

The **Research** Shop

COMMUNITY. CAMPUS. COLLABORATION. 

ASSESSING THE POTENTIAL FOR COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE SEED AND WELLINGTON FARMERS TO INCREASE ACCESS TO FRUITS AND VEGETABLES AMONG PRIORITY POPULATIONS

JANUARY 2016

Carly Fraser* and Thomas Armitage**

*Research Shop intern, Community Engaged Scholarship Institute

**Distribution Coordinator, The Seed

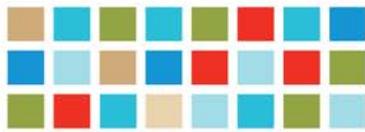
Citation: Fraser, C. and Armitage T.(2016). *Assessing the Potential for Collaboration Between The Seed and Wellington Farmers to Increase Access to Fruits and Vegetables Among Priority Populations*. Guelph, ON: Community Engaged Scholarship Institute.

<https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/handle/10214/8902>



**COMMUNITY ENGAGED
SCHOLARSHIP INSTITUTE**

College of Social and Applied Human Sciences
University of Guelph Guelph, Ontario Canada N1G 2W1
519.824.4120 Ext. 53829 | cesi@uoguelph.ca
www.cesinstitute.ca



The authors would like to acknowledge the 12 participating farmers for their time and knowledge, Research Shop intern Alex Therien for her support in research for this report, and Research Shop Project Managers Lindsey Thompson and Karen Nelson for their guidance and revisions.





SUMMARY

This report details the findings of informational surveys conducted by Research Shop interns via phone or in person with 12 farmers from Wellington County. The purpose of the survey was to determine if farmer support can help alleviate the concerns listed by emergency food providers and conversely, to see how the storage facility might be able to support farmers. Specifically, surveys were conducted to help inform prospective budgets, scheduling, and staffing for the cold storage and distribution centre. Farmers were primarily identified through the Taste Real Guelph Wellington local food map. Participating farmers also suggested names of others that may be interested. The following are the main findings of the research:

1. **Addressing emergency food supply:** There is potential to supplement the food hub with fresh produce from the farmers surveyed. Relationships with more farmers and other organizations, such as food retail, will be needed to ensure consistent supply of fresh food year round.
2. **Staffing and volunteers:** Volunteers help increase produce donation potential and are valuable to the start-up phase but a long term plan should be in place that manages reliance on volunteer work.
3. **Collaboration and community engagement:** Farmers saw collaboration with emergency food providers through the hub as beneficial to community development.
4. **Addressing storage concerns:** Farmers gave mixed reviews in their willingness and/or need to store food products at the hub at this time.
5. **Issues of transportation:** While not all farmers will require transportation to participate in the hub, financial support will help ensure sustainability.
6. **Communication:** Communication plans and software considerations need to be flexible to the limited and last minute communication abilities of farmers.
7. **Brokerage Potential:** Brokerage services were not a priority for farmers at the moment, yet there is potential for this interest to grow in the future as the hub becomes more established.

Overall there are ways for the needs of emergency food providers to be supported seasonally and partially by local farmers with potential for growth in the future.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Summary | 3 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| Research Goals..... | 5 |
| Methods | 6 |
| Results | 6 |
| Addressing emergency food supply..... | 7 |
| Staffing and volunteers..... | 8 |
| Collaboration and community engagement..... | 9 |
| Addressing storage concerns | 9 |
| Issues of transportation | 9 |
| Communication | 10 |
| Brokerage Potential | 10 |
| Conclusions | 11 |
| Limitations of the Report..... | 11 |
| References | 12 |
| Appendix | 13 |
| Farmer Survey: The Seed Cold Storage and Distribution Hub..... | 13 |
| Scheduling Information:..... | 13 |
| Product Handling:..... | 14 |
| Budgets/Finances:..... | 16 |
| Other: | 17 |



COMMUNITY ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP INSTITUTE

College of Social and Applied Human Sciences
University of Guelph · Guelph, Ontario Canada N1G 2W1
519 / 824.4120 Ext. 53829 | cesi@uoguelph.ca
www.theresearchshop.ca



INTRODUCTION

Community consultations with emergency food providers (neighbourhood food banks, pantries, and church groups) have revealed that there is a need for centralized storage and distribution of fruits, vegetables, and other perishable food products to support their programs. The Seed – a community food project currently housed at the Guelph Community Health Centre – has been taking a lead on developing a cold storage and distribution centre alongside several Guelph-based organizations to meet this need. This effort is largely inspired by the work of Community Food Centres Canada, particularly The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto and The Local Community Food Centre in Stratford.

