

A Food Policy for Canada Report Back

Edmonton's "What's Your Recipe for a Better Food System?" Event

Edmonton, Alberta
September 13, 2017



Introduction

The purpose of this submission is to provide feedback from a regional level to send to the federal government as a means to better shape the National Food Policy (NFP) and ensure it reflects Edmontonians'/Canadians' values. The content of this report is a recording of a diverse group of organizations and individuals. Comments captured do not necessarily reflect the views or recommendations of the host organizations, nor do they represent a consensus. What we are presenting is a reflection of those in attendance in Edmonton at an event on September 13th, 2017. Many attendees represented an urban perspective and are not farmers or food producers, as these individuals were harvesting at the time of the event.

We all agree that a National Food Policy must include local, municipal, urban, rural and regional voices if it is to be relevant, realistic and feasible. We agree that there is a role for all types and sizes of farms and farmers to co-exist within a country the size of Canada. A National Food Policy should support local and regional food systems across Canada, and must surface regional innovations and practical, achievable ideas about how we can integrate considerations of equity, health and sustainability with economic growth strategies for food.

Background Information

Over the course of July, August, and the beginning of September, a group of food-focused organizations working in and around Edmonton consolidated their efforts to hold a regional consultation event on *A Food Policy for Canada* in order to submit a response to the Federal Government. The event was organized in accordance with toolkits created by Food Secure Canada and the Federal Government. The following organizations helped in this event's creation and execution: Alberta Food Matters, Alberta Flavour Learning Lab, Edmonton Food Council, University of Alberta's Sustainable Food Working Group, Alberta Agriculture and Forestry, and the City of Edmonton.

The variety of organizations were brought together through the strong network in the Edmonton region related to food. Edmonton's food system is burgeoning with exciting initiatives such as an edible forest being planted in our river valley, food delivery systems to seniors and the underprivileged, a potential new large-scale food hub, and policy development that allows for urban hens, bees, and gardens. Over the summer this team worked towards hosting a consultation event. On September 13th the event *What's Your Recipe for a Better Food System? Towards a National Food Policy* gave Edmontonians the opportunity to bring forward their perspectives and discuss

the NFP. The event was hosted at Edmonton's Food Bank (11434-120 Street NW) and brought together various members of the public to work through a world cafe-style engagement session. Invitees were contacted via the host organizations' networks and attendees included a variety of members from food production, distribution, policy, waste recovery, and the emergency food sector, as well as members of the general public. Approximately 62 individuals engaged in the event and their views are expressed within this report. Members of public who were not able to attend this event forwarded their concerns along to the host organizations to be included in the report. The following organizations were represented at this engagement event:

- Agricultural Research and Extension Council of Alberta
- Alberta Agriculture and Forestry
- Alberta Environmental Farm Plan
- Alberta Food Matters
- Alberta Human Ecology Association
- Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention
- Atco Blue Flame Kitchen
- Capital Region Board
- City of Edmonton
- Edmonton Food Bank
- Edmonton Northlands
- End Poverty Edmonton
- Food4Good Edmonton
- Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative
- Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT)
- Office of Sustainability, University of Alberta
- Shoots Urban Farm
- University of Alberta
- University of Alberta Campus Food Bank

The event introduced the proposed NFP, federal jurisdiction related to food, and the purpose of this consultation. After this opening, the group segmented into groups of 5-10 and discussed the five main questions posed by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in its consultation materials regarding *A Food Policy for Canada*.

Participants provided their individual feedback on these four topics through written notes and verbal group discussion. There were a variety of viewpoints. Some participants agreed with each other; some disagreed. These notes were compiled by a team of note takers and synthesized into this report.

QUESTION 1: What issues concern you the most when it comes to thinking about food? What are the opportunities?

