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Climate change is already affecting what crops are grown in northern regions and more changes are on the way



By [Shannon VanRaes](#)
Reporter

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Lutz Goedde Photo: Shannon VanRaes

Climate change is altering weather, raising sea levels and shrinking the Arctic, but that might be a good thing for Canada — at least from an agricultural production standpoint.

“It looks like Canada is going to be one of the winners from climate change,” said [Jason Clay](#) of the [World Wildlife Fund](#), speaking to industry representatives and policy-makers at the [Forum on Canada’s Agri-Food Future in Ottawa](#).

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He noted that while not all regions of Canada will have a positive

experience, “significant areas of Canada are going to have longer growing seasons” and that “Canada should be able to produce a lot more food going forward.”

Others agree with the assessment.

Lutz Goedde, of the management and consulting firm McKinsey & Company, said Canada is in a unique position because of its northern latitude and large supply of fresh water.

“There is a lot of talk about global warming and climate change, you guys are really lucky. Canada is the only place in the world that at scale, without doing anything, is actually getting better because of climate change and global warming,” he said.

Pointing to the steady northward trek of corn and soybeans, the agricultural business consultant said that the effects are already evident.

For his part, Clay noted that the growing season in North Dakota has increased by an average of 10 days over the last five years alone.

“That’s not going to stop at the border, its going to keep going north,” he said.

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A study published in the scientific journal Nature this October came to the same conclusion. While much of the world will see upheaval and diminished agricultural production as a result of climate change, Canadian farmers will have an opportunity to expand their seasons, growing areas and types of crops they produce.

“Growing evidence demonstrates that climatic conditions can have a profound impact on the functioning of modern human societies, but effects on economic activity appear inconsistent,” reads the study, authored jointly by Marshall Burke, Solomon Hsiang and Edward Miguel.

Russia and Mongolia are also poised to do better in the wake of climate change, while

some areas of Europe are also likely to see small improvements to growing conditions.

Who loses out to climate change? Those who can least afford it.

Africa, Asia, the Middle East and South America are expected to see marked decreases in agricultural production and overall productivity. The United States will also see some decreases in productivity as a result.

“Every other place in the world basically is getting worse,” said Lutz. “So it’s a good situation to be in for Canada.”

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But Clay cautions that warmer temperatures, longer growing seasons and new agricultural regions pose other risks — particularly to the natural habitats and waterways.

While Canada may be called on to provide more food to nations feeling the negative effects of climate change, it can’t do so by destroying its own resource base, he stressed.

Clay noted that already, millions more acres of grassland and prairie have been worked under in the northern United States as farmers look to take advantage of the longer season with new crops.

“I think the question is, how much is enough?” he said. “How much is enough and how much is going to leave your natural resource base intact, to the point that Canadians want to see it? So there is good clean water, good soils, healthy streams, a lot of biodiversity?”

And Canada should not lose sight of higher value and value-added products as its ability to produce agriculture commodities grows, said Lutz.

Clay believes that innovation and strategy will be key to both profiting from coming changes and protecting the environment, while also producing more food for a growing world.

“I think you’re only going to achieve this if you actually plan for this and do some zoning, and really think about this ahead of time, because once you start farming, you can’t go back to nature,” he said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon VanRaes

Reporter



Shannon VanRaes is journalist and photojournalist at the Manitoba Co-operator. She also writes a weekly urban affairs column for Metro Winnipeg, and has previously reported for the Winnipeg Sun, Outwords Magazine and the Portage Daily Graphic.

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