



# SUPPORTING NORTHERN B.C.'S AGRICULTURE PRODUCERS AND FOOD/BEVERAGE PROCESSORS

Action Plan for the Delivery of Programs and Assistance



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Finally, we would like to recognize and thank the Honourable Lana Popham, Minister of Agriculture for meeting with us in Fall 2017 for a briefing about the agrifoods industry in northern BC. Without that beginning, this project would likely not have been possible.

It is our hope that this action plan for the delivery of programs and assistance will lead to the growth and development of the northern BC agrifoods sector to the benefit of northern producers.

## Contact

Greg Halseth  
Community Development Institute  
University of Northern British Columbia  
3333 University Way  
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9

Tel: 250-960-5826  
E-mail: [greg.halseth@unbc.ca](mailto:greg.halseth@unbc.ca)  
Website: [www.unbc.ca/cdi](http://www.unbc.ca/cdi)

Marleen Morris  
Community Development Institute  
University of Northern British Columbia  
3333 University Way  
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9

Tel: 250-960-5952  
E-mail: [marleen.morris@unbc.ca](mailto:marleen.morris@unbc.ca)  
Website: [www.unbc.ca/cdi](http://www.unbc.ca/cdi)

## Availability of this Report

This report is available on the Community Development Institute website at [www.unbc.ca/community-development-institute](http://www.unbc.ca/community-development-institute)

## Executive Summary

The BC Ministry of Agriculture and the Community Development Institute (CDI) at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) share a common interest in facilitating the growth and development of the agricultural sector in northern BC. Agriculture has always been an important economic contributor to the region and, with increased demand for food, both at home and abroad, the sector is now entering a new phase of opportunity. Through working together on this project, the Ministry of Agriculture and the CDI hope to facilitate opportunities for growth.

The project, entitled the *Northern BC Agrifood Industry Needs Assessment and Supports* was developed to identify and assess current and future business and market development opportunities, challenges, and barriers faced by northern BC's agrifood industry. Particular attention was focused on marketing agrifoods products to the Lower Mainland and other metropolitan areas of the province. The project consists of two phases and three reports:

- Project Implementation Plan (Phase One);
- Industry Consultation and Findings Report (Phase Two); and
- Action Plan for Delivery of Programs and Assistance (Phase Two).

This report, the *Action Plan for Delivery of Programs and Assistance* is based on focus groups and interviews conducted with agrifood producers across northern BC. In total, 70 producers participated in the consultation sessions, representing a wide range of meat (beef, lamb, pork, chicken, bison, and turkeys), produce, and value-added (jam, honey, apple cider vinegar, dried mushrooms, dried fruit, and caramels) products. Focus groups were held in the northwest, northeast, central, and eastern regions of northern BC, engaging producers from Terrace, Smithers, Burns Lake, Vanderhoof, Fort St. John, Dawson Creek, Chetwynd, 100 Mile House, Williams Lake, Quesnel, McBride, Valemount, and the Robson Valley.

The *Action Plan for Delivery of Programs and Assistance* promotes a community economic development approach to the development of the northern BC agrifoods sector. This approach is grounded in research, develops direction through dialogue, and moves forward through agreement on collective action. The Action Plan for the Delivery of Programs and Assistance can be summarized as follows:

- For the development of the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market the approach would be to first complete a comprehensive market study to confirm the market and market potential for northern BC agrifoods products. This would be followed by research and dialogue with producers regarding models for accessing this market, namely the establishment of a comprehensive marketing organization or providing support for producers to access this market independently.
- For the development of regional markets, the approach would be to work with the BC Association of Farmers' Markets to make it easier for producers to access shared tables at larger markets and to develop case studies that could serve as references and inspiration for producers looking for other opportunities to market their products locally.
- There strong potential for northern BC to develop a world class product in the rapidly growing global market for grass fed beef and lamb. This potential could be furthered through assembling a research team comprised of producers and agricultural specialists to determine the breeds and feeds that would produce a more universally acceptable grass fed product.
- There is a need to attend to ensuring that the foundations for the future of the agrifoods sector in northern BC are supported through policies and programs that can support attracting and retaining young people to work in the sector and ensure that they can access and purchase farm land.

