

## Organic farmer: Agriculture must drop ‘us vs them’ mentality towards consumers

There’s a new documentary making the rounds on agriculture-related social media channels. *License to Farm* is a 30-minute film produced in Saskatchewan with the goal of encouraging farmers to speak up in defense of their “social license” (i.e. a level of public trust that allows them to operate relatively independent of government oversight).

It’s an important issue: as the percentage of the population with direct ties to agriculture declines and consumer concerns about food increases, communication between producers and consumers is essential. Equally important is the accuracy and tone of that conversation. This is where I have concerns.

First, several speakers present the false impression that there are two options for agriculture: a “modern” agriculture that uses GMOs and pesticides, and “turning back the clock” to a previous era (which is directly or indirectly associated with organic farming). [I’ve addressed this myth](#) and the harm it does to both the farm community and consumer perception before, so I’m not going to re-visit it in depth here.

If the goal is to build relationships of mutual trust and respect between farmers and consumers, it has to be a two-way street. We know that to the general public, farmers remain among the most highly-respected professionals. This is a distinct advantage (and one that the biotech industry is eager to exploit, by the way). But farmers’ perceptions of consumers will also have a big impact on communications. Farmers who want to bridge the so-called “rural-urban divide” need to be careful that their attitudes and language do not reinforce the division.

This is where *License to Farm* falls short. Intentionally or not, it seems designed to perpetuate an “us vs. them” approach to the issues. To illustrate the point, I made two lists: the first is of the words used in association with farmers, farm practices, and food. Compare this to the second list of words used to describe consumers and consumer concerns. The words in each list appear more or less in the order they are mentioned in the film, and I also tried to keep track of the frequency of common words. The lists are not exhaustive, but the results are startling:

### *License To Farm’s* Words About...

#### **Farms, Farming, and Food**

tradition

vast, complex enterprise

cutting edge technology (3 times)

risky business

values

[farmers] produce safe food  
“one of strictest in the world” [regulatory system]

#### **Consumers and Consumer Attitudes**

push-back

customers

public fears

misinformation

“conceptions stuck in 40s and 50s”

confused, bewildered

far removed [from agriculture]

[need for, reality of] choice  
modern [practices]  
specific and necessary use of pesticides  
revolutionary technology  
sophisticated  
safe food (at least 12 times)  
environmentalist  
most concerned about pesticides  
protect the environment  
sustainable (at least twice)  
family-owned and operated  
efficient, efficiency  
“doing best job we can”  
healthy food (at least 5 times)  
innovation  
love [for farming] (at least twice)  
credible  
trusted (3 times or more)  
improve the environment  
need to speak up (3 times or more)  
need to tell their story (2 times or more)  
improving land  
good stewardship  
proud

illegitimate fears  
disconnected  
“romanticized ideal”  
anti-farm movement  
not scientifically based (twice or more)  
no basis in fact  
concern (4 times or more)  
“activists allege”  
misunderstanding (at least 3 times)  
dumb  
fear-mongering  
illogical (twice or more)  
counterproductive  
worried  
beliefs (twice or more)  
perceptions (twice or more)  
myths (at least 4 times)  
fear (3 times or more)  
suspicious  
naturalistic fallacy  
misinformed  
misconceptions  
need education  
confused  
upset

consumer concerns not scientific

As others have [pointed out](#), some critique is a good thing. Not all consumer concerns are completely valid. At the same time, critiques need to be balanced. Words matter, and when the words used to describe one party are exclusively positive while the words used to describe the other party are almost entirely negative in their connotation, balance is hard to find and conversation becomes difficult.

Social license needs to be earned, not demanded or expected. It's also easier to get respect when respect is given. Framing "social license" as purely a public relations challenge to convince ignorant consumers that everything every farmer does is perfect is a disservice to everyone involved. (For a great exploration of this concept, check out John Phipps' ["Accountable Ag"](#) blog post!)

Our diverse agricultural community has the capacity, the opportunity, and the responsibility to meet a diversity of consumer demands. (Within reason, of course – no one should expect locally-grown bananas at Canadian farmers' markets!\*) Farmers can do that while working to continuously improve their impact on the world. It's going to take a collaborative approach, and it means treating consumers as allies, not enemies.

That's a story worth telling.

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*\* After I published this post, a Twitter follower pointed out that it is indeed possible to find [locally-grown bananas](#) at a Canadian farmers' market. Proof-positive that innovative Canadian farmers are prepared to meet practically every consumer demand – and that farmers like me should never dismiss a consumer demand as "unreasonable" without knowing all the facts!*