Participants expressed a wide range of concerns, from the state of farming, to food insecurity in vulnerable populations, to the lack of resiliency and ecological health in our current food system. Participants shared concerns for the future of farmers, including those currently farming as well as new farmers, and farmers who operate at all scales and all methods of production. Some expressed a concern that there is too much corporate control over the food system, and the unknown role of the Innovation Superclusters Initiative (ISI). There were ecological concerns, including loss of productive, healthy soil, soil degradation, and habitat loss. Concerns were shared about the health of Canadians, that nutritious food is cheaper and more accessible than junk food, with resulting health issues such as diabetes and obesity which impact the health care system. Other concerns included food insecurity in vulnerable populations, access to healthy food in Indigenous communities, and access to affordable, nutritious food and food knowledge for all - including those in remote locations, those with mental health issues and disabilities, seniors, new immigrants, homeless and Indigenous Peoples. Participants shared the importance of poverty reduction because most barriers to accessing food are income-related. Concerns were shared about lack of transparency in how decisions are made around Canadian food, and a concern that decisions are driven by interest groups rather than based on facts. The lack of transparency in how food is labelled was also a concern. There is a lack of resiliency in our current food supply, and it is too clustered - it needs to be more evenly distributed across the country. Canadians are experiencing a loss/lack of food knowledge and food skills.

Participants saw a myriad of opportunities and long-term changes they would like to see happen. There is an opportunity to feed Canadians: an opportunity to have a National Food Policy that is based on the principles of equity and social justice, supported by community-based and participatory research with the most marginalized populations and active citizen engagement of members of these populations to create the most equitable and sustainable food system. There is an opportunity to provide improved access and choice when it comes to food (whether it is in terms of organic food, cost-effective choices, locally grown, etc.), to provide more opportunities to access locally grown/raised and farmer-direct food. There are opportunities for a new generation of farmers and to support current Canadian farmers (new, old, large, medium and small) and fill demands and needs of national and local markets. There are opportunities to encourage more food cooperatives. There are opportunities to re-localize food systems and develop regional cuisine, employment and placemaking/identity. In cities, there are opportunities to promote urban agriculture and incentivize small urban food businesses. There are opportunities to adapt to climate change and use more ecologically sound practices. There are opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing of all Canadians and to investigate nutrition policy. There are opportunities to focus on new technology and better science, and develop more efficient production methods that use less energy and resources.

QUESTION 2: How do you think the federal government could help increase access to affordable, nutritious and safe food?

Discussions on this question were wide-ranging and responses had the most variance. Access to food includes physical, economic, and social access. Addressing access to food must involve collaborations and partnerships between the federal government, volunteer/non-profit groups, local governments and local communities. Solutions must include, and be developed, with active engagement from our most vulnerable populations: children, the elderly, Indigenous communities, low-income Canadians, newcomers and refugees - populations who are invisible and have no or little voice at the "table", yet are most impacted by food policy and the food system. Solutions need to involve creating supportive environments for producers so all farmers can succeed. Solutions should include education, funding, research and innovation, and policy components. Solutions need to be designed with the recovery and diversion of wasted food in mind.

Some of the key ideas, with the clearest connection to the role of the federal government, included:

Governance and Policy

- **Strong political will and commitment from all levels of government.** What role does each level of government play? What role do public institutions play? What role does civil society play? A policy is useless without acknowledging and dividing up rights and responsibilities. But there needs to be an integrated approach as there are multiple players. Governance also needs to be reflexive and adaptable.
- **Addressing access to affordable, nutritious, healthy food as a human right.** A food policy needs to look at the population's health, particularly marginalized populations living in poverty, such as Indigenous Peoples and immigrant/refugees and newcomers. Not addressing the right to food at an individual, community and population level is a violation of human rights. Research has shown that poverty is the root cause of food insecurity and hunger. Policy needs to address this and rely less on charitable aid, as food banks and social agencies are not a long-term solution.
- **Funding food programs and developing policies that focus on children.** Health Canada has a mandate to promote healthy food to children. Canada needs a National School Food Policy or Program and ways to integrate food into the education system, with a focus on teaching students to be self-sufficient, to learn to cook and grow their own healthy food in an ecologically-sound way, and to understand the food system. Food marketing to children should be minimized or eliminated. Student nutrition programs need to be universally available, such as having a national school food program and/or government-funded lunch programs.
- **Create income-based and poverty-reduction solutions.** This ensures everyone has income to afford healthy food. The federal government needs to create a standard or basic guaranteed income that provides a living wage for all and allows people the freedom to choose and afford their own food.
- **Build/strengthen the social safety net.** Housing, childcare, increased social safety nets, income protection for precarious employment, basic guaranteed annual income – these foundations need to be in place so all Canadians are in a stable place where they can benefit from educational initiatives &

