

The Thompson Shuswap Foods Connections Project – Phase I



Executive Summary

August 2012

The goal of the Thompson Shuswap Food Connections (TSFC) project is to strengthen the local food economy by identifying opportunities to diversify local farm production and to expand local markets. The project is structured into two phases. The objective of Phase I is to connect producers with local agency/institutional buyers. Phase I surveyed farmers on the nature and extent of their food production and interviewed agency purchasers to better understand their buying structures. This report summarizes the results of the Phase I activities. The objectives of Phase II are to examine food production models including food safety requirements and to explore the feasibility of enhancing food processing infrastructure and value-added production capacity in the region. These activities will be presented in a separate Phase II report.

The Phase I report provides many insights into regional farming from the initial survey of farmers (Section 2) and the targeted farmers survey/interviews (Section 4). While the majority of regional production is livestock related there is also a core group of vegetable and small fruit producers. Most of these producers have intensive operations that sell direct. In response to questions about their interest and/or capacity to increase production, most farmers were hesitant about expanding into the wholesale market and they also identified challenges to increasing their production capacity. These sentiments are illustrated in the following statistics:

- 83% of respondents indicated they would like to increase their sales. Their target markets include direct to consumer, distributors, retail grocery stores, commercial and restaurants, public institutions and the local food community.
- Several barriers to increased production were identified. Land was identified as the greatest resource need, followed by capital, labour and equipment.
- 83% of respondents indicated they would or maybe would like to learn more about partnerships to expand commercial market opportunities.
- 58% of respondents indicated they would or may be interested in value added processing to expand their market opportunities
- 67% of respondents indicated they would or may be interested in partnering in a shared food processing facility, and 73% would or may be interested in partnering in a shared storage facility.

Many of the other challenges facing regional farmers are industry-wide (e.g. aging farmers, high land costs, global marketing) however there were also local conditions that, if improved, could support farm industry expansion (e.g. the establishment of identified markets and assistance with the aggregation and distribution of products). It is significant that most of the resistance to

expansion came from the smaller farmers. The area's few larger operations, in comparison, were more likely to express interest in increasing their production and expanding their marketing reach.

The institutional contacts (Section 3) suggested that onions, carrots and potatoes would be the best crops to be considered for integration into local purchasing systems as these products are: purchased in substantial volumes; currently produced locally; and could be supplied on a year round basis. Again there were obstacles to matching farmers and institutions including the absence of required storage and distribution structures. For example, products sold to institutions need to be channelled through the various commercial distribution houses that each institution has established relationships with. Farmers would need to meet the grading/packaging/labelling criteria, and food safety requirements of these distributions systems.

The Phase I research clearly indicated both opportunities and challenges for farm industry expansion. Phase II will explore some of the challenges facing agriculture to provide recommendations and strategies to address these barriers. It is acknowledged that different challenges face businesses relying on direct marketing as compared to those farms looking to expand their whole sale marketing. In particular, it is envisioned that Phase 2 will consider framers market expansion opportunities and the potential for centralized handling, storage and cross docking facilities.

The Phase II research has also revealed topics that may be considered in subsequent agricultural development initiatives in this or other areas of the province. For example, in the Destiny Farms case study farm (Section 6) located in the TNRD it was noted that the farm has 10 – 12 tons/week of cull potatoes that may be developed into other processed products such frozen, hot mash, dehydrated potatoes, hash browns or other ready to use products. This observation could lead to the examination of potato processing opportunities in the Kamloops region or other potato production regions (e.g. Vancouver Island).

Funding provided by:

Canada



SOUTHERN INTERIOR BEETLE ACTION COALITION