Critically, what emerged from the development of this action plan is the need for more information, and following that, more dialogue on the options and possibilities for the northern BC agrifoods sector. The increasing demand for food and growing interest in high quality, locally produced food, makes this a time of opportunity for northern BC producers.

## Introduction

The BC Ministry of Agriculture and the Community Development Institute (CDI) at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) share a common interest in facilitating the growth and development of the agricultural sector in northern BC. Agriculture has always been an important economic contributor to the region and, with increased demand for food, both at home and abroad, the sector is now entering a new phase of opportunity. Through working together on this project, the Ministry of Agriculture and the CDI hope to facilitate opportunities for growth.

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These discussions provided a 'producers lens' which helped inform the development of targeted support, resources, and solutions that can grow the agrifoods sector in northern BC.

The findings from the consultation sessions have pointed to two areas of opportunity to expand the northern BC agrifood sector: growing the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market and growing northern BC regional markets. It also identified the opportunity to develop a leading position in a growing market segment, namely grass fed beef and lamb. Finally, the research also pointed to the need to attend to developing policies and programs to lay the foundations for the future of the agrifoods sector in northern BC.

## Background from the Industry Consultation and Findings Report

The *Northern BC Agrifood Industry Needs Assessment and Supports* consultation engaged a broad range of producers who brought to the discussions a wide range of knowledge and experience. In total, 70 producers participated in the consultation. The key findings from that research can be summarized as follows:

- There is significant capacity and opportunity for growth in all aspects of the agrifoods sector. There are a large number of producers working part- or full-time off the farm who would prefer to work full-time on the farm. Growing the market to enable these producers to devote all of their time to farm operations would increase production volumes.
- The assessment by producers of their current markets is that they are far from ideal. They do not deliver the price or volume required to sustain farm operations without off-farm income. Furthermore, current markets are time consuming, particularly in the areas of marketing and sales, with transportation being both time-consuming and costly.

- There is strong interest by producers in pursuing the development of the Lower Mainland market. This market is perceived as being more aware of, and concerned with, purchasing healthy food that is raised / grown locally (meaning produced in BC). Producers also feel that Lower Mainland consumers understand and appreciate quality food products and have the financial means and willingness to pay for the true cost of these products.
- There is almost unanimous agreement that producers in the north do not have the expertise or time to understand and successfully develop the Lower Mainland market. Producers identified a number of potential approaches to market development and questions related to those approaches that require research and subsequent dialogue and decision-making before a path forward can be developed. There were questions around market intelligence, market identification, market size, transportation, storage, distribution, product branding, and the opportunity for collective or cooperative marketing and sales.
- There is significant support for exploring the establishment of an organization to take on all of the aspects of the work associated with market development, including market research, product development, market development, processing, packaging, branding, transportation, distribution, and payment to producers. Most producers feel that this organization had to be accountable to producers.
- Producers also identified a number of other issues that are having an impact on farm operations, including the cost and availability of farm labour, aging producers and succession planning, government regulations, and for meat producers, the shortage of abattoir facilities.

Critically, what emerged from this needs assessment and consultation is that market growth and development will only be successful if all aspects of the market development equation are addressed together. There is, in fact, a danger of approaching this opportunity on a piecemeal basis.

In summary, we know that the demand for quality food is increasing, and that many consumers are looking for quality 'local' food. We also know that there is significant opportunity to grow the agrifoods sector in northern BC, and that this opportunity will increase as climate change brings warmer temperatures and shorter winters to the region. Finally, this research has helped build an understanding of the agrifoods sector in northern BC; producers are small and have limited skills, expertise, and time beyond a focus on production. Taken together, these factors indicate that there is significant potential for growth in the northern BC agrifoods sector that will increase over time. However, nothing will happen without soil / land to table coordination of this potential.