To support this work The Seed is investigating the capability of farmers, distributors, and retailers to donate fresh fruits and vegetables. Also, some community groups have modest budgets for produce, so the system would not be entirely reliant on donations. The Seed is also looking into the feasibility of developing a brokering model where the storage facility acts as a liaison between farmers and retailers. This report details the findings of informational surveys conducted by Research Shop interns with farmers from Wellington County for the purpose of creating an operational, business and sustainability plan for The Seed's cold storage and distribution centre.

Research Goals

The following 5 concerns were listed by emergency food providers, that there is/are:

1. An insufficient food supply, particularly in the case of nutritious and/or fresh food, as well as various high-demand items;
2. A lack of adequate staff, volunteers, and overall community engagement;
3. An insufficient space for food storage;
4. Difficulties with transportation to and from emergency food provision organizations;
5. Insufficient communication and collaboration between organizations.

The purpose of the survey was to determine if farmer support can help alleviate the concerns listed by emergency food providers and conversely, to see how the storage facility might be able to support farmers. Specifically, surveys were conducted to help



inform prospective budgets, scheduling, and staffing for the cold storage and distribution centre.

METHODS

Farmers were primarily identified through the Taste Real Guelph Wellington local food map. Towards the end of each of our surveys, farmers suggested names of others that may be interested in participating. In total 28 farmers were contacted via phone, email, or in person. Of the 28 contacted, informational surveys were conducted via phone or in person with 12 farmers.

The Research Shop and The Seed collaborated to develop initial survey questions, which were then expanded by referencing a similar food hub feasibility study done in Perth County (Turnbull *et al.*, 2013). These were adopted to suit the needs and scope of the food hub in Guelph. See Appendix for full survey.

RESULTS

Overall the farmers that were surveyed are interested in maintaining contact with and receiving updates on the cold storage and distribution hub. There is variation in the way that farmers would like to be involved with the hub. Specifically noted, two farmers (2/12) indicated that they are interested in the project but it is beyond their capacity to participate at the moment; three farmers (3/12) indicated that they could be involved in a minimal capacity and only when they can find the time or have surplus; one farmer (1/12) indicated they would be available for consulting if new farmers needed support; and one farmer (1/12) sits on The Seed committee and is actively involved in the development of the storage hub.

Four farmers (4/12) are interested in developing pre-season contracts with the hub and said they could also help with pre-season planning. Farmers with less production variety know which products they are able to provide, while farms with a wide variety of produce (CSA oriented farmers) are willing to cater to the needs of the hub if consulted early enough in their planning season. There are small amounts of land available for growing specific crops in need. The following discussion presents the findings of the surveys with farmers as they pertain to the concerns listed by emergency food providers. Academic and grey literature has been used to support, contrast or nuance the answers provided by farmers.



Addressing emergency food supply

The ability for Guelph Wellington locally-focused farmers to contribute to the emergency food supply is unclear as many farmers noted variability in their surplus or ability to contribute high volumes of produce to the hub pending time and resource constraints. All farmers indicated that they do have an overabundance that they would be willing to donate when possible; three farmers (3/12) specifically mentioned that they already donate their products to food banks. Farmers noted that either they or other farmers might be more interested in participating in the hub if they were compensated at wholesale price, or partially compensated with transportation costs or percentage of donation value. Also participation is more likely if they know exactly what is to be expected of them or if they have a rise in surplus in the future. Other food hubs note that it may take some convincing to get producers interested in the food hub when they have marketing relationships set up elsewhere and that the hub should work to educate farmers on the benefits of participating (Matson *et al.*, 2014).

The potential supply of fresh foods is mainly seasonal. Seasonal extension structures are used by some farmers and others have the capacity to store vegetables for supply over winter. Potatoes (3 farmers), sweet corn (2), beets (4), carrots (5), squash (2) were all identified as products grown in large volumes by multiple farmers. Raspberries, cabbage, tomatoes, peppers, onions, garlic, beans, broccoli, salad greens, kale, cucumber and parsnips are also grown in large volumes but not across multiple farms. A wide variety of other vegetables and some fruits are grown by farmers however they are grown in smaller quantities and geared for specific markets that may change year to year (CSA customers, restaurant contracts).

