

Building Food Security in British Columbia in 2013

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Prepared by the British Columbia Food Systems Network
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BC Food Systems Network

The British Columbia Food System Network (BCFSN) is comprised farmers, food activists, health promoters, Indigenous peoples, academics, municipal workers, educators, labour union members and others concerned about food security in B.C., with a shared a vision for a more equitable, accessible, viable, and sustainable food system.

Building food security in B.C.

Given local and global trends, food insecurity will continue to adversely affect an increasing number of British Columbians. Over the past decade, British Columbians have been impacted by sharp increases and instability of food and energy prices combined with already high housing costs and several decades of stagnant wage growth. Increasingly, many are finding it difficult to access healthy and affordable food, with food bank use becoming far more prevalent in recent years and growing public health concern over the increasing prevalence of diabetes and obesity.

Meanwhile, many B.C. farms producing food for local consumption are struggling to stay afloat in a volatile market due to unpredictable weather, price competition with other jurisdictions, and relatively higher production and property costs. While a handful of farms in B.C. are quite profitable, many are faced with tight margins and low incomes for owners and workers alike. As a result, there is little incentive for young potential farmers to succeed an ageing population of B.C. farmers.

These inter-related policy issues provide compelling reasons to elevate food policy on B.C.'s political agenda. In order to achieve food security as a goal, government will need to enact a plan of action to prioritize food security in policy as well as resources. The B.C. Food Systems Network recommends that Government of British Columbia:

- Allocate more resources for food policy and programs, beginning with increasing the annual budget of the Ministry of Agriculture to meet the national average for per-GDP funding over a five year period;¹
- Apportion additional funding across several ministries, including Health, Education, Environment, and Social Development, to expand existing food security programs and establish new, targeted inter-ministerial programs.

Achieving food security in B.C. will require an evidence-based review of current policies, followed by strong policy action aimed at ensuring equitable access to food, strengthening local agriculture, fostering sustainability and climate resiliency, and implementing a 'whole-of-government' approach.

The following sections outline potential policy directions in each of these four areas.

¹ In 2010, the Ministry of Agriculture's budget of \$126 million was just 4.2% of the agricultural sector's GDP compared to a national average of 11.3%. Meeting the national average means increasing the Ministry's budget to \$340 million based on 2010 data.

Ensuring equitable access to food

A community enjoys food security when all people, at all times, have access to nutritious, safe, personally acceptable and culturally appropriate foods, produced in ways that are environmentally sound and socially just. Food Security initiatives should focus on strengthening assets and abilities and engage individuals and communities.

Although British Columbia has the fourth highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Canada, it has the highest rate of poverty.² Inequality across the province has been steadily rising over the last decade along with the high cost of living and sharply increasing cost of food; in the past four years, food prices have increased by more than twice as much as in the previous four years.³

The result is a growing number of British Columbians living in moderate to severe food insecurity; in 2010, over 8% of all households were 'food insecure' and that number is likely growing with the number of people accessing food banks increasing by 15.5% in 2011.⁴

Food insecurity is a problem in all communities throughout the province, not just among marginalized populations; people living in rural areas frequently pay higher overall food prices, while those in urban centres typically pay more for other costs such as housing, leaving little money for food.⁵

In addition, food insecurity is of concern for Indigenous groups as traditional food systems are under severe and constant pressure from industrialization. This degradation has been steadily increasing since the colonization of B.C., and has contributed significantly to declining health and quality of life for Indigenous people.

Policy Directions:

- Establish a poverty elimination and prevention program with food affordability as a central measure for program targets;

² In standard measures of poverty, B.C. tied with Nova Scotia for the worst scores in Canada using MBM and LIM and second to last, ahead of Nova Scotia under LICO, but overall evidence indicates that Nova Scotia is ahead of B.C. in addressing poverty, according to Murphy, B., Zhang X., Dionne, C., (2012) "Low Income in Canada - A Multi-line and Multi-index Perspective", *Statistics Canada*.

³ Food prices in British Columbia increased 7.5% between 2004 and 2008, compared with 16.1% between 2008 and 2012, according to Statistics Canada – Table 326-0020—Consumer Price Index (CPI), 2009 basket, 12-month averages.

⁴ *Statistics Canada* (2010) "Canadian Community Health Surveys".

⁵ *Dietitians of Canada & Community Nutritionists Council of B.C.* (2009). "The Cost of Eating in B.C."

- Strengthen rural economies with sustainable development initiatives and identify food as a priority area for small business development, employment training and green jobs (e.g. sustainable agriculture, small-scale processing, and local food co-operatives);
- Establish a meaningful process for collaboration with communities regarding policy and decision-making that affects Indigenous food systems;
- Establish a series of land conservancies specifically set aside for food and medicine harvesting by Indigenous communities;
- Apply a "food and health lens" to decision-making relating to industrial resource extraction and development.