local initiatives. As one participant said, “In a precarious life it’s hard to focus on food security; food access will follow when basic needs are met.”

- **Demonstrate leadership over Indigenous Peoples’ access to food.** Indigenous Peoples should have access to their traditional foods – it should not be illegal to hunt.
- **Federal protection for agricultural lands and guidance over land-use as it relates to food access.** The federal government needs to develop land use policies to support the long term viability of agriculture. Sustainable resource management is fundamental to this, so in agriculture that would be agricultural land preservation - with the federal government taking this across the country (beyond BC, Ontario and Quebec). There needs to be federal protection or special treatment for areas that are zoned for agriculture in order to elevate the status of rural agricultural lands and urban agricultural lands. For example, in Northeast Edmonton, Alberta, a provincial highway is being built overtop of farmland where an established market garden operates.
- **Ensure access to primary resources.** From a land perspective, that means enabling new entrants’ access to land - which then leads to different land tenure arrangements that go beyond private ownership. For example, crown land could also be made available for food production by encouraging partnerships between people who are growing food and people with unused land.
- **Create an environment where all farmers can succeed** through tools such as subsidies, grants, or tax incentives. (Some participants specified small farms, some talked about organics, some talked about all kinds of farms; many said there should be support for Canadian farmers.) Some felt that the playing field is not level for all farmers, that small farmers need support to reach economies of scale and that the quota system is a barrier for entry. Some felt that the federal government needs to help producers lower their costs. The federal government needs specific programs and policies to support and encourage enhanced opportunities for new farmers, and to encourage current farmers to remain in the sector, and to make farm regulations that are farm-scale appropriate, including on-farm processing and on-farm slaughter. Some thought there should be more attention to small cooperatives and local farms.
- **Balancing global food exports with supporting local and regional food systems,** focusing on local food production and consumption without compromising international trade partnerships.
- **Unhealthy food is too easily accessible.** There was discussion on limiting marketing of junk food to kids and limiting sugar and salt in foods. Some felt that GMO products are unhealthy.
- **Packaging and labeling.** Requiring that labels clarify best before versus expiry dates, and offer more transparency about serving size, ingredients, and main nutritional qualities (e.g. sugar content). There should be standardization and education about the difference between a best before date and an expiry date.
- **Transportation.** This includes transportation between communities and around communities. For the elderly, mobility problems can reduce their access to food, so that's something that could be addressed through transportation.
- **Addressing northern food security.** Northern and remote communities have a need for healthy food, whether through **developing better transportation to and through northern communities** and ensuring the transport system can handle large amounts of food, and at affordable prices, or developing local solutions such as greenhouses, as a way to improve access to food. Solutions could also be subsidy based, such as subsidizing distribution to get food and resources to remote areas,

subsidizing local producers, or both. Research and technology could also help, such as developing new plant cultivars for Northern Canada.

- **Wasted food needs collaborative solutions that include local governments and community organizations.** Municipalities, farmers and volunteer organizations need policy support and funding to develop solutions for managing wasted food and diverting food out of the waste stream. Food should be channeled elsewhere and either redistributed or reused. Food that is still edible and nutritious can be gleaned. In order to distribute surplus food that is fit for human consumption, there needs to be support to develop linkages between organizations to donate food and those accepting donations, and infrastructure to facilitate this (e.g., cooling blankets, refrigerated trucks). In order to redistribute food that is not fit for human consumption, there needs to support for innovations and partnerships (e.g., partnerships between grocery stores and farms to feed unsaleable produce to livestock). Most food redistribution organizations are volunteer-based. The federal government needs to provide grants and funding so that these organizations so that they can establish core, dedicated, paid staff and equipment. Food banks even dump out a lot of food: 10-12 pallets a week, because they can't handle and manage food before it spoils. Some said that we should outlaw throwing away food in the supply chain, like France has done. We should encourage partnerships between grocery stores and agencies that need access to that food, and improve regulations to facilitate that and to cause laws to change in favour of those activities.