When farmers donate or sell their imperfect produce, also known as 'seconds', to hubs, clients can have a direct link to quality fresh food. Barham *et al.* (2012) note that this helps steer hubs away from becoming a place where retailers might only contribute 'leftovers' which are food items that have been sitting in the food supply chain for longer and may be damaged or over ripened foods. This is not to say leftover contributions should not be welcomed, rather to draw attention to the differences in food qualities between farm surplus and retail surplus. Seeing seconds as valued food items also gives farmers access to a new market they may not have access to otherwise.

Based on the number of farmers surveyed, and the variation in their capacity to contribute to the hub, this report can conclude that there is potential to supplement the food hub with fresh produce from the farmers surveyed. Relationships with more



farmers and other organizations, such as food retail, will be needed to ensure consistent supply of fresh food year round. Organizers should engage early with interested farmers for pre-season planning of specific items. They should also plan ahead for processing expected produce that will arrive at variable times and in a range of quantities.

Staffing and volunteers

Emergency food providers' concern over lack of adequate staff, volunteers, and overall community engagement carries into the discussion with farmers. While farmers indicated a desire to contribute to food security and community development in the county they also added the reminder that they still need to maintain farm income through their priority markets. Labour constraints were a recurring barrier to participation. Three farmers (3/12) specifically mentioned that they are maxed out in current capacity so adding on other projects and absorbing any extra costs was a big concern.

For some farms the availability of gleaners helped to change what might be available to donate to the hub. Gleaners are volunteers who go to farmers' fields after harvest to collect any produce that may have been left behind or may otherwise go unharvested for a variety of reasons. One farmer noted: "*If people came to harvest it would encourage us to do it. Providing harvesters, that changes things quite a bit.*" Most farmers were interested in at least having access to a list of gleaners that could be contacted and organized quickly. Two farmers (2/12) open to gleaners noted that it would be helpful to have some consistency in participation as there is some training required for proper crop harvesting and management to maintain the fields. Depending on the structure of the farm, organizing last minute gleaning is possible. Others are interested in developing a more consistent schedule that may involve a yearly, monthly, bi-weekly gleaning, or through a barter agreement on specific products.

This sentiment is mirrored in the literature. Food hub operators stress that workforce stability is good for longevity as specific skills are needed to run a successful food hub; effort should be made to grow and maintain these skills (Barham *et al.*, 2012; Matson *et al.*, 2014; Fischer *et al.*, 2013). Volunteers are recognized as valuable to the start-up phase but a long-term plan should be in place that minimizes reliance on volunteer work. Food hubs noted that volunteers can be hard to train and manage and would go about it differently if they could do it over again by developing training materials (Matson *et al.*, 2014).



Collaboration and community engagement

Collaboration with agencies was one of the ways farmers saw the hub benefiting their business. With smaller and variable quantities of surplus, having a hub helps to focus donations. Farmers also saw this collaboration as beneficial to community development as they repeatedly expressed the importance of engaging with local food security through their operations.

It is worth noting that many established food hubs have encouraged or emerged out of collaboration between farmers (LeBlanc *et al.*, 2014). While The Seed is actively looking for farmer input in the development of the cold storage facility, it is ultimately a Seed-driven endeavour. These surveys have acted as the first step towards increasing possible collaborations with farmers as they remain an integral part of the food community.

Addressing storage concerns

Farmers gave mixed reviews in their willingness and/or need to store food products at the hub. Farmers indicated that rental fees would make sense for storage space, especially if there were freezers or specialized storage units for products (such as garlic and onions). Rental fees based on percentage of sales or in exchange for a proportion of the product were suggested. Matson *et al.* (2014) note that this is a valuable way to produce extra income for the hub. They also note that it may be more appropriate for smaller hubs to adopt a “just in time” exchange schedule to avoid the need for excessive storage.

Some general comments that emerged in surveys around storage concerns include:

- Recommendation of an automated washing facility so that higher volumes of products can be dealt with if donated.
- Three of the farms were certified organic. The labeling of such products is a needed consideration for the hub as some farmers would like to differentiate their products. Other than this, labeling issues were not a priority.

Issues of transportation

Matson *et al.* (2014) note that transportation is one of the main operation costs for food hubs to manage. The Seed has secured funding for the purchase of a truck to help facilitate produce transportation. Farmers were asked about their transportation needs.