## Growing the Lower Mainland / Metropolitan BC Markets

The findings from the consultation sessions point to a strong interest in pursuing market opportunities in the Lower Mainland and other metropolitan BC regions. The highest level of interest came from meat producers, particularly beef, lamb, and pork producers. There was also interest from produce producers for crops that would travel well, including root vegetables and brassicas (cauliflower, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, etc.). Value-added producers of products such as fruit preserves and honey also expressed a keen interest.

Producers in northern BC indicated that they felt that consumers in the Lower Mainland are more aware of and concerned with purchasing local food, meaning food raised or grown in BC. They also felt that Lower Mainland consumers understood and appreciated the value of local and specialized products and were more willing to pay the true cost of producing these products. For northern producers, accessing the Lower Mainland market has the potential for higher prices and increased revenue. For producers who must work off the farm to make ends meet, increased volume and revenue would mean the opportunity to farm full-time.

Despite the tremendous opportunity, northern BC producers identified several significant barriers to entering the Lower Mainland market. These included market intelligence, market research, market identification, transportation, storage, and distribution. For producers, the majority of whom are juggling off-farm employment with farm responsibilities, there is very little time available to research and plan for market development, growth, and expansion. While there is strong interest in pursuing the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market, most producers do not have the time or expertise to move on the opportunity.

The analysis of the findings of the consultation sessions led to the identification of a number of options for pursuing the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market, from the establishment of a comprehensive market organization to supporting producers to 'do it themselves'. Importantly, it will be the producers themselves who must make the final decision on which option will work for them.

To advance the understanding of the opportunities and challenges around accessing the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market, it will be necessary to continue the dialogue that began with the focus groups with northern BC producers. In order for producers to make informed decisions about the opportunity, the dialogue needs to be based on solid research and information: first, research and information to define the market opportunity and potential and second, ways in which this market could be accessed and pursued. This dialogue could be initiated at a conference or workshops that would re-engage those who participated in the focus groups and others.

For an informed dialogue to take place, and for producers to make decisions about pursuing this market opportunity, the following information needs to be available.

### 4.1 Define the Lower Mainland / Metropolitan BC Market Potential

The first phase of the dialogue would focus on the opportunities and potential of the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market. This dialogue must be informed by sound and comprehensive market research in order for northern producers to determine whether the Lower Mainland and other metropolitan regions of BC are desirable markets for their products.

The design of the market research project would need to consider the complexity of the northern BC agrifood sector. The three main questions would be 'which products', 'to which consumers' and 'at what price'. In terms of identifying potential products for the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market, the consultation sessions found that there is more interest and greater capacity among meat producers, especially beef, lamb, and pork.

A smaller number of produce producers also seemed ready to consider this opportunity for products that would travel well.

The questions of ‘to which consumers’ and ‘at what price’ are more complex, as they involve consideration of volume; marketing, branding, and packaging; transportation, storage, and distribution costs; as well as input costs for various geographic regions in northern BC. A model for this system would have to be developed as part of the market research study. For example, meat sold to grocery stores would require individual packaging and labelling, whereas meat sold to restaurants and specialty butchers would not. The implications of pursuing these different markets are important, and each of these markets would have to be identified, defined, and quantified.

## 4.2 Define Options for Pursuing the Lower Mainland / Metropolitan BC Market

Once a viable market has been identified, dialogue and discussion can turn to options for pursuing that market. The findings from the consultation sessions point to two broad approaches: the establishment of a comprehensive marketing organization and supporting producers to enter the market independently. Once again, the dialogue regarding these options must be informed by sound and comprehensive research in order for northern producers to determine which path to follow to pursue the market in the Lower Mainland and other metropolitan regions.

### 4.2.1 Establishing a Comprehensive Marketing Organization

A comprehensive and integrated marketing organization that would take on the responsibility for market research, market development, processing, packaging, branding, transportation, storage, distribution, and payments to producers was identified as one potential option for growing the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market. The advantage of such an organization would be that it would allow producers to focus on farm operations and production.