Funding, Subsidies and Incentives

- **Increase incentives for industry to grow and develop healthy options.** For example, support lettuce production in the way that wheat and other crops are supported, and help distribute food to remote areas.
- **Funding to make healthy food accessible.** The emergency food sector and community food programs are largely run by volunteers. As one participant said, "If the goal is to make healthy food accessible to those on the margins in society, it's going to have to be the federal government, not volunteers. What we're doing now doesn't work." One idea is to enable sales opportunities for farmers to sell to low income communities through subsidies.
- **Funding for research and innovation and supporting green jobs.** This includes hydroponics, learning to grow food in hostile environments such as brownfield sites, vertical farm, and greenhouse growing using sustainable wind and solar energy. This is particularly important in northern and rural communities and on reservations.
- **Subsidized food of a minimum quality.** This is similar to subsidized housing. For example: community food centres (a model that is established in Ontario and elsewhere), farmers' market vouchers, and a co-op model of food access. This is especially important for children, the elderly, and people living in poverty. Opinions were more varied on the subsidizing of healthy food through a "sin tax or "fat tax." Some said that a tax on specific products that are very clearly unhealthy (highly processed, sugary, fatty foods) could be used to subsidize healthy food (i.e. tax a Coke, but leave a burger alone as could provide protein). There is healthy debate on this and some questions came up: is it possible to have a "sin tax" that targets unhealthy food with the knowledge that lower-income people tend to buy cheaper, unhealthier food? There may be pushback from special interests, but it's important.

Knowledge, Transparency and Accountability

- **Transparency and accountability** when it comes to the relationships between government and industry is key to building public trust in the Canadian food system. This includes how the superclusters are operating and the relationship between large corporations and government.
- **Providing more support for food skills development** could improve the affordability of food, as people will be able to prepare nutritious meals from scratch. Others argued that research shows low income populations have the same level of food skills as those in other income brackets. If you only have access to unhealthy food options, it doesn't matter if you are food literate.
- **Providing awareness/education/information** to help shift attitudes, educate more on health/food literacy, and improve Canadians' knowledge about food (i.e.. What is healthy food and where does it come from?).
- **Breaking down the lack of deep awareness** among decision-makers and those actively involved in developing food system of the serious and harmful inequity tied to marginalized populations who live in chronic poverty. The lack of awareness leads to lack of action and deepens the negative impact on food insecurity on a multitude of children, youth and families.

Local Solutions & Collaboration with Local Communities

There was some discussion of local solutions - these require collaboration between federal and local governments, and/or community groups. Participants are proud of local initiatives in Edmonton that happen through the work of individual grassroots efforts, nonprofits, volunteers, municipal government, and provincial government. These include urban gardens and urban agriculture, fruit/edible forests, a growing local food scene, farmers' markets, food delivery to seniors, urban agriculture, backyard beekeeping, backyard hen keeping, and greenhouses. While these local solutions may be outside of federal jurisdiction, it is important to note that participants value the ability to access food in a diversity of ways in their home communities, and there needs to be federal awareness and support for this.

- **Community-based solutions.** The short term priority is to have a NFP based on the principles of equity and social justice, supported by community-based and participatory research with the most marginalized populations and the active citizen engagement of members of these populations to create the most equitable and sustainable food system.
- **Urban agriculture.** Regardless of the production system, urban agriculture addresses the first principle of "increasing access to affordable and nutritious food."It also uses land, soil and water resources efficiently (e.g., edible gardens instead of lawns). Education for urban gardening and urban agriculture is needed as there is land in urban communities that could be used for food production. It is important to build on the skills of immigrants and refugees who arrive with gardening, agriculture and food skills, but may not have access to land and other opportunities.
- **Addressing food deserts in the city.** Everyone should be within walking distance of a grocery store and have physical access to food. Planning and zoning changes to make sure that food deserts or other areas that lack access to quality food discourage unhealthy food options like fast food.