Having products picked up from the farm is helpful but varies as a requirement for participation in the hub. For example, four farmers (4/12) indicated that they would not mind bringing products in if they are on their way to a drop-off elsewhere in town. In this case, farmers did not expect to be compensated for the drop off because they are interested in donating products to the hub. There was brief mention by one farmer (1/12) however that if funding is available it would be helpful to offset transportation costs at times to ensure sustainability: *"If there is funding, I would like to get money for delivery, but I want to donate as much as possible."* Farmers that were further away or had more variation in surplus timing would require transportation to make participation viable. Logistically, one farmer (1/12) noted that it is good to have crates to pick up items from the farm.

Communication

All farmers indicated that they do not have a lot of time to communicate what is available for pick up. For certain crops it may be 1-3 days' notice. For other crops, such as sweet corn, a more general idea of what will be leftover can be made available one month in advance with a two-week window for pick up. Developing contracts for particular items would help for the reliability and predictability of products. Furthermore, Matson *et al.* (2014) recommend careful consideration of software use as the hub develops. If software is being developed from scratch, there needs to be room for changes to be made as the hub develops. There is no software exceptionally favoured by food hubs noted but they range from simple excel sheet tracking to more complex websites and ordering systems.

Brokerage Potential

Brokerage services were not a priority for farmers at the moment, yet there is potential for this interest to grow in the future as the hub becomes more established. Some farmers felt the brokerage service did not fit within their farm model; they prefer to have a more direct relationship with their customers. Others felt they were busy enough with their farm operations that this was not needed and they saw the hub as more of a donation centre.

While Guelph Wellington local farmers may be hesitant at this time, elsewhere food hubs have contributed to economic success for farms of various sizes by providing an alternative to dominant agri-food markets. Hubs have been noted as especially helpful to medium-sized farms "who are too large to rely on direct marketing channels as their



sole market outlet but too small to compete effectively in traditional wholesale supply chains" (Barham *et al.*, 2012, p. 5). Food hubs have helped farmers grow their businesses by dealing with marketing, transaction costs, facilitating market access, and providing steady income with higher price guarantees (Barham *et al.*, 2012). Considering the growth in demand for local food in Ontario (Sumner, McMurtry, & Renglich, 2014) there is potential for economic partnerships to be made between the distribution hub and local farmers in the future through a brokerage model following and building on the success of established and/or establishing food hubs (see also Fischer *et al.*, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

Guelph Wellington farmers gave insight into where they stand currently with the development of the Seed's cold storage and distribution hub. Judging by farmers' responses, there is a willingness and anticipation to participate and this will increase as more structures are put into place. According to LeBlanc *et al.* (2014) "moderate involvement of farmers [is] characteristic of start-up food hubs" (p. 126), but that increased farmer involvement is crucial to food hub success especially in the non-profit sector. Overall there are ways for the needs of emergency food providers to be supported seasonally and partially by local farmers with potential for growth in the future.

Limitations of the Report

The research for this report occurred alongside farmers' growing season. Time constraints permitted securing surveys with only 12 farmers. The list of farmers who may be interested in collaborating is growing as word spreads about the distribution centre.



REFERENCES

- Barham, J., Tropp, D., Enterline, K., Farbman, J., Fisk, J., & Kiraly, S. (2012). Regional Food Hub Resource Guide. *U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service.*, (April). doi:<<http://dx.doi.org/10.9752/MS046.04-2012>>
- Fischer, M., Hamm, M., Pirog, R., Fisk, J., Farbman, J., & Kiraly, S. (2013). Findings of the 2013 National Food Hub Survey, (September).
- LeBlanc, J., Conner, D., McRae, G., & Darby, H. (2014). Building resilience in nonprofit food hubs. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 4(3). Retrieved from <http://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/article-leblanc-et-al.pdf>
- Sumner, J., McMurtry, J. J., & Renglich, H. (2014). Leveraging the local: Cooperative food systems and the Local Organic Food Co-ops Network in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 4(3), 47–60.
- Turnbull, R., Ferguson, M., & Lang, C. (2013). *Perth County Regional Food Hub - Feasibility Study*.



