

## Soonias Leading Farm Credit Canada's Indigenous Agricultural Efforts

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Shawn Soonias  
*Farm Credit Canada*

Farm Credit Canada (FCC), the country's largest agricultural term lender, has been around since 1959. But it's only been the last few years that the Crown corporation, which reports to the Canadian Parliament through the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, has taken a much more serious approach to Indigenous agriculture. "How to support Indigenous agriculture wasn't part of the mandate and wasn't maybe looked at seriously until [the] early 2000s," said Shawn Soonias, a member of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. "Leadership made some efforts to understand the opportunity and what the role might look like. It was [in] 2019 that the company was able to create that role that I occupy as director of Indigenous relations."

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Soonias believes Indigenous agriculture will now remain a focus for FCC officials. “Moving forward, we have a lot of deep connections with national Indigenous organizations, some key well-respected political leaders, Elders, and community members that we’ve used for advisory and engagements,” he said. “We’ve had ceremonies with some of our leaders in these spaces, so there is that level of direct connection with communities in terms of mentorships.”

Soonias is pleased to see FCC has some long-term planning when it comes to assisting Indigenous agriculture. “FCC is Canada’s leading financial institution that is 100% dedicated to Canada’s agriculture and food sectors,” he said. “We have the knowledge, experience, and expertise to support Indigenous agriculture in the same ways we have supported Canada’s agriculture and food industry — from individuals to national brands and everything in between. This, of course, will not happen overnight. We are planning not for the next quarter but rather [for] the next quarter century.”

Soonias said there are various ways his corporation is setting current goals. “FCC has undertaken a variety of processes to inform both our goals and actions in support of Indigenous agriculture and food,” he said. “This includes research, informal and formal engagement with Indigenous businesses and economic development corporations, government, industry, education and training institutions, non-profits and the academic sector to create better understanding, collaboration and synergies in support of Indigenous agriculture.”

In the spring of 2021, FCC officials released the results of an online survey of Indigenous producers and stakeholders. Despite the fact that they reported having poor to average experiences, more than 70 per cent of the producers indicated they planned to increase their participation in the sector over the next five years. “FCC is working to become a stronger partner in the advancement of Indigenous agriculture in the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration,” Soonias said of his corporation’s role. “As Canada’s leading agriculture lender, we are uniquely positioned to contribute to the success of Indigenous communities and entrepreneurs in this diverse and dynamic industry” (FCC sees opportunities for Indigenous agriculture, 2021).

Although Soonias believes the FCC still has plenty of work to do to become a better partner, it can also be an industry leader. “There is a rich history and traditions of Indigenous agriculture prior to European settlement, and we are now several generations removed from those practices and knowledge,” he said. “FCC not only has an opportunity to better understand the landscape of Indigenous agriculture in Canada but, more importantly, [to] provide Indigenous entrepreneurs with learning opportunities about agriculture and farm management.”

Work towards this goal will begin by having the FCC provide Indigenous awareness and relations training to its approximate 2,300 employees across the country. Training will help workers better comprehend both legislative and systemic barriers preventing Indigenous communities from fully taking part in Canada’s agriculture industry. It will also give employees an understanding of the historic, economic, and social challenges facing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit across Canada (FCC sees opportunities for Indigenous agriculture, 2021).

Though it is hoping to be viewed as a leader, Soonias realizes the FCC has plenty of work to do in this regard. In its own 2021–2025 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategy, Soonias said the FCC is keen to hire more diverse talent. Only about three per cent of FCC’s employees self-declared as being Indigenous. “This is very important,” Soonias said of the need to increase that percentage. “Representation matters. The national percentage of Indige-

nous peoples in Canada is 4.9 per cent so we should at least get there. We also know representation by province and, even further, by community is different. While we know we still have much work to do, the number of Indigenous employees at FCC has continued to grow in at least the last four years.”

Though there is renewed Indigenous interest in agriculture, in an April 2021 Alberta Farmer Express article, Soonias talked about some massive barriers. “We see a tremendous amount of interest in all forms of agriculture,” he said. “But a lot of our communities are in a situation where they’ve been a couple of generations removed from agriculture, so they’ve got to recapture and reconstruct some of their skill sets. We’ve got our work ahead of us to address some of these things” (Blair, 2021).

Soonias added Indigenous agriculture is currently frequently focused on gardening, greenhouses, and the production of Indigenous foods. But he believes other parts of the sectors, including food processing, livestock, aquaculture, and non-timber forest products, also have plenty of potential. He told the Winnipeg Free Press this past October that there is a growing momentum among First Nations that want to be in control of their own lives. “There is a sense of urgency now,” he said. “Many Indigenous communities are beginning to take a much closer look at operationalizing their lands, from breaking new ground to reducing lands leased to non-residents, first to enable food security, then towards employment and financial sovereignty” (Whetter, 2022).

