

Innovative Solutions to Basin-Boundary Food System Challenges

KNOWLEDGE BRIEF

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This Knowledge Brief summarizes research conducted as part of the Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute's Regional Food Systems project. For other research products associated with this project, visit cbrdi.ca/food.

BACKGROUND

In the Columbia Basin-Boundary region the challenges farmers face and the unmet demand for locally produced food suggests that there is room for improvement in the region's food system. Agriculture in the Columbia Basin-Boundary region (the Basin-Boundary) is typically small scale and the majority of the food consumed in the region is imported, a reflection of a food system that is designed to work with large-scale producers and national, continental, and/or global supply chains ¹. However, there is a renewed and growing interest in agriculture and food security in the Basin-Boundary ². This necessitates changes to the existing food system to better work with local producers and other intermediaries to produce and

supply food to the people of the Columbia Basin-Boundary region.

Innovative solutions are emerging that transform how our food is grown, processed, distributed, marketed, and sold. These solutions increasingly focus on ensuring economic, environmental, social, and cultural sustainability. It is important to understand that innovative actions may not require a completely new system or huge investments, but rather the re-purposing or re-organizing of what exists, building on existing infrastructure and assets. Below we provide an overview of several innovative solutions which could be adapted across the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region. We highlight models that have already been implemented on a smaller scale within the region that could be duplicated or expanded, as well as examples from outside the region. Innovative solutions are broken into three categories: supply, processing, and ownership and land access.



SUPPLY SOLUTIONS

Shortened Supply Chain

The local food movement is essentially a movement to shorten the supply chain. While perceptions and definitions of local food differ, what is consistent is that for food to be considered local means the distance between production and consumption is shortened³. As such, the local food movement may best be characterized by what it is not - a long, globalized food supply chain with considerable geographic separation between producers and consumers. The global food system is characterized by long supply chains where there are centralized processing systems, multiple intermediaries, and long transportation distances. Within these long supply chains farmers can be unaware of what happens to the food they produce and sell. Similarly consumers can be unaware of where, how, and by whom the food they buy is produced. One approach to localize the food system is to shorten supply chains.

A short supply chain means reducing the number of intermediaries between the producer and the consumer⁴. While there is no agreed upon definition of a short supply chain, the general principle is that the physical and social distance between the producer and consumer is as small as possible. Shortening the supply chain reduces the number of organizations involved and decreases the physical distance food travels⁴. The shorter the supply chain, the greater the proportion of revenue that goes to each organization involved and the easier it is to communicate information about where and how the food is produced.

Supply chains are not simply 'short' or 'long' based on a certain number of organizations. Rather, a supply chain should be thought of as a continuum where the more intermediary organizations are added the longer the supply chain is and vice versa. The shortest food system supply chain is the direct sale - where farmers or processors sell directly to consumers through farm gate sales, 'pick your own', sales over the internet, home delivery, and farmers markets. In these situations, the consumer has the opportunity to learn about the farm and farmer that produced the food because the consumer can actually meet the farmer.

One example of direct farm to consumer sales are ***Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Programs*** where consumers purchase a share in a farm's harvest and receive a package of food on a regular basis (e.g., weekly, biweekly, monthly)⁵. The upfront payment from CSA programs helps farmers by providing income when expenses are high (i.e., during the spring) and providing a consistent consumer base⁵. Multiple CSAs exist within the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region⁵. One example is Blueberry Patch Farms where you can get CSA boxes with⁶⁻⁸ different vegetables or fruits that vary depending on what is in season (<http://www.blueberrypatch.ca/>)⁶.

Farmers Markets are another example of a shortened supply chain where farmers sell directly to consumers. However in the case of a farmers market, the market acts as somewhat of an intermediary, providing an organized venue and requiring farmers to contribute in order to participate (e.g., through fees). In the Basin-Boundary there are over 30 farmers markets where consumers can buy direct from farmers⁷. One example is the Creston Valley Farmers' Market. In 2015 between 20 and 50 local vendors attended this year round market where everything is made, baked, or grown locally⁸. News, events, vendor information, reports, and the market's business plan are all available at <http://www.crestonvalleyfarmersmarket.ca>.