COMMUNITY ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP INSTITUTE

College of Social and Applied Human Sciences
University of Guelph Guelph, Ontario Canada N1G 2W1
519.824.4120 Ext. 53829 | cesi@uoguelph.ca
www.cesinstitute.ca



APPENDIX

Farmer Survey: The Seed Cold Storage and Distribution Hub

1. What products does your farm offer?
2. Do you produce large volumes of any particular products?
3. What product(s) do you consider to be your specialty?
4. Do you currently use seasonal extension structures?
5. Does your farm operate seasonally or year round?
6. Are your products:
 - a. Certified organic
 - b. IPM/Reduced Spray
 - c. Conventional
 - d. Other
7. Do you have any other certifications for your products? E.g. G.A.P.
8. What is the best way to contact you? How would you like to communicate with the storage group?

Email (please provide preferred email address)

Phone (please provide preferred telephone number)

Scheduling Information:

The answers to these questions will give us an idea of your ability to donate, and help us coordinate timing your needs with our staffing and distribution to other organizations.

1. On what days do you harvest?



2. Emergency food providers have particular needs that will likely be fulfilled through multiple donors. We would like to avoid having excess produce ourselves. How much time in advance are you able to let us know what you might have available?
3. On which days and at what times is it best to be in contact?
4. Do you ever have an overabundance of produce that you would be willing to donate?
5. If so, what in particular do you often have in excess?
6. When are you most aware that you have excess? E.g. following a farmers' market, CSA harvest, etc.
7. Would you deliver your produce or would you require it to be picked up?
8. If you deliver, do you charge a fee?
9. Would you be interested in having a volunteer group of gleaners come by to harvest excess product that would then be circulated to emergency food providers?
 - a. If so, on which days and at what times would it be best for them to come?

Product Handling:

The answers to these questions will give us an idea of how the hub may be able to operate as a non-profit business in the future that helps local farmers distribute their produce for profit. This aspect of the initiative, if desired and practical, would occur after all the kinks are worked out of our emergency food provision program.

1. Are you interested in brokerage services? E.g. you list your products on our website weekly that food providers can then view and order, we then arrange pickup and delivery on your behalf.
 - a. If yes, (i) please list the products you think you would be interested in having brokered; and (ii) what type of monetary exchange do you think is fair for this service? Please describe.



- b. If no, please describe.
- 2. **(If yes to question 1)** What is the ideal way for you to communicate product availability and/or for us to place orders?
 - a. Online ordering system where you upload your availability and all our customers can see/order through the system (we are in planning stages on this)
 - b. Telephone conversations
 - c. Email
- 3. How do you think the cold storage hub could benefit your business?
 - a. Packing _____
 - b. Cooling _____
 - c. Washing _____
 - d. Sorting _____
 - e. Labeling _____
 - f. Delivery _____
 - g. Other _____
- 4. Are you interested in potentially storing food products at the hub for the purposes of season extension?
 - a. If so, what type of monetary exchange do you think is fair for this service? E.g. rental fee, percent of sales, other? Please describe.
- 5. Have you ever produced under contract?
 - a. If yes, what percentage of your output is currently contracted?



6. Would you be interested in establishing pre-season contracts for pre-determined needs at a guaranteed price? (i.e. 1 acre of carrots for a community partner)
7. Would you participate in pre-season planning in collaboration with the cold storage hub?
8. How many acres could you dedicate for production of food for the cold storage hub in Guelph?
9. How would you describe your level of interest in selling food products through the cold storage hub in Guelph?
 - a. Extremely interested
 - b. Very interested
 - c. Somewhat interested
 - d. Not very interested
 - e. Not at all interested

Budgets/Finances:

1. How do you prefer to receive payments?
 - a. Cash on Delivery
 - b. Prepaid
 - c. Invoice
2. What are your plans for your operation within the next 3 years?
 - a. Maintain the current size and type of production
 - b. Expand the scale of the existing business (increase acreage and/or livestock numbers)
 - c. Invest in farm equipment or structures to extend the growing season



- d. Diversify (new crops/livestock on existing acreage)
- e. Diversify (new crops/livestock on increased acreage)
- f. Downsize
- g. Exit the industry by transferring the business to a new owner
- h. Other

Other:

1. Are you interested in being involved with the development of the cold storage hub?
 - a. If so, how?
2. Is there anything that you can think of that is an immediate barrier to participating in the cold storage hub?
3. Is there anything that would make you more likely to participate in the cold storage hub? Is there anything else you would like to say about your potential participation in the hub?
4. Is there anyone else you think would be interested in participating in this survey? Or in assisting with the cold storage hub? Please provide their preferred contact information...