

The Sorrento Gathering BC Food Systems Network Established

On September 10-12, 1999, an historic gathering took place at the Sorrento Conference Centre on Shuswap Lake. Thirty-five participants involved in community-level action related to food came from everywhere in the Province except the far North and the East Kootenays. They shared ideas and local initiatives, engaged in analysis and discussed policy options at the provincial, national, and global levels.

In keeping with the holistic perspective of their local organizations, participants emphasized the way in which food issues cross cultures, sectors, and age groups, and highlighted the need for food policy to link ministries dealing with health, agriculture, education, trade, environment, and women's equality.

The meeting concluded by founding the BC Food Systems Network – a recognition that policy analysis, information and support for sustainable agriculture, and action towards a healthy, sustainable food system is happening in communities all over the province. The Network will insist on a democratic process for policy development and encourage public policies that foster economic viability, ecological health, and social justice.

POLICY

The central question of the weekend gathering was, what would be the policy implications if BC were to “put food first” – if the creation and maintenance of a robust, ecologically sound agriculture and the provision of healthy food for the entire population were to become the central objectives of the provincial government, so that policy in all areas would have to be seen through the lens of food security?

FOOD SECURITY

Global agreements (which Canada has signed) state that food security is a basic human right. We define food security as a situation in which

- (1) everyone has assured access to adequate, appropriate and personally acceptable food in a way that does not damage self respect.
- (2) people are able to earn a living wage by growing, producing, processing, handling, retailing and serving food.
- (3) the quality of land, air and water are maintained and enhanced for future generations, and
- (4) food is celebrated as central to community and cultural integrity.

HEALTH

We also took as a given that good food is the basis of health. This means also that people in need of healing, whether in hospitals, care facilities, or remand centres, require healthy food, not the cheapest available. By the same token, children (our future) require the best possible food, starting with breastmilk.

JUSTICE

The principles of democracy and equity require that good food is available to everyone, not just those who can afford to pay for it. Nor is it acceptable that BC's food policy is based on the exploitation of people of the environment in other countries.

ECONOMY

We agreed that without food production, there is no economy. Full cost-accounting reveals the costs as well as the risks of a food system which is dependent on outside sources, long-distance movement of food, high-input agriculture, and poor population health. Food dependency holds political as well as economic dangers: any jurisdiction which cannot feed its people is at the mercy of whoever does.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH OUR FOOD SYSTEM

Some over-arching concerns were shared by the group. We are outraged at the level of hunger and malnutrition in a society where food is plentiful. In a wealthy society, social welfare payments which do not assure personal food security are unacceptable. We cannot rely on overburdened and understocked food banks; nor can we continue to implement support programs which leave out critical constituencies (eg. babies between 6 months and 5 years old).

The contamination of breast milk is an appalling symbol of one of the major problems in the system which we named as 'abuse of the planet'. Genetic engineering of food and seeds must be stopped.

The high level of corporate and external control of our food system, coupled with "free trade" agreements, is undermining local agriculture and food production. It also leaves us highly vulnerable to an emergency since we do not have control of our own food resources.

We are losing the essential arts of farming, gardening, foraging, identifying edible and medicinal plants, cooking, preserving and storing foods, and the cultures and community sharing that have accompanied them. The connection of food and food security to every sector and level of society is ignored as governments and ministries contradict or undermine one another's actions, and community groups are given no voice in policy-making.



BC Food Systems Network

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