

# Towards a Regional Food System Alliance Development Strategy for the West Kootenay - **Recommended Next Steps** (November 2011)

The West Kootenay is home to a diverse community of individuals, businesses and organizations who contribute to the production, processing and distribution of food for local consumption. All combined, these efforts, their accompanying relationships, and the very act of eating, make up what can be referred to as our 'food system'. In recent years, the contribution of local food systems to health and well-being, the environment, the economy and culture has become widely accepted to be of paramount importance.

But how do we define this 'system', and, as with any system, how do we identify the relationships within it to make sure that the system is functioning in the best interest of the people it serves?

With no efforts currently underway in the region to consistently bring together this community of food system 'stakeholders', we believe a regional food system alliance is an ideal forum to help enhance our regional food supply. It was this interest which motivated this committee and regional partners to support and commission the report - *Towards a Regional Food System Alliance Development Strategy for the West Kootenay*. The report has since inspired the following vision and recommendations.

## **Strategic Vision**

We recognize an insatiable appetite among residents in the West Kootenay to support and be a part of a thriving local food system.

Our most important resources to realize this vision of a thriving local food system are the people and community-driven interests already present among the many food focused initiatives in the region. The West Kootenay is home to Canada's largest and most-successful independent consumer-owned retail food co-operative, Canada's first accredited food hub, and Canada's first community supported agriculture (CSA) projects for grain! Clearly, cooperation and community are two values rooted strongly within our West Kootenay culture. With such a diverse history of growing, hunting, fishing, gathering and processing a significant percentage of the food which once sustained the population, this region is ready to become an even greater beacon to the world of how food can become the catalyst for enriching culture, respecting local ecosystems; improving the health and well-being of our residents; and, becoming a primary driver of the local economy.

However, despite the many individuals, producers, processors, distributors, retailers, restaurants and caterers operating in the region today, there is no single locus of activity to connect together all of these initiatives to each other and to the rest of the regional community. Similarly, among the food and agricultural community, there is a well recognized lack of infrastructure for processing, storage, distribution and marketing. There are inadequate vehicles for networking and education and no overarching vision that brings people together resulting in an absence of a unified voice on issues of regional significance. A new and long term initiative is greatly needed to address these gaps and opportunities.

Throughout Canada and the United States, many organizations have been successfully demonstrating the positive outcomes that can be found from encouraging more coordination and stronger relationships within a food system. Often, these efforts have successfully enabled a community to identify just *what* the food system is and the opportunities to be found within it. With many models to look to for inspiration, Jon Steinman

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carried out research into how food system organizations function and how they are structured (their form). With that research now complete, this committee believes that the best strategy forward is to determine the function(s) of this hoped-for regional food system organization before determining its form. Having also assessed the range of functions which food system organizations often adopt, we've concluded that the greatest opportunity for our regional food system is through healthy economic development. We believe this should become the primary focus of a West Kootenay regional food system alliance.

By 'economic development', we are referring to a sustained effort among all people within the region to support and develop the infrastructure, knowledge and skills, necessary to increase the amount of food produced in the region. It's also essential that this effort be informed by and contribute to an ecosystem-centred approach, culture, health and social well-being. Namely, we believe that through better coordination among individuals, organizations, governments and businesses, a regional food system alliance becomes an exciting tool which could carry out a mandate to take on, stimulate, and/or partner on activities which capture the millions of food dollars leaking out of the region

every year. What do we mean by 'leakage'? Using data developed by Oregon State University for Lane County, Oregon, we're able to estimate that West Kootenay residents annually spend in the neighbourhood of \$266 million on food. If only 5% of that is spent locally (as is the case in Lane County), we feel it's safe to conclude that the amount of money pouring out of this region via our food expenditures is both shocking and incredibly exciting.

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*(\*estimates based on data from Market Analysis for Local Food Products in Lane County, Oregon State University 2010)*

We are therefore proposing that this process of developing a regional food system alliance enter into a new stage of research and subsequent development. A three-phased approach is recommended and outlined on the following page.

### **Food System Alliance**

Despite the process thus far having been labelled as the development of a food "council", we are recommending that the intended outcomes of this process be referred to as a 'Food System Alliance'.

### **Vision**

*(We propose the following Vision to guide subsequent phases of development and the anticipated Food System Alliance)*

The Food System Alliance envisions a West Kootenay food system that shows an increase in the percentage of locally produced food each year, is robust and versatile in the face of ecological and economic pressures, and is an inspiration for a vibrant and resilient culture of food in other regions.