Strengthening local agriculture

Local agriculture is an important part of food security not just for maintaining and protecting a significant part of our food supply, it can also influence nutrition and affect our environment. Local agriculture implies greater 'food democracy' since local residents can have a more direct influence over the regulation of health, safety, labour and environmental standards involved with the production of the food they eat.

Part of strengthening local agriculture is to ensure the people who grow, raise, and process our food can earn a decent living while being encouraged toward sustainable production. In this way, the agricultural sector would be viewed as a source of good, green jobs where smaller farms earn enough to support their operations and larger farms provide decent wages and working conditions to their workers.

B.C. is home to some of the most fertile land in Canada, which can grow a large diversity and quantity of quality food, yet increasingly, already limited agricultural land is threatened by demands for non-agricultural land uses.⁶ Since the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) was established in 1973, over one-third of the land in protection has since been removed from the province's most fertile regions.⁷

In 2010, B.C.'s Auditor General found that the Agricultural Land Commission has insufficient resources to effectively evaluate proposals to add, remove and subdivide land in the ALR, enforce existing regulations, and manage the development, identification and protection of land.⁸

⁶ Only 5% of the land base is considered suitable for agriculture, and only about 1% of that is considered 'prime agricultural land'.

⁷ Including Vancouver Island, the Okanagan, and the lower mainland.

⁸ Over the last decade the agricultural budget decreased by 40%.

Fiscal constraints and other changes to the Ministry of Agriculture's budget have also eliminated support services for local producers and shifted to a strongly export-driven focus. Although some larger export-oriented farms are very profitable, many other farms face financial challenges as evidenced by increasing farm debt and low profitability.

Despite a growing market for locally produced food, the growth of Farmers Markets, the 100-mile diet and local food movements, only a small percentage of food grown in B.C. is consumed locally.⁹

In 2010, B.C. farmers had the lowest net income in Canada, and were the only farmers in Canada to have experienced a 5-year period of negative net farm income, continuing a 30-year trend of declining agricultural net incomes in B.C.¹⁰

According to the 2011 Agricultural Census, the average age of B.C. farmers is nearly 56; therefore, investment in local agricultural production and assistance for new farmers is vital to keeping our agricultural sector alive and ensuring that young, would-be farmers view agriculture as a viable career option.

Policy Directions:

- Renew commitment to ensuring full protection of the Agricultural Land Reserve and provide incentives for food production on agricultural land;¹¹
- Improve assistance for new farmers including, farm succession and land access;
- Establish an apprenticeship program for new farmers and support farmer mentoring;
- Develop a 'small farm lens' for all ministries and use it to assess the implications of new and existing regulations on small local producers;
- Build on the strength of B.C.'s export agricultural sector to include and encourage a shift to B.C. markets; programs should be designed with meaningful engagement of farmers and communities of all sizes;
- Ensure that there is more even capacity for both food production and processing across the province;¹²

⁹ In 2010 B.C. agricultural producers (agriculture and aquaculture) received \$2.9 billion in farm receipts and sold almost \$2.5 billion in exports, meaning that only 7.5% of farm receipts sold were not exported.

¹⁰ *Statistics Canada*, CANSIM—table 002-0009 [Last modified: 2011-11-24].

¹¹ Approximately 50% of the ALR is not currently used for food production.

- Develop local food procurement policies across ministries and work to ensure that the provincial government retains control over purchasing and procurement policies in light of trade negotiations such as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA and TPP).

Fostering sustainability and climate resiliency

In agriculture, as in other industries, sustainable development means protecting the quality of land, air, and water, the well being of animals, and the integrity of plants and seeds. These precious resources form the basis of life and must be maintained and enhanced for future generations.

Research and information are essential for ensuring a successful sustainable food sector. Although there is growing demand for organic and sustainably grown food in B.C., only about 3% of all B.C. farms were organic in 2011. A Certified Organics Association of B.C. survey finds that the foremost need expressed by participants is for more information via organic extension agents¹³. Growing B.C.'s organic and sustainable food sector also requires significant consumer education, as a variety of 'sustainability' claims from some producers has led to confusion and meant that retailers and consumers must decipher descriptors such as natural, sustainable, and organic, with little supporting information at their disposal.

