



Building a Robust, Sustainable Local Food System

Working Paper #1:
**Local Food Storage Infrastructure:
Capacity and Needs in the Capital Region**
for
Discussion at the
Regional Food Leaders Roundtable
Planning Meeting
May 8, 2024

Prepared by

Patricia Reichert, Doctor of Interdisciplinary Social Studies & CSG Co-Facilitator

Christina Peacock, CSG Co-Facilitator

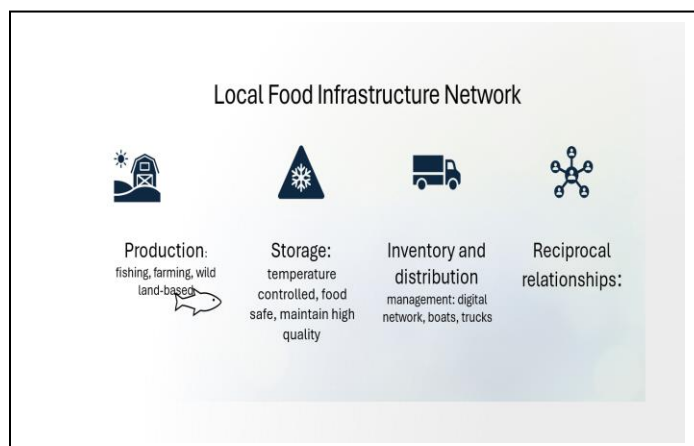
This working paper provides information we have gathered about the storage that is available at local food hubs in the region—both non-profit and independent commercial. To date we have interviewed seven local food hub managers about their food storage and what is needed from their different perspectives. These hubs are located across the Capital Region from Galiano Island through to Esquimalt. We will continue to gather information as local food infrastructure planning and development progresses. At present there are no food hubs in the western part of the region.

This paper will inform and support the discussion among local food leaders at the May 8 meeting with a focus on: 1) creating a network that strengthens our working relationships and shared goals; and 2) building consensus on specific priorities for increasing local food storage capacities for the region.

The overall aim is to expand local food infrastructure so that we can create a robust and reliable local food procurement system in the Capital Region.

The information and analysis presented here takes into account priorities identified in regional symposia and other roundtable discussions we have organised in the past. The analysis is also informed by a survey we conducted with 99 local food farmers, fishers, independent processors, grocers, and food hub service providers as part of CSG’s ongoing participatory and collaborative action initiative. (See the Closing the Supply Gap (CSG) website closingthesupplygap.com)

The biggest barrier to building a sustainable local food system in Canada is the lack of local food infrastructure. Here in British Columbia—and specifically in what is called the Capital Region—we are making some headway in addressing this problem.



In this region we are at the cusp of needing core infrastructure that supports a *reliable local food supply chain and local food procurement system.*

In terms of taking action in the progression toward a robust local food supply chain, there is some urgency to put in place the infrastructure needed to ensure local food procurement for the school meal program that is rolling out in all school districts. There are an estimated 40,000 children attending these schools in the Capital Region. Without a local procurement system it will be difficult if not impossible to supply a significant quantity of local food to the school districts, as articulated by the government of BC.

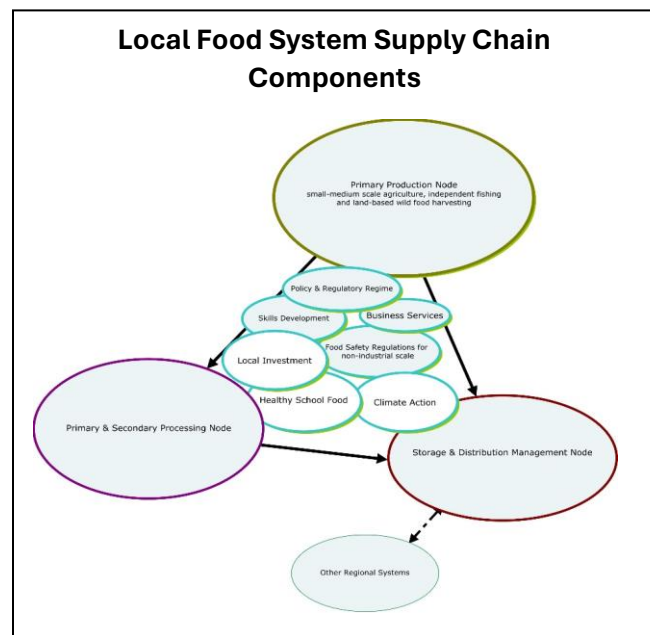
A local food procurement system is a key link in:

- regional sustainable development and regional economic benefits
- achieving food justice and sovereignty,
- supplying local food for the school meal program in the four school districts in the region,
- climate action
- securing local food for emergency situations

At CSG roundtables involving food leaders from across the region, the need for local food storage has topped the list of priorities, while maintaining a systems approach. This model shows the network of infrastructure components that are the foundation for the system. Within CSG the process for creating it is collaborative.

