

Opinion: The case for more local food production in B.C.

BY JACK WONG, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 30, 2015

true



Chris Bodnar sells Swiss chard at the Langley Farmers Market.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, Vancouver Sun

B.C.'s vibrant agricultural industry is expected to generate \$14 billion annually for the province's economy by 2017.

This will come mostly through the export of fruit, vegetables, poultry, dairy and beef to global markets that recognize B.C. for food quality, safety and wholesome choices.

While the agri-food industry is a huge economic engine for B.C., what is the potential for local food production? How can the larger food industry work in tandem with local producers to ensure there's enough food for everyone?

There's no doubt that interest in and demand for local food in B.C. is on the rise. For many of us, an heirloom tomato grown by a local farmer is worth a premium price above a tomato produced and transported from far away that may lack the taste, freshness and rich colour of a local variety. The simple act of eating and connecting to one's dinner has given rise to the "locavore" food culture that celebrates the vineyards of the Okanagan, mutton butchered on Salt Spring Island, or fresh blueberries picked in Langley.

But locally produced food faces threats. Farmers are growing older: the average age of B.C. farmers is over 57 years and only six per cent of all farmers are under 35 years of age. One in four family farms has shut down over the past decade. What will happen to our farmland and locally grown food without a new generation of farmers to cultivate it?

For the past year, the Real Estate Foundation of B.C. has worked to better understand the potential for

local and sustainable food systems. We worked with the Vancouver Foundation on a survey and found virtually all British Columbians polled think it is very important that B.C. produces enough food to prevent our dependence on imports from other places; 81 per cent think B.C. agriculture is important because it is a renewable, sustainable industry that can help address climate change and 82 per cent think B.C. farmland is a vital public asset.

We recently travelled the province and listened to food leaders — producers, local government, educators, health authorities — and others connected to it describe how they envision food systems in their regions, what capacity there is, what resources and information currently exist, and what is most important to act on.

We were encouraged by the many things already happening in communities, but were also surprised by the lack of coordination and communication occurring between small and large producers. A majority of the food activity in B.C. is generated by large scale agri-business and government operations, and smaller producers are not at the table.

Participants told us they wanted more education about the value of sustainable local food systems, both for the public and decision makers. People working in local food production wanted to expand local infrastructure for food processing, storage and distribution. They wanted more support for new and established farmers and hoped government would protect and maintain access to agricultural land and water around the Province.

For instance, B.C. farmers' markets' sales have exploded by 147 per cent from \$46 million to \$113 million, between 2006 and 2012.

Jobs are also growing in areas such as local food production, processing, trade and service, and food policy. For example, a 2014 Vancouver Economic Commission study found Vancouver's food sector experienced a 21-per-cent increase in jobs between 2010 and 2013. In Abbotsford, sales at farm gates are estimated to support almost 4,000 full-time jobs, with an additional 7,340 jobs with secondary impacts from agricultural wages and revenues spent in the community.

So we know the local food industry is growing. And we think the two sub-sectors can operate in tandem, as we heard during our conversations that the proverbial pie should continue to expand both locally and globally. However, there is an opportunity to create a larger appetite, if you will, for local B.C. food, and to provide more education around key features of a local food economy, such as its importance to the local economy, where to find it, or why it may cost more than foreign imports. And we also need to support the next generation of farmers to support local food production.

Since building the local market for B.C. foods is a key component of the government's agricultural plan and makes sense for all British Columbians, we welcome collaborations with government, industry, non-profits and farmers to increase local food production, find innovative ways to increase demand and ensure more local food gets served to British Columbians.

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