While seeing the benefit of this approach, there were several questions and concerns, including how the organization would be financed, who would run it, who it would be accountable to, how the quality and volume promised to consumers would be assured, and how much control the marketing organization would exert over farm operations in order to assure quality and volume. There was also discussion of potential models, including producer owned co-ops, a collaborative producer owned for-profit or not-for-profit marketing organization, and a collaborative producer- / consumer- owned marketing organization.

Currently, producers in northern BC do not have enough information about this option to have an informed dialogue, much less make any decisions about its feasibility and their willingness to participate. Thus, a comprehensive feasibility study would be a useful first step.

This will, undoubtedly, be a difficult conversation and decision for some producers. The consultation sessions raised concerns about the level of interference and loss of autonomy that often come with cooperative or collaborative marketing. On the other hand, there was also strong interest in enhancing revenue and profit and taking advantage of the power of working together to achieve better market outcomes. The answer to the question, “Is it worth it?” will be made on a producer by producer basis.

For this element of the research, there are a number of topics that would be important to address, including:  
Structure:

- Type of organization (non-profit, for profit)
- Ownership / membership
- Governance
- Management

- Mandate and scope
- Regional representation
- Sector representation
- Financing/funding
- Reporting/accountability

Agreements with Producers:

- Product volume
- Product quality
- Product inputs
- Production schedule
- Delivery or pick up dates / who is responsible for transportation
- Quality assurance / sampling / verification
- Pricing
- Payment

Agreements with Consumers:

- Product volume
- Product quality
- Quality assurance program
- Delivery or pick up dates / who is responsible for transportation
- Pricing
- Payment

Facilities (if applicable):

- Production (processing or value-added)
- Packaging / branding
- Storage and distribution
- Transportation

There are a number of organizations in Canada and beyond that may serve as potential models for the marketing organization. These include the Union de Producteurs Agricoles (UPA) in Quebec and the Organic Meadow Cooperative in Ontario.

#### *4.2.2 Support Producers to Enter the Lower Mainland / Metropolitan BC Market Independently: To “Do it Themselves”*

Establishing a comprehensive and integrated marketing organization to handle northern BC agrifood products would be the most efficient and effective approach to accessing and expanding the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market. Furthermore, this approach would address producers concerns about the lack of time they have available to develop and pursue new markets. However, given the possible trade-offs in terms of operational autonomy and interference, this option may not be the choice of northern producers.

In the absence of a comprehensive and integrated marketing organization, a second option would be to provide access to specific and discrete services that would allow producers to access the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market. Producers could access these services on an as needed basis. It is assumed that costs would be attached to these services.

The findings from the consultation suggest that there are two critical areas of support that must be addressed simultaneously for northern producers to pursue the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market; transportation and distribution and market research and intelligence.

### A Transportation and Distribution System for Northern BC Products

One critical area of support would be to develop a plan for a transportation and distribution system that producers could access to get their goods to market. This would address the concern that producers have regarding the time away from the farm to deliver goods to the consumer.

The scope and scale of the system required would depend on the volume and frequency of transport. This could range from an approach that would accommodate a high volume of product on a regular basis to one that would make sense for sporadic delivery of small volumes. Options could include:

- Negotiating a contract with a food distribution company, such as Sysco, that delivers food to northern grocery stores and restaurants to take products back to the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC;
- Establishing a northern BC food distribution company that is small, nimble, and focused solely on food transport;
- Establishing a “delivery-share” system whereby a producer who is making a trip to the Lower Mainland notifies other producers in the sector or region and “piggybacks” their deliveries, sharing the cost of the trip.

For some options, distributing the goods to consumers in the Lower Mainland could be included in the delivery contract. For others, a separate contract to move the goods from a central location in the Lower Mainland to individual consumers may be required.

### Market Research and Market Intelligence for Northern BC Products

A second critical area of support would be to develop options to supply market research and intelligence for northern BC products. This market research should include information on broad markets (i.e. restaurants, specialty retail, markets such as Granville Island), what the market is looking for, volume required, quality required, and specific contacts. This information would make it relatively easy for a northern BC producer to make contact with a potential client.

