

The Thompson Shuswap Foods Connections Project – Phase II



Executive Summary

February 2013

The Thompson Shuswap Food Connections (TSFC) project was initiated to examine the local food economy and identify opportunities to diversify local farm production and to expand local markets. The project was structured and reported on in two phases. Phase I surveyed farmers on the nature and extent of their food production and interviewed agency purchasers to better understand their buying structures. Phase II examined local food facility capacity and case studies to explore the feasibility of enhancing food processing infrastructure and value-added production capacity in the region.

Phase I Report

The Phase I report provides many insights into regional farming from the initial survey of farmers and the targeted farmers' surveys and interviews. While the majority of regional production is livestock related there is also a core group of vegetable and small fruit producers who rely primarily on direct marketing venues. Most interviewed farmers were hesitant about expanding into wholesale markets and they also identified challenges to increasing their production capacity.

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 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 established commercial distribution houses that each institution works with and farmers would need to meet the grading/packaging/labelling, and food safety requirements of these distributions systems.

Phase II Report

The Phase II Report examines regional food facility capacity to address marketing, distribution and processing challenges through an analysis of regional food facility/hub markets (Section 2) and food facility/hub products (Section 3). In Section 2 we confirmed that agriculture in the

region competes in a global market-place where large food distribution systems dominate the sales of food to local residents. Kamloops must also compete with other British Columbia food production areas with more favourable geographic conditions and closer access to large markets (e.g. Fraser Valley). Despite these challenges, there are successes in the region that could be expanded into new markets. Opportunities for direct sales will continue to be important to the success of local farmers and there are benefits to supporting more direct sales through agri-tourism branding and marketing.

In Section 3 we reviewed eight food facility/hub case studies and concluded that there was little confidence in the viability of a centralized local food facility/hub for the region at this time. We also reviewed existing local food facility/hub network components and identified a regional shortage of commercial facilities (e.g. aggregators and storage facilities) with most farmers meeting their needs on-farm. Case study research also indicated that in other regions the agri-food system is intersecting with the tourism sector in multiple ways that promote sustainability and strengthen the local agri-food sector. Recognizing the potential of agri-tourism, regional agri-tourism food network options are explored in Section 5 following a more general discussion of regional agri-food opportunities in Section 4.

In Section 6, we highlight recommendations that support and enhance the regional agri-food network, including the following:

- support opportunities for direct farm product marketing including farmers market expansion and farm-gate sales.
- support establishment of local farm product aggregator.
- support local advocacy for the protection of water for agriculture.
- support farmers exploring new niche markets and products such as
 - specialized grains
 - supportive grain CSA
 - parent seed production
 - herbs
 - niche products that support existing farm businesses (e.g. specialized or organic hay and grains for sport horse industry or organic farming)
 - expansion of potato production and processing.
- consider all opportunities for collaboration with First Nations including:
 - expansion of crop land under First Nations management.
 - development of niche market processing facilities as new joint economic development initiatives (e.g. specialized potato or garlic products)
 - expansion of Heartland Quality Foods marketing of frozen produce items
 - linking new niche items and/or high volume items grown on crop land under First Nations management through to local institutional markets.
- expansion of food policies that support local food such as:
 - regional companies and agencies, although small players in the local food chain, could lead by example with policies committing to a percentage content of local food to demonstrate their commitment to change.

- regional municipalities could adopt percentage local food content policies at their venues as an expression of support for change.
- in a limited capacity, local institutions have demonstrated that policy is an effective driver for change. The 'food-to-cafeteria movement' and the hospital 'food revolt' may help to accelerate policy change.
- policies can bring local food production activities into programming through the supported activities such as school gardens and the inmate gardens at the Kamloops Regional Corrections facility.
- policies recognizing the potential to reduce carbon emission associated with food supply by connecting near market food production and purchasing.
- support growth of agri-tourism network components as a strategy to diversify and strengthen farm/businesses through such steps as:
 - support agri-tourism industry advocacy, funding and leadership.
 - develop a marketing/promotions plan for the regional agri-tourism network.
 - develop an agri-tourism network structure to support local operations.
 - ensure regulatory support for agri-tourism development.
- ensure local government policies regulating land use and delivering services are structured to support agriculture.
- Consider the hiring of a regional Agricultural Support Officer to strengthen the agri-food sector as proposed in the job description framework outlined in Section 4.

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