Though he’s only been at FCC for a handful of years, Soonias has worked for 30 years now with various organizations that support Indigenous groups. “I am still taken aback by my own naivete about other people’s lack of awareness,” he said. “I won’t call it ignorance, but [a] lack of understanding or awareness of the history, perspectives, and values held by Indigenous people in Canada. Understanding is lacking around what Indigenous organizations strive to accomplish and how.”

In an August 2021 interview with Industry West Magazine, Soonias said his greatest fear is that Canada will not reconcile with Indigenous peoples in ways or on a timeframe that will make a real difference. “One thing COVID revealed was that governments can and will do what is needed when a national response is required, even under a minority government,” he said. “I see reconciliation as a priority in Canada and hope that we can move forward as a nation. I approach my role at the FCC with reconciliation as the main driver, and I know that many other governments, businesses, institutions, and people are similarly passionate and focused on reconciliation. I remain optimistic that our grandchildren’s Canada will look and feel much more inclusive than the one we have grown up in” (Staff, 2021).

Soonias added that FCC reps also need to be aware and cautious of their presence in Indigenous communities. “Other sectors such as oil and gas, LNG, and mining have had decades to develop their understanding, awareness, trust, and relationships with Indigenous communities and businesses,” he said. “This is new to agriculture and food, so Indigenous peoples will take best practices and lessons learned from the other sectors and experiences and expect to move at the speed of light once they set their sights on agriculture. So, what we communicate to industry and how we help prepare stakeholders to build relationships and support Indigenous agriculture is important.”

Soonias added that there is also plenty of time to review FCC operations. “This includes reviewing how we do things, make decisions, market our products and knowledge, [and] what these supports look like to ensure they are inclusive, accessible, and culturally appropriate to our Indigenous customers,” he said. “This also includes our lending policies, risk appetite, definition of agriculture, credit directives, and other areas in order to mitigate

the barriers the Indian Act has for on-reserve security and how financial institutions have allowed this to prevent lending on-reserve.”

Soonias is certainly an ideal individual to be serving in his current position with the FCC. “The role allows me to bring my full skill set and experience,” he said. “I’ve held senior roles in child welfare, justice, education, as an independent officer of the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly, First Nations, municipal, provincial, and federal governments, and the non-profit sector. All of these roles have created a deep understanding of the social and economic challenges faced by Indigenous peoples, and these are all important lenses to bring to the agriculture sector. It is also critical to my role in building understanding and reconciliation informally through interactions with industry stakeholders, as well as internally for our employees’ knowledge around Indigenous awareness and how to build trusting relationships with the Indigenous community.”

Soonias’s responsibilities as the FCC’s director of Indigenous relations are much more complex than they sound. “The work of supporting Indigenous agriculture efforts is much more than simply business or economic development with Indigenous peoples,” he said. “This is about revitalizing the innovation, creativity, knowledge, and role of Indigenous [people] in agriculture. This is about meeting the domestic and export demand for healthy food. This is about strengthening Canada’s economic resiliency and role as a net exporter of clean, healthy agriculture and food products.” Soonias, however, believes goals must be accomplished by making sound decisions. “For our communities, some of the wise practices really need to be explored as part of due diligence,” he said. “We’ve seen examples of where communities might rush into sectors and partnerships with companies that may not be in their best interests or without having the right kind of business knowledge in a sector and not being able to make really well-informed decisions.”

Soonias believes Indigenous agriculture can play a vital role as part of a much bigger picture in the future. “This is a growing sector, not just for Indigenous people, in terms of enhancing how we use our lands,” he said. “We see the dynamics of global trade, global networks, and the fragilities of the food supply chain that were revealed through COVID. And they seemed to be more acute and apparent with the war in Ukraine. There’s going to be more pressure on Canada as one of the net producers of food that is going to be exported, and I think Indigenous peoples can really live into that.”

Soonias believes there are countless Indigenous agricultural success stories across the country.

These include the following:

- Kainai Nation in Alberta, which has the largest irrigation operation in Canada and is exporting premium Timothy hay internationally
- North America’s largest shellfish producer, Clearwater Seafoods, of which 50 per cent was acquired in a \$1 billion deal in 2020 by the Mi’kmaq Coalition
- Saskatchewan’s Boreal Heartland, a company utilizing traditional foraging practices in remote areas to create employment
- Manitoulin Brewing Company in Ontario, which has become successful in the food/beverage industry in part by building a brand that encourages tourism to further enhance customer engagement
- Saskatchewan’s NWC Wild Rice Company, which has not only achieved success by using traditional wild rice lands to create opportunities but also created a brand attached to their food

Soonias said FCC officials are hoping to encourage Indigenous youth to continue to enter the industry. To that end, the corporation has a program in partnership with Regina's Scott Collegiate. "We recognize Indigenous youth have not traditionally gone into agriculture," Soonias said. "It's not something where they would see role models in their community. Much like STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and some of these other areas, we have to build that awareness, that passion, and that pipeline. For young people, this is a huge opportunity in this sector. It's one of the most important sectors in Canada's GDP — it is our food security and our sovereignty."

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