al., “The Impact of Land Conversion from Boreal Forest to Agriculture on Soil Health Indicators.”

¹⁸ Maggi and Tang, “Estimated Decline in Global Earthworm Population Size Caused by Pesticide Residue in Soil”; Puglisi, “Response of Microbial Organisms (Aquatic and Terrestrial) to Pesticides.”

¹⁹ Peltoniemi et al., “Long-Term Impacts of Organic and Conventional Farming on the Soil Microbiome in Boreal Arable Soil.”

²⁰ Daigle, “Resurging through Kishiichiwan: The Spatial Politics of Indigenous Water Relations,” 163.

²¹ Daschuk, Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life; Feir, Gillezeau, and Jones, “The Slaughter of the Bison and Reversal of Fortunes on the Great Plains.”

²² Anishnabe Moose Research Committee, “Anishnabe Knowledge and Governance for the Protection of Moose Populations in and around La Verendrye Park, Quebec.”

²³ Robin, T., Rotz, S., & Xavier, A. (2023). Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Ontario : A Study of Exclusion at the Ministry of Agriculture , Food & Rural Affairs. Yellowhead Institute, 22. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/food-sovereignty-omafra/>