There are many other examples of innovative approaches to shortening supply chains beyond direct sales. Further detail on single intermediary examples are found below in the values-based supply chain section.

Value-Based Supply Chain

A values-based supply chain (value chain) is a business arrangement among supply chain partners to share business planning, knowledge, and market intelligence to help develop strategies and solutions that benefit each organization in the chain⁹. A value chain is a collaborative approach to business management where organizations share operational and ethical principles and maintain steady and open communication⁹. The value chain approach is driven by the needs of consumers and focuses on factors like the uniqueness of products or services, enhancing innovation, redefining value, improving quality, and increasing efficiency¹⁰⁻¹². Value chains include the full range of activities required to bring a product or service from conception through production to delivery, end use, and/or disposal¹²⁻¹⁶.

Small or medium sized enterprises (e.g., a small farm) often sell products through intermediaries, creating a long supply chain where other organizations profit¹⁵. The value chain approach can help producers to connect and engage with other organizations along the chain, allowing producers to closely work with intermediaries to gain benefits like increased market access, improved relationships, and reduced uncertainty^{10,11,15,17,18}. A value chain approach can increase efficiency and reduce waste. For example, processing facilities can allow existing by-products to be used for value added products, reducing waste and creating a new revenue stream. Value chains also allow for the consideration of values beyond financial, such as social or environmental values¹⁴. Intermediaries like distributors and retailers benefit from acquiring specialized products that they can sell at higher prices, as well as reduced risk through advanced planning and price negotiations. The transparency of a value chain allows for marketing and communication to capitalize on the growing demand for food products that are produced in an environmentally and socially responsible way.

The value chain approach has been applied to agriculture in examples globally, including in Canada and the United States^{19,20}. For example, using a value chain approach farmers can be strategic collaborators, as opposed to anonymous interchangeable suppliers. Within a value chain the success of each partner is linked. For example, Edmonton's Little Potato Company applied a value chain approach, working closely with organizations in their supply chain (e.g., distribution, retailer, restaurant) to ensure mutual success based on their unique little potato varieties and products (<http://www.littlepotatoes.com/en/>)²¹.

Other examples of value chains include intermediaries that work together on production, distribution, and marketing. For example, a **Food Hub** is an organization that manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of food products from multiple local producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand²². Essentially food hubs overcome the challenges faced by small producers and/or processors by pooling the resources of multiple producers and/or processors to create economies of scale, increasing efficiency by sharing marketing, storage, processing, tools, and distribution services²³.

Food hubs can take many forms (e.g., business, cooperative or non-profit organization) and vary depending on the community (e.g., virtual or physical place). Food hubs can be an example of both a value chain approach as well as a shortened supply chain. For example, food hubs can balance goals of being financially stable with having positive economic, social and environmental impacts within their communities ²⁴.

The food hub concept has been adopted in a number of places. For example, the Vancouver Food Hub is a partnership between local growers, Farm Folk City Folk, and Vancouver's Farmers Markets, providing a one stop shop for restaurants, markets, and other organizations to order food ²⁵. Within the Basin-Boundary there is the Kaslo Food Hub which hosts various food security related programs, including a Food Cupboard, Resource Library, Tool Library, and more ²⁶. Also from within the region is the example of the Kootenay and Boundary Food Producers' Co-op whose aim is to develop services and infrastructure to better link producers and customers, as well as building agricultural capacity and developing educational and marketing opportunities around farm viability (<http://kbfpc.ca/>) ²⁷.

PROCESSING SOLUTIONS

Access to local licensed and inspected processing facilities can be a barrier to entry into food processing, limiting local production. For example, the recent closure of Passmore Pluckers certified organic abattoir in South Slocan means that anyone looking to process birds in the West Kootenays will now have to go to Grand Forks or Creston ²⁸. Similarly, the lack of licensed and inspected commercial kitchens can also pose a barrier. However a variety of solutions exist to address these processing challenges.

