

Overview of Agriculture and Food Production in the Kootenay Boundary Region of British Columbia.

The Kootenay Boundary region of British Columbia has a rich farming history and a diverse current agricultural culture and production which includes tree fruit, berries, diverse vegetables, poultry, beef, dairy (cow, goat and sheep), and greenhouses. Encompassing 9.4% per cent of the province and 4% of the population base, the region produces an impressive 3% of the gross farm receipts of British Columbia. The First Nations people of the area, followed by newcomers from many different countries have, over the centuries, contributed their knowledge and skills to work with the climate and resources of the region to supply the food needs of its inhabitants. As recently as the middle of the last century, much of the food consumed here was also grown or raised here, either wild or cultivated.

By the end of the twentieth century this had changed drastically and currently as much as 95% of the food consumed in our region is imported. This is due to several factors. Improvements in transportation to and within the region have facilitated the importation of food and other goods. The flooding of the Columbia Basin with the building of several dams in the region in the 1960s meant the loss of much prime agricultural land as well as the loss of wildlife habitat and grazing lands for livestock. Federal government agricultural policy has a primary focus on large scale production which is perceived to benefit from "economies of scale". Such "economies" are simply not possible in a mountainous region where agriculture is, by necessity, small scale. It can also be a challenge to ensure that local government policy supports and does not hinder agriculture since historically the primary economic base of the region has relied on the resource extraction industry (forestry and mining).

However, with the increased awareness of issues relating to food access and safety, the demand for local farm product has been on a steady increase for the past decade. With regional food sales estimated in excess of \$150 million there is a great, untapped market close at hand for our region's farmers and other food producers. Area residents are seeking out local food and both independent and chain grocers have also become more and more receptive to supporting and promoting local agricultural product. In addition, numerous studies have also identified agriculture as a key to the economic, environmental and social sustainability and diversity that is sought by Kootenay Boundary residents.

Many of the challenges facing Kootenay Boundary farmers are common to farmers throughout the world: high input costs, increasingly unpredictable weather due to global warming, the resistance of "consumers" to value food highly, labour costs which cannot be covered by the prices set in the marketplace by global forces, a consuming public which is more and more ignorant of the realities of food production, including seasonal and bioregional circumstances.

Additional challenges for our region's farmers are related to geography: our region

comprises many small communities spread among the mountains. Each community provides only a small portion of the total market needed in order for a farm enterprise to be economically viable. The time and costs associated with taking product from one community to the next throughout the region adds an enormous burden to any food producer. Historically, it has been difficult to create and sustain collaboration and networks among the area farmers in order to facilitate this necessary distribution.

The opportunities associated with the Kootenay Boundary are also related to its geography: because most farms are small in size there has been virtually no large scale agriculture in most areas of the region. Both historically and currently, farming practices readily fall into what one would normally categorize as environmentally sustainable. There are two thriving farmer-driven organic certifying organizations in the region with an ever growing number of certified farms and processors.

Many of our farmers carry a vision of feeding local communities. However, this must be combined with a pragmatic approach which realizes that many residents in our region are "cash poor". Food producers and activists have been developing a co-operative marketing approach which will capitalize on the well-known beauty and "cleanliness" of the area to develop a niche market for Kootenay Boundary food, both within and external to the region.

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