### **Mission**

*(We propose the following Mission to guide subsequent phases of development and the anticipated Food System Alliance)*

The mission of the Food System Alliance is to:

- support and facilitate activities that encourage individuals, businesses and institutions to buy food products from local sources, thus retaining economic wealth within the region;
- facilitate dialogue and collaboration, and bring together community resources to maintain and enhance the health of the region's food system;
- promote and celebrate West Kootenay food producers and stakeholders and establish the region as a model for a vibrant local food system.

## Recommended Next Steps



**Phase 1** – a) Coordinate and initiate a Local Food Market Analysis. b) Research best practices and feasibility for producing an annual West Kootenay Local Food Guide and companion guide for businesses and institutions. c) Consult with Tides Canada on how a yet-to-be-formed regional food organization might best position itself to benefit from its services.

### a) Local Food Market Analysis

A local food market analysis would identify approaches to localize the food system. In particular, it would identify economic development opportunities created by local food production and consumption.

To help establish an organization as a stimulator of economic development within a region's food system, the ability to set benchmarks and tangible goals appears to be necessary. An excellent example of a local food market analysis was produced by the Community Planning Workshop at the Community Service Center at Oregon State University. OSU conducted a Local Food Market Analysis for Lane County and published its findings in September 2010. The report "proposes implementation strategies that the private sector, local governments, and non-profits should consider in achieving the goal of increasing local production and consumption of food products". The study specifically focuses on what can be achieved within the next one to five years.

Examples of some of the implementation strategies identified in the OSU report include: Create a Local Food Coordinator Position to Link Buyers and Growers; Develop Tomato, Bean and Squash Co-Pack Facilities; Encourage Processor- and Distributor Supported Agriculture; Develop Controlled Atmosphere Storage Capacity; and, Increase Wheat Milling and Storage Operations.

Using the many already-established models for conducting local food market analyses, this phase would involve coordinating a West Kootenay analysis with local and/or non-local partners and identify what external funding is required to carry out the project.

### **Points of Interest from *Market Analysis for Local Food Products in Lane County (2010)***

- Expanded local food production potentially provides new jobs and keeps money in the local economy.
- An Iowa study concluded that if Iowans were to purchase seven servings of fruits and vegetables locally for just three months of the year, the direct and indirect economic benefits would amount to the creation of almost 6,000 jobs (equivalent of 1 job per 500 residents).
- Every percentage point of the food market that can be produced locally is worth \$11.7 million dollars to Lane County's economy.

### **b) Annual Local Food Guides – Best Practices and Feasibility**

Inspired by the success of the Willamette Farm and Food Coalition's Locally Grown guide (among many other successful models abroad), a West Kootenay Local Food Guide would be a significant driver of the local food economy and offer a strong tool to communicate the intent of a regional alliance seeking to unify all parts of the food system. The guide would inherently communicate what the regional 'food system' is and help begin the process of establishing the West Kootenay as a home to a distinct and identifiable culture of food. Included would be; editorial content on food system issues; farm listings; seasonal crop availability charts; U-pick guides; community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives; restaurants, caterers and retailers carrying local products; processors; farmers' markets; books, films and resource listings; children and youth programs; and a directory of food system or related organizations in the region. The guide could also act as a communication tool for the food system alliance which we propose would house this initiative. The guide could be offered in both print and searchable on-line formats and would look to partner with some of the more locally-specific guides already in production throughout the region (i.e. Creston Valley, Slocan Valley, West Kootenay Food Directory).

Annual food guides require dedicated and consistent oversight to make sure that the guide remains up to date. This phase would involve more in-depth research into best practices for producing a local food guide and gather the details on how to successfully publish and manage such a resource.

### **c) Consult with Tides Canada**

Coordinating economic activity within our food system requires dedicated staff, strong governance and innovative models for community ownership of the initiative. Similar to the successful model employed by Sustain Ontario, we propose that this phase explore how a proposed regional food system alliance might become a project of Tides Canada. TC offers support to non-profit initiatives with financial management, human resources, accounting, risk management, collaboration and good governance. Such a relationship would offer a level of security in the organization's early years and instil greater confidence among potential funders.