Food supply challenges will come from climate-related impacts in B.C. and other jurisdictions because of the interdependence of global food supply lines. Currently, B.C. is reliant on imported food for almost half of its needs, with approximately 70% of fruit and vegetable imports coming from the U.S., and the majority from California. Over-reliance on imported food places the province in a potentially precarious situation as extreme drought throughout California and the mid-west has already caused prices to spike.¹⁴

While supply shortages in other jurisdictions and a warming local climate may provide unique opportunities for B.C. producers to grow more food and capture unmet global demand, evidence indicates that the most productive growing regions in B.C. may also be particularly vulnerable to unpredictable climate change impacts.¹⁵

¹² Uneven food production and processing capacity poses issues for food security; for example, in Fraser Valley's poultry sector, 12,000 birds/km² are processed, when 1,600 birds/km² is considered high volume and vulnerable to biosecurity problems.

¹³ *Certified Organic Associations of B.C.* (2008) "Organic Agriculture Extension Survey".

¹⁴ In 2012, over half of all US counties (1,584 counties in 32 states) have been added to the USDA list of natural disaster areas due to drought and excessive heat damaging crops in California and the mid-west corn-belt.

¹⁵ Ostry, A. (2010). "Food for thought: The issues and challenges of food security", *Provincial Health Services Authority*.

B.C. food producers are already facing increasing difficulty due to more extreme seasons and increasingly unpredictable weather, resulting in lost crops, damages to equipment and structures, low-quality yields, loss of growing capacity for certain crops, increasing pestilence, and additional labour and time costs associated with attempting to adapt.

Policy Directions:

- Reinstatement of regional research and extension services to farmers targeting small-scale agriculture, organic production, and urban agriculture;
- Support food providers in shifting to sustainable production in both urban and rural settings (organic agriculture, community-managed fisheries, indigenous food systems, etc.);
- Explore additional ways to further encourage sustainable practices through the Environmental Farm Plan Program;
- Provide resources to research positive and negative climate change impacts and adaptations, and communicate findings through targeted extension services;
- Provide marketing assistance for existing, transitional and new organic farms.

Implementing a whole-of-government approach

Food has a profound effect on our lives and therefore affects multiple policy areas either directly or indirectly. Building food security can improve the health and well-being of individuals while safeguarding the environment and providing economic development; education can improve nutrition and foster an early interest in farming, ensuring a supply of farmers to feed our future generations.

A holistic and integrated approach is needed to ensure consistency and coherence across government Ministries and policy areas such as community nutrition, education, public health, community planning, environment, fisheries, forests and range, and agriculture. A growing body of academic work from various disciplines recognizes that all these areas are inter-related and together shape our food system.¹⁶

'Food system' issues are complex and yet traditionally, food has been a primary concern for the Ministries of Agriculture, Health, and a secondary concern for others, with each

¹⁶ O'Hara, S and Stagl, S (2001) "Global food markets and their local alternatives: a socioecological economic perspective", *Population and Environment: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 22:6, pp 533-554;
Statistics Canada (2001) "Census of Agriculture" <www.statcan.ca/english/agcensus2001/index.htm>;
OPHA Food Security Work Group (2002) "A Systemic Approach to Community Food Security: A Role for Public Health", [position paper adopted by the Ontario Public Health Association].

Ministry operating in a 'siloed' manner under narrowly defined—and at times conflicting—policy priorities and objectives.

For instance, at the food production level, the Ministry of Agriculture's policies can contribute to lower prices for agricultural products, lowering incomes and creating hardship for farmers and their families. At the same time, consumers expecting low prices and international trade agreements are increasing pressure to compete on the world market and to view agriculture in strictly economic terms.

Meanwhile environmental concerns are rising in relation to agricultural production, from preserving biodiversity, carbon emissions, the health implications of persistent organic pollutants, to the impact of genetically modified organisms. Rising obesity and diet related chronic disease has created a need for more nutritional information, while advertising creates confusion over whether highly processed products should be considered healthy.

The relationship among these social, environmental and economic factors is the reason that they must be tackled with a systemic approach in order to make a difference. To effectively deliver a 'whole-of-government' approach, a structure is needed which could withstand financial and political change and be able to coordinate relevant sectors and ministries.

Policy Directions:

- Ensure policy coherence and consistency using a “whole-of-government” approach and work with like-minded governments and organizations to bring this perspective to multilateral forums and governance;
- Initiate a government-wide review of spending in order to identify existing initiatives related to food and ensure that efforts are complimentary, purposeful and coordinated;
- Establish an inter-ministerial body including the Ministries of Health, Environment, Agriculture, Education and Natural Resources to collaborate on sustainable community food and agriculture plans and improved food security and health outcomes;
- Support and expand school meal programs, school gardens, and food literacy programs to ensure that all children at all times have access to the food required for healthy lives;
- Provide core support for communities to develop food system plans, urban agricultural projects, food recovery programs, and social enterprise.