QUESTION 3: What health and food safety issues concern you the most when it comes to the food you eat?

Participants identified three key areas where they thought the Federal Government would be able to address their concerns related to the health and safety of their food.

- **The Canada Food Guide.** Participants thought that the Guide should be re-evaluated with a concerted focus on rooting it in objective science and avoiding bias within its creation. There must be an acknowledgement within the Guide that different people need different foods. The Guide should be altered to incorporate a more scientific and objective viewpoint before it is integrated into policy.
- **Transparency.** Here, the group focused more on the importance of agricultural traceability of products as well as increasing the accessibility of the language that is technically difficult for the average consumer to understand (e.g., comparing and contrasting the different forms of sugar). Participants also expressed that government needs to show that “it is not in industry’s pocket.”
- **Education.** More support should be given to the provinces to help educators teach students about labelling of food products as well as nutrition.

QUESTION 4: What concerns, if any, do you have about the environmental impact of the production of food, including farming, fishing, aquaculture, and food processing?

As a response to this question, participants listed multiple concerns with the environmental impacts caused by our food system.

- **Transportation.** Moving food and processing food both have significant environmental impacts. Incentivizing or de-incentivizing, could lower the carbon footprint of certain food industries (such as beef).
- **Deal with wasted food more effectively.** Completing the food cycle through redistributing food waste was identified as the most pivotal aspect of addressing this concern. Methods to deal with organic waste were also discussed, including large scale composting/anaerobic digestion and on-farm composting as part of more sustainable farming practices and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Regulations on producers.** Harmful chemicals in food production and distribution should be limited or eliminated through regulations. Organic certification should be more accessible and affordable for producers to spur growth in the organic food industry.
- **Address urbanization and sprawl.** These factors reduce valuable farmland around cities. Related points include the desire to see greater urban food production and a concern around the lack of incentives for young farmers today.
- **Education.** Participants saw education, especially educating adults, as a key way to address environmental concerns. Participants established that consumers and producers both needed education around the impacts of the food system.
- **Pesticide and fertilizer usage.** Perspectives varied on these topics. Some participants said that pesticides should be banned completely. Some said that pesticides and fertilizer usage should be reduced in order to conserve soil and water quality. Others said that pesticides and fertilizers are already checked and deemed safe (by Health Canada), and we must trust farmers, and give them the freedom to make the best decisions for their individual farms.
- **Biodiversity.** More biodiversity is needed in all our landscapes, urban and rural, in order to promote fertile soil and food growing spaces.

QUESTION 5: When it comes to growing more high-quality food in Canada, what initiatives do you think would help?

- **Incentivizing and disincentivizing.** These are the two most overt tools that could be used to encourage the growth of high-quality food in Canada.
 - Incentives that would support small to medium agriculture or locally focused producers were considered the most effective. Supporting **research and development technology**, as well as organic growers were also found to be important.
 - Participants wanted highly-processed foods and foods that are produced with the heavy use of chemicals to be disincentivized to support high-quality food in Canada.
- **Flexibility and new production methods.** The policy needs to allow permission enough to allow for change in what is grown, how it is grown, and for new forms of production methods. Each section must be competitive with other countries.
- **Diversifying crops vs. single commodity growers.** The government should provide incentives to farmers to grow a different crop in their rotation, such as pulses, so that producers would feel confident to take on the risks associated with a different crop that also provides some ecological benefits. This could help farmers diversify and provide better rotations.
- **Education and transparency.** This can be achieved through labelling and connecting consumers with where their food comes from. Overall, labelling could educate the public about the food grown in Canada and reinforce its significance to the national food system.