## 4.3 Action Plan: Next Steps for Producers Interested in the Lower Mainland / Metropolitan BC Market

The next step to support producers interested in pursuing the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market would be to organize a conference to further information sharing and dialogue about this opportunity. The conference agenda would include presentations and dialogue to provide information on the topics outlined above. It would also be an opportunity to bring in speakers from organizations and producer groups that could serve as a model to share their experiences.

Preparing for the conference would require the preparation of market research or discussion papers that would address each of the three main topics: defining the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market, establishing a comprehensive marketing organization, and supporting producers to enter the market independently.

In addition to independent producers, it will be important to include producer organizations in this dialogue as they may prove key to assessing the interest of their members and the direction they wish to take. Producer

organizations could also play a role as a communications conduit as plans are developed and systems are designed.

From this conference, next steps in the development of the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market for northern BC agrifoods could be determined.

## Growing Regional Markets

The findings from the consultation sessions revealed that there is also an interest among northern BC agrifood producers in expanding regional markets. This interest came primarily from very small producers and those who grow crops that do not travel well (e.g. microgreens, lettuce, spinach, etc.).

Currently, most of these producers sell their product at their local farmers' market. While many were happy with this venue, several indicated that there are challenges with respect to the rules set by the BC Association of Farmers Market (BCAFM). Furthermore, there was some interest among these producers in exploring other potential markets for their products.

To support these producers, it would be beneficial to pursue a change in the rules governing the BCAFM and to research examples of other potential markets for their products.

### 5.1 Challenges with the Rules Around the BC Association of Farmers' Markets

Northern BC producers in smaller communities spoke to the small size of their local farmers' market as a limitation on the volume of product they produce. Many indicated that they would like to make the trip to larger centres (e.g. Terrace, Prince George) to sell at the farmers' market there. For many, however, the travel cost and the time away from the farm was very difficult.

Several suggested that it would be beneficial if farmers' markets would allow a 'combined/shared table' featuring goods from several producers in a region. This way, the producers could take turns going to the larger market, rather than each having to go individually. Currently, however, the approval of a shared table is at the discretion of the local market, and is often rejected.

Producers indicated that it would be beneficial for them if shared tables would be automatically approved.

### 5.2 Other Regional Markets for Small Producers

Some small producers indicated an interest in learning more about market options that would provide access to their products every day of the week. For these producers, models such as Long Table Grocery in Quensel or Cariboo Growers in Williams Lake (which is now winding down) may provide information, insight, and inspiration regarding this potential.

A case study of these, and other similar markets, would provide the basis for dialogue and decision-making around the potential of this model in other communities.

### 5.3 Action Plan: Next Steps for Producers Interested in Growing Regional Markets

The next step to support producers interested in expanding regional markets would be to communicate with the BCAFM about their "shared table" policy. It will be important for the BCAFM to ensure that producers are aware of any changes to these policies.

With regard to opportunities for developing other local/regional markets, the case studies could provide a starting point for those who are interested in this option.

## Developing a Unique Northern BC Product: Grass Fed Beef and Lamb

Beef and lamb producers spoke to a growing interest in grass-fed animals and indicated that northern BC had the potential to be well-positioned in this market. This is due to the fact that feed grain is expensive in this region, so most producers raise their animals on grass.

At the same time, they acknowledged that market acceptance of this product is hindered by the perception that the meat has a “strong” taste.

This points to an opportunity to support research and development of a unique product in a growing global market and could produce world-class grass fed beef and lamb.

Research into breeds and feed that would produce a “milder” tasting grass fed product could be the key to unlocking a significant market for northern BC producers. Working with agricultural scientists, producers could experiment with combinations that would produce meat that would be more widely acceptable to consumers.

Just as an aside, it is worth noting that one butcher on Granville Island is sourcing grass fed lamb from Wales.

### 6.1 Action Plan: Next Steps for Developing Grass Fed Beef and Lamb

The next step in developing world-class grass fed beef and lamb would be to assemble a research team of interested producers and agricultural scientists who would work on the challenge of producing grass fed beef and lamb that would be more widely acceptable to consumers.