## **Phase 2 – Using the recommendations generated through the market analysis, engage stakeholders and the community in a dialogue to help set the direction for an anticipated regional organization.**

This phase would engage stakeholders and possible partners in conversations on the merits of the research and the implementation strategies developed through the market analysis. This process would seek to build momentum and community ownership of the initiative. Discussions throughout the region could bring together small groups of stakeholders to explore the economic development potential for the region's food

### **Annual Business and Institutional Buy Local Guide**

More and more businesses are interested in purchasing local food products. There is currently no consistently updated resource to help direct this interest and serve as a matchmaker between businesses and producers / processors / distributors. The Willamette Farm and Food Coalition offers a good model and has been able to glean data for the guide from its broader Locally Grown guide. A West Kootenay version could be distributed to all businesses and institutions in the region which sell food and would be available on-line. The resource could also help lay the foundation for more coordinated efforts to encourage and develop better regional food infrastructure (i.e. distribution, processing) and would contribute significantly to enhancing the culture of West Kootenay food.

**“Each new non-profit organization reinvents the need for the same financial, legal and human resources services. With Tides Canada, projects leverage a single infrastructure, increasing efficiencies and amplifying the impact of donor dollars. We free you up to focus on your mission and program work while you rely on our support infrastructure.” - Tides Canada**

system and how a food system alliance might best stimulate these desired functions. With economic development interests involving a broad demographic of the population, ‘stakeholders’ are defined as those working both within and outside of the food system who maintain an interest in the initiative and who possess a depth of knowledge/skills to contribute to the process.

**Phase 3 – Develop a regional food alliance, which, among other functions, would oversee the production of a regional local food guide and assist in carrying out and/or stimulating the implementation strategies of the food market analysis.**

The *Towards a Regional Food System Alliance Development Strategy* report has generated a comprehensive overview of the many forms which food system organizations adopt (governance, staff, membership, funding, decision-making and communications, among other areas of focus). While this committee has identified what are likely more appropriate models than others, we support the completion of Phase 1 and 2 of this recommendation prior to determining what form a food system alliance might take.

Recommended Goals for the Development Phase

- Using the report, *Towards a Regional Food System Alliance Development Strategy for the West Kootenay* as a guide, establish the form which the alliance would adopt to best serve its desired function(s). Membership, governance, staffing, decision-making, meetings, communications and funding strategies are to all be developed.

Recommended Goals of a Food System Alliance

- Stimulate and/or partner on food system infrastructural development (i.e. food processing facilities; co-op development; food distribution; food storage; business consulting services; etc.)
- Produce an annual regional food guide and supplementary guide for businesses and institutions.
- Consider the development of a regional food charter which would offer a shared vision for the food system to be adopted by individuals, organizations, businesses, institutions and governments. On-line technologies would encourage the charter to become a living document whereby signatories would periodically update how they are working towards that shared vision. This would become a strong tool to communicate exactly what the food system is and who within the community is actively involved.
- Consider developing a network of communities throughout Canada and the United States who are working on similar regional food system economic development initiatives. Member communities of the network would inspire one another through the sharing of each other’s experiences.
- Communications; Education; Networking.
- Unified voice on issues of regional significance.

**In Closing**

The purpose of a food system is to build connections among producers and eaters, but as Ken Meter of the Minnesota based Crossroads Research Center reminds, those connections are “frustrated by the prevailing food industry, which separates farmers from eaters so significantly that supply and demand cannot balance.” As a result, the viability of our West Kootenay food producers remains precarious, but we do nevertheless enthusiastically anticipate that a regional food system alliance focused on economic development could become a leading catalyst for our regional community to

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This preliminary stage in the process of developing a West Kootenay Food System Alliance has offered a strong foundation of research on how to develop and manage an inclusive and democratic regional food alliance. It has further supported our own process of recommending what we believe is the most impactful series of steps to achieve the proposed mission and vision for this initiative and propel all residents to proudly stand behind and support a vibrant and responsible food system and food culture.

In abundant food,

**Your Advisory Committee - Proposed West Kootenay Food System Alliance**



**Corky Evans**  
*Former MLA Nelson-Creston (Winlaw)*



**Mike Stolte**  
*Center for Innovative and Entrepreneurial Leadership CIEL  
(Nelson)*



**Sheila Dobie**  
*Spencer Hill Orchard (Grand Forks)*



**Wayne Harris**  
*Mountain Valley Farm / Kootenay Alpine Cheese /  
Creston Valley Agricultural Society (Lister)*



**Nadine Raynolds**  
*Redfish School of Change / GreenLearning BC  
(New Denver)*



**Jocelyn Carver**  
*Kootenay Country Store Co-operative (Nelson)*



**Carolee Colter**  
*CDS Consulting Co-op (Nelson)*



**Jon Steinman - Coordinator**  
*Deconstructing Dinner (Nelson)*