Community abattoirs provide access to processing facilities for multiple local producers. For example, the Salt Spring Abattoir is a community facility managed by a not for profit society and funded by grants from a variety of sources that provides processing access on Salt Spring Island (<http://www.saltspringabattoir.ca/>) ²⁹. Similarly, in Ontario Manitoulin Island Community Abattoir Inc. is an incorporated not for profit that is managed by a volunteer board and successfully funded through a variety of local, provincial, and federal sources ³⁰. Within the region, Boundary Country Meatworks in Grand Forks is an example of a community abattoir, owned and operated by the Grand Forks and Boundary Regional Agricultural Society (<http://bcmeatworks.com/>) ³¹.

Accessible **commercial kitchens** allow small producers to develop, test, and produce products for sale. Access to such facilities can allow producers to access specialized equipment they could not otherwise afford, helping them to produce and sell their products more easily ³². Some examples of commercial kitchens go beyond rentable space, incubating and supporting (e.g., providing marketing, financial, technical, and regulatory assistance or training) new food processing businesses and entrepreneurs who can then take part in shortened, values-based supply chains as part of a growing local food system. For example, in Manitoba while there are multiple, inspected commercial kitchens that provide rentable space to businesses and entrepreneurs, there is also the Food Development Centre in Portage la Prairie that supports research and product development through on-site consulting, ingredient sourcing, food

testing, and other services (<https://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/food-and-ag-processing/food-commercialization/food-development-centre/>)³³. Commercial incubator kitchens are seen as an economic development opportunity in the Basin-Boundary, as well as an initiative to support food security. For example, one feasibility study found that a community kitchen on the east shore of Kootenay Lake would be financially viable and recommended moving forward with implementation³⁴.

A **Food innovation district** is a geographic cluster of food-oriented businesses, services, and community activities, such as markets, food business incubators, and facilities for common storage, packaging, and distribution³⁵. Food innovation districts are supported by “local governments through planning and economic development initiatives in order to promote a positive business environment, spur regional food system development, and increase access to local food”³⁶. According to the food innovation toolkit developed by Michigan State University, planners, economic developers, elected officials, and community champions all have roles to play in food innovation districts³⁶. There are multiple examples of food innovation districts from the United States, such as the Michigan Food Innovation District which brings together not only growers and producers, but research, financing, processing and manufacturing, and many other actors (<http://www.mifoodinnovationdistrict.com/>)³⁷. Within the Basin-Boundary the formation of clusters around specific crops or processing is suggested in the Boundary Area Agricultural Plan³⁸. Such arrangements may help smaller producers and processors to achieve economies of scale and access tools, marketing strategies, and wider distribution.

OWNERSHIP AND LAND ACCESS SOLUTIONS

The agricultural plans from within the Columbia Basin-Boundary region expressed that farmland is often prohibitively expensive for new farmers, and development pressures in some areas mean that agricultural land is sold based on speculative residential or recreational values which are typically higher. The loss of farmland due to development is also a major issue identified in the Regional District of East Kootenay Agriculture Plan where pressures on agricultural land seem to be the greatest within the Basin-Boundary³⁹. The loss and development of farmland is identified as the top agricultural concern for the people of British Columbia (BC)⁴⁰.

High farmland prices in BC combined with lack of access to capital create challenges to accessing affordable farmland for people wanting to start farming and current farmers wishing to expand⁴¹. To address the loss of farmland and prohibitive cost of land in the Basin-Boundary, the Regional District of East Kootenay and Regional District of Kootenay Boundary plans recommend research into the feasibility of alternative land ownership models (e.g., Agriculture Land Trust or land cooperative model) to make land more accessible to farmers that cannot afford to buy farmland at market prices³⁹. Additionally, there are a variety of alternative farmland access models, including: cooperative and community farms, incubator farms, farmland access agreements, public farmland, and farmland trusts.