## Laying the Foundations for the Future

The findings from the consultation sessions point to a need for attention to laying the foundations for the future of agriculture in northern BC. Specifically, there is a need for policies and actions that will address the need for farm labour and for succession planning in farm ownership.

There is a need for comprehensive approach to attracting and retaining young people in the agricultural sector. This approach needs to include consideration of education, training, full-time employment, and the ability to earn a living wage. It may also include mechanisms to transition into land ownership for those who wish to pursue this.

The timing for programs to engage young people in agriculture is critical, as many long-time farmers of the baby boom generation are hoping to retire soon and would like to sell their land. Unfortunately, young buyers often do not have the capital or credit to buy the land. In some countries, there are programs that make it easier for young local farmers to acquire farm land. There is the potential for BC to look at these examples and potentially develop programs of its own.

### 7.1 Action Plan: Next Steps for Laying the Foundations for the Future

The next steps in attracting and retaining young people in the agricultural sector could entail convening a committee to look at all aspects of agricultural labour workforce development. This would include identifying jobs in the sector, barriers to recruiting for those jobs, and education programs for those jobs. Committee members could include representatives from the agricultural sector and from education.

The next steps for succession planning for farm ownership could include a review of policies in other jurisdictions around the world and the development of policies and programs for BC. As a starting point, a report prepared by the CDI for the Real Estate Institute of BC entitled *Non-Resident Property Ownership Policies: Agricultural Policies from Around the World* may be informative.

## Conclusion

The findings from the *Northern BC Agrifood Industry Needs Assessment and Supports* identified a number of programs and supports that could assist northern BC agrifood producers and facilitate growth and development of the agricultural sector in the region. The *Action Plan for Delivery of Programs and Assistance* recognizes that, while some producers are of a size to be ready for entry into the Lower Mainland / metropolitan BC market, others are smaller and are looking for options to expand their regional market potential.

The *Action Plan for Delivery of Programs and Assistance* also identified the potential for northern BC to develop a world class product in a growing market sector: grass fed beef and lamb. These products have the potential to help define BC products around the world.

Finally, the *Action Plan for Delivery of Programs and Assistance* speaks to the need focus attention on laying the foundation for the future of agriculture, first by ensuring that the sector has access to and can attract and retain skilled workers, and second, by developing programs that facilitate succession planning for retiring farmers and access to farm land for young farmers.

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- There strong potential for northern BC to develop a world class product in the rapidly growing global market for grass fed beef and lamb. This potential could be furthered through assembling a research team comprised of producers and agricultural specialists to determine the breeds and feeds that would produce a more universally acceptable grass fed product.
- There is a need to attend to ensuring that the foundations for the future of the agrifoods sector in northern BC are supported through policies and programs that can support attracting and retaining young people to work in the sector and ensure that they can access and purchase farm land.

Critically, what emerged from the development of this action plan is the need for more information, and following that, more dialogue on the options and possibilities for the northern BC agrifoods sector. The increasing demand for food and growing interest in high quality, locally produced food, makes this a time of opportunity for northern BC producers.



## The Community Development Institute at the University of Northern British Columbia

The Community Development Institute (CDI) at UNBC was established in 2004 with a broad mandate in the areas of community, regional, and economic development. Since its inception, the CDI has worked with communities across the northern and central regions of British Columbia to develop and implement strategies for economic diversification and community resilience.

Dedicated to understanding and realizing the potential of BC's non-metropolitan communities in a changing global economy, the CDI works to prepare students and practitioners for leadership roles in community and economic development, and to create a body of knowledge, information, and research that will enhance our understanding and our ability to deal with the impacts of ongoing transformation. The Community Development Institute is committed to working with all communities – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – to help them further their aspirations in community and regional development.



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The Community Development Institute at  
The University of Northern British Columbia



3333 University Way, Prince George, BC CANADA V2N 4Z9  
Telephone: 1 (250) 960-5952 Email: [marleen.morris@unbc.ca](mailto:marleen.morris@unbc.ca)  
[www.unbc.ca/community-development-institute](http://www.unbc.ca/community-development-institute)