Learning about local food storage from food hub managers in the region

In the interviews with food hub managers we gathered information based on their in-depth knowledge and experience about:



- the amount and characteristics of the storage at each location,
- the unmet needs for more storage at each location,
- their general understanding of local food storage for different types of local foods in the different communities that each is serving, and
- their capacity to address those needs from within the region.



Key Interview Results

In general, the interviews are building a unique and valuable bank of shared knowledge about local food storage in the region that is foundational for development of a reliable local food procurement system.

Local food storage is at a premium across the region. The good news is that local food storage is increasing due to the work of local food hubs and the increasing services they are offering. The continuing need is underlined by reports from two of the newest food hubs in the region that even though they only started delivering services within the past couple of years, the storage they have is already at capacity.

In the case of one of these new hubs, the storage they provide is *purpose-built* and entirely new in the region. The land and buildings at this facility are owned outright by the non-profit organisation that operates it. It serves their defined community and includes the full range of temperature control from two types of ambient to walk-in cooling, to blast chilling, to ongoing walk-in and container freezing. This facility has the capacity to add significant dedicated container storage and would need funding to invest for the containers and their operation. Importantly, for the most part the hydro service is available to support current plus incremental storage. This facility is also working in the community to establish an emergency supply of food. This work is in the fledgling stage but the idea is to involve interested farmers who will store local food on their sites using a pod configuration across the locality.

The other newest hub has a combination of purpose-built walk-in cooling and freezing that it is renting from another organisation in a shared facility using a lease agreement with the non-profit owner. It also has some ambient storage as well as additional fridges. It could increase access to walk-in cooling storage minimally in cooperation with the other organisation on their site. For the most part, though, the storage is at capacity. Storage investment at this hub would have to include hydro upgrade.

A third hub is in the process of increasing its service capacity generally including more storage that will minimally meet their current storage needs for the services they are offering. They are moving into a different *community-based* facility that is being repurposed. The facility holds the potential of providing more space at a later date. The cooling storage is provided with fridges and freezers.

A fourth hub cooperative has a limited amount of temperature controlled storage in different community buildings, including a small amount of purpose-built refrigeration/freezing that is used during market days and for constrained times in

the fall. The manager feels there is potential for providing access to more winter produce across its locations if there was appropriate storage that could maintain quality/nutrition.

A fifth hub cooperative shared that most of the on-farm storage among its members meets only short term needs. Temperature controlled storage in those venues is temporary only and involves high carbon use. There is some centralised storage in their delivery chain but for the most part it's short-term and mostly not temperature controlled. This hub is likely handling a high volume of local food among the hubs.

A sixth hub has no food storage facilities at the present time. There is important and increasing food production on the site, however. They reported that the site has significant appropriate space that could be used for purpose-built local food storage. This site is still in development and strategic priorities are still being established. The site is owned by a local government and a non-profit organisation operates it.

The information we gathered affirms that most new local food storage is place-based, intended to meet real-time local needs. In some locations the storage is serving both local food and charitable food acquired from the industrial food system. The potential to increase storage is under consideration in all locations. Direct links to farmers are either established or being established. Three of the facilities are also connecting with processors, and two are connecting with preparation of school food. *A significant gap is that none of the facilities is providing storage and distribution for local fishers' catches.*

There is a persistent need for both place-based local food storage and regionally shared storage.

As already noted, the local food hubs in this region have storage for some of the local food related directly to their everyday services. There are a couple of exceptions that provide some storage for local fresh food for use through the winter or store local food that has had some primary processing, such a frozen berries, and meat.