Cooperative and Community Farms

Cooperative and community farms can help support access to land for new farmers, as well as help with sharing costs and pooling resources (e.g., labour)⁴². There are many different ways that these types of farms can be structured. Cooperative farms are member owned and are generally community or regionally based, resulting in surplus revenue being recirculated into the local community⁴². Community farms are considered to be social enterprises that can be operated by co-operatives, institutions, or societies, generally comprised of complementary businesses⁴². This structure reduces the land cost and operating costs for the individual farmer, and allows for shared marketing and distribution⁴². Both cooperative and community farms have a global track record of successful examples. One example is the Haliburton Community Organic Farm in Saanich BC (<http://haliburtonfarm.org/about-us/>). The farm is run by the Haliburton Community Organic Farm Society and functions on four principles: stewardship, education/research, economic viability, and community involvement/partnerships⁴³.

Incubator Farms

The goal of incubator farms is to support new farmers through a short-term lease (1-5 years) on existing farmland, a deal that often includes existing infrastructure (e.g., fencing, irrigation), training, and mentorship⁴². An incubator farm can take a variety of forms, including ownership by land trusts, operating on public land, or operating on private land where an existing farmer wishes to support new farmers⁴². One example is Three Feet Below Farm in Richmond, BC (<http://www.threefeetbelow.ca/>). This incubator farm allowed three farm school students to learn and grow their skills in a low risk environment on a small plot with the mentorship of an experienced farmer⁴⁴. Use of the farm has since been passed to new students to provide them a chance to learn⁴⁴.

Farmland Access Agreements

Beyond purchasing land or the cooperative, community, or incubator farm options discussed above, there are alternative land access agreements. The Young Agrarians network facilitates connections between land owners with farmland available and farmers seeking access to land across Canada through land linking workshops, land access guides, and online tools for finding and listing land⁴⁵. Existing landowners, whether they are public or private, can benefit from land use agreements through benefits like reduced property taxes, seeing their land being used, and accessing a portion of the food produced on their property.

There are a variety of short and long term ways that agreements can be made between landowners and farmers providing land access options without land purchases. **Leases** allow the use and occupation of a property, or portion of a property, for a pre-determined period of time in exchange for rent⁴². **License** agreements allow a person to do a specific action on, or with, someone else's property (e.g., grazing)⁴². A **memorandum of understanding** is an agreement between at least two people, typically serving as a temporary agreement over a specific use of the land⁴². Each of these land use has different durations and levels of formality.

Public Farmland

Public Land is owned and administered by the federal, provincial, or municipal government. In BC agriculture in the form of cropland or grazing are accepted uses of crown land, however the provincial government is not currently accepting new applications⁴⁶. Use of municipal lands for agricultural purposes is determined by individual municipalities. For example, in Nelson the Seniors Economic Environment Development Society (SEEDS) grows food in greenhouses on city property⁴⁷.

Farmland Trusts

Farmland trusts are independent, non-profit organizations that protect and preserve farmland by owning and managing the land, holding covenants, and/or providing support for farming and farmland protection⁴⁸. There are a variety of different trust governance structures and purposes. For example, the Ontario Farmland Trust works to protect and preserve farmland in Ontario by acquiring farmland and interests in farmland, conducting research and education, managing and disbursing funds, and fostering cooperation with other groups interested in protecting farmland (<https://ontariofarmlandtrust.ca/>)⁴⁹. In BC the Farm Folk City Folk organization is leading an initiative to create a new governance model that would hold farmland in trust⁵⁰. This Foodlands Trust Project is exploring four farmland trust models to be developed and piloted between 2015 and 2018⁵⁰:

1. Integration of provincial trust operations into an existing non-profit organization;
2. Registered, membership based cooperative trust;
3. New stand-alone provincial trust organization;
4. Municipally integrated regional farmland trust.

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