

## The Issue

The demand for gluten-free oats and **pulses** around the globe are soaring which is good news for Canada's farmers and agri-food industry. In 2022, gluten-free oats alone were valued at over \$218M and expected to grow nearly 8% over by 2030.<sup>1</sup> However, there are concerns about the purity of oats and other inherently gluten-free grains (i.e., free from cross-contamination with other gluten-containing grains, like wheat and barley) for people with celiac disease (CeD).

Data from Canada and the USA has revealed that inherently gluten-free grains, pulses and seeds (especially flax and hemp) as well as the flours and products made with ingredients derived from these crops are above the regulatory threshold of less than 20 ppm gluten. This is of great concern to **Canadians with CeD**, as the only treatment is Medical Nutrition Therapy – following a strict life-long gluten-free diet (GFD) and **relying on food products with gluten-free claims**.

Production of gluten-free foods has been impacted by persistent and interconnected challenges in recent years, including labour shortages, increased costs, supply chain disruptions, market volatility and financial stress on small producers.

These pressures have also contributed to the cost of gluten-free food products for celiac consumers who are paying 150 to 500% higher than regular gluten-containing counterparts. This is adding to Canada's food security and affordability crises across Canada.

Through past AAFC funding grants, tools and resources have been developed to support gluten-free grain production, but these have not been disseminated across Canada to improve access to these valuable crops.

## Recommendations

**Celiac Canada recommends a comprehensive review of agronomic practices to improve the quality and access to our valuable gluten-free crops to improve supply to both domestic and global gluten-free markets.**

- Conduct a study about the current gluten-free oat and pulse supply in Canada to ensure the rigid gluten threshold levels are not exceeded.
- Provide financial incentives and capital equipment grants to support farmers interested in producing and exporting gluten-free value-added crops in Canada and around the globe.
- Work with Celiac Canada on educating farmers and producers across the value chain including:
  - Sustainable crop rotation plans
  - Seed management including how to avoid contamination
  - Mitigation plans for on-farm contamination
  - Maintaining gluten-free farm equipment and storage facilities
  - Logistics – how farm produce is transported and stored once it leaves the farm gate
  - Improve sampling using HACCP methods

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<sup>1</sup> [Gluten-Free Oats Market Size, Share & Growth Report, 2030](#)

## **Celiac Disease: Why Agrifood Practices are Critical to our Community**

For over 50 years, Celiac Canada has been the only national charity advocating and supporting people living with the disease in Canada. CeD is a serious autoimmune disorder affecting 1:100 Canadian children and adults. In some countries the prevalence is 2-3% of the population.

When an individual consumes gluten (a protein found in the wheat, barley, rye and hybrid grains) it triggers an immune reaction damaging the small intestinal tract. Gluten also negatively impacts many other organ systems in the body leading to a wide range of symptoms and serious complications.

Currently the only treatment for celiac disease is Medical Nutrition Therapy – following a strict life-long gluten-free diet. This can be very challenging to follow as gluten is found in many different items such as breads and other baked goods; cereals, crackers, pasta, plant-based meat substitutes, snack foods, and some alcoholic beverages.

**Even inherently gluten-free grains (especially oats) and flours; pulses, flax and hemp seeds may be cross-contaminated with gluten during seeding, harvest, storage, transportation, milling and packaging.**

Fortunately, food companies have been willing to invest in technology, separate facilities and dedicated supply chains to produce safe gluten-free foods. Procuring safe ingredients (especially grains, flours, starches, pulses, flax and hemp seeds) not contaminated with gluten can be difficult. Also, gluten-free food substitutes need strict manufacturing protocols to ensure they are not contaminated with gluten and meet Health Canada's gluten threshold safety level. However, production costs of these products are much higher than for gluten-containing food.

Celiac Canada is aligned with AAFC's Strategic Plan for mission driven science that includes:

- increasing the resiliency of agro-ecosystems;
- advancing the circular economy by developing value-added opportunities;

Production of Canadian gluten-free specialty oats and pulses are excellent examples of the principles of a circular economy by creating **value-added and profitable opportunities for farmers** and the food industry.

**The gluten-free agri-food sector is an opportunity for Canada to increase market diversity and export markets, build new supply chains for farmers while becoming a world leader in safe gluten-free grain supplies and addressing increasing consumer demand.**

**For more information, please contact:**

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