What we know

- **Most farmers in our 2018 focus groups said their capacity to increase production is constrained by lack of shared infrastructure including warehouse space for co-packing and distribution, coolers, trucking, and storage.**
- **In our 2022 survey, fishers said they need dockside storage and other community-based infrastructure in order to sell more of the catch into local communities.**
- **In our 2022 survey, farmers identified external storage, co-packing, and distribution coordination as key needs.**



For the most part, though, there is a large gap in longer-term storage for local food. *This gap is a barrier to increased production and to establishing a reliable, resilient local food supply chain.*

Developing more storage would fill a major gap in the ability to provision local food across the region and through all seasons. Such storage would maintain fresh food and accommodate primary processed foods—frozen and lightly processed fruits and vegetables, frozen meat and fish.

There is some potential for addressing this gap, with two reasonably good possibilities noted in our interviews. One is to tap into the storage owned by a Capital Region independent business that is currently serving Vancouver Island and beyond. We are told that this facility has a full range of temperature control and management inventory.

The second is to explore the possibilities for developing a *local food* purpose-built, bulk storage facility on the peninsula with the capacity to store *locally* farmed, fished, and primary processed foods from across the region. Ideally, such a facility would operate on cost-plus basis as publicly owned or a cooperative so that the margins of producers', fishers', and primary processors' could be maintained or increased while the system moves away from the current dependence on industrial foods. One of the four local governments on the peninsula has already invested in local food production and two of the others have conducted feasibility studies for local food hubs. There is also experience among these local governments in working collaboratively to support other public services.

With so many local food storage gaps across the region, networking across existing organisations and strategic planning could maximise resources.

Local food systems offer not only experience and knowledge having to do with increasing ecological and social sustainability but also offer the promise of increasing food security by supporting *food sovereignty* public policies. Supplying the school food program with local food is one example of the immediate potential in this regard.

Food system research here and elsewhere indicates this approach would increase local economic benefits, food equity, and both environmental and social resilience.

A distinct change and advantage for the food hubs we spoke with is that they all have (relatively) secure tenure in their facilities. A couple of them own their facilities outright. One has a secure lease agreement with a larger non-profit organisation. And others are in community facilities on publicly-owned land.



Secure tenure is a major achievement through the past few years. It signals a maturity in the fledgling local food supply chain that is in development and potential for more local investment. It also signals an increased interest expressed by some local governments in the local food system as a whole.

Developing quality local food storage that serves the region as whole would support existing more localised infrastructure. Based on our interviews and prior collaborative roundtables, formal and informal networking among the local food hubs could bring their wealth of knowledge and experience together to create the reciprocal relationships so vital in a local food system. It is this networking that could open the door further into a *local food supply chain*.

Unfortunately, the fishing sector is often not included in local food system planning. The exception is among First Nations and other Indigenous governing organisations. The heartbreaking part of leaving fish out of the planning is that most of the fish and seafood caught in the waters around Vancouver Island are exported. There is very little infrastructure that supports access of independent fishers to the local marketplace.

School food funding, climate action, and emergency response capacity provide significant opportunities for advancing local food system development. Buried in the changes we're seeing in the local food hub sector are changes in public policies and community awareness that are key to leveraging investment in local food system infrastructure. The unreliability of the industrial food supply chain and the increasing fragility of our environment have become apparent right here in our province. Increasing costs for industrial food are negatively impacting most people in our midst and making healthy school food for children an imperative. Collaborating among local food leaders and reaching out to other groups in our communities can bring real strength to robust and resilient local food infrastructure. Without exception, our interviews showed that people are working hard to plan and find funding for local infrastructure. Networking could increase this capacity.

Fresh, local food provides a high level of nutrition. A local food system reflects the values of the place where it is produced. In a sustainable, values based local food supply chain the practices that are used by farmers, fishers, and processors are transparent. The scale of production in our region respects the ecological capacity of the place, and respects the diversity of cultural mores of people living in the region. Experts estimate that a local food system doubles the economic returns it brings to the region. Together, these factors form the foundation for food sovereignty which is the foundation of food security.



Meeting May 8, 2024, 1:00-3:00 p.m. via Zoom

At our meeting on May 8 we will discuss infrastructure strategic planning. In advance, please consider these questions:

- How does this information resonate for your organisation?
- What does networking with other food hubs in the region mean to you?
- How do we ensure that we are not missing opportunities or creating unhelpful duplication?
- What more do we need to know for the next action?
- Who else in our communities do we need to involve in this conversation?

