

A Strong Agriculture Industry Includes a Strong Local Food Market

ISSUE:

The “local food” movement is gaining momentum across Canada, and when balanced with a focus on investing in high-tech agri-business and a strong agricultural export market, it represents a significant opportunity for Alberta. Food costs are rising, and the economy in Alberta is still fragile. If Alberta is to be the bread basket of the world and a global agri-business mecca, it should enjoy the fruits of its own labour through the presence of a robust domestic food sector.

Background

Alberta’s longstanding farming and agriculture tradition provides this province a strong foundation for a high quality of life. Alberta’s high-tech agri-business sector and its quality agri-foods exports are increasingly in demand around the globe. While government develops plans to markedly increase agricultural production and export, Albertans are becoming more and more interested in locally grown, organic and niche market foods. This is desirable not just because Alberta-grown food is safe, of high quality and fresh, but also because it improves sustainability, breeds innovative small business opportunities, is environmentally responsible, and offers many health benefits.¹

However, local food, within current structures, is typically more expensive, and often not widely available. Strong policy decisions are required to support the growth of the local food industry and make local food accessible and affordable for all Alberta families.

A local food policy can be a key driver in local and regional economic development. Key elements of local food policy could include:

- Attracting and cultivating small food business startups and supporting the scale up of new and existing businesses to serve emerging markets.
- Ensuring that locally grown food is widely available and affordable, e.g., domestic/regional purchasing policies for institutions and large food retailers, community-supported agriculture, establishing community gardens, establishing, promoting and/or expanding local farmers markets, etc.

¹ City of Edmonton, [Food and Urban Agriculture Project](#)

- Supporting food providers in a widespread shift to ecological production in both urban and rural settings.
- Consulting and engaging producers, processors, retailers and business organizations to identify gaps in supply chain, policy obstacles, and co-operative marketing and distribution opportunities as part of business retention and expansion planning and support.
- Amending land-use bylaws as needed to facilitate urban homesteading, community gardens, small-plot intensive (SPIN) farming² and edible forest gardening.³
- Partnering with local post-secondary institutions to develop agri-food entrepreneurship training opportunities

The provincial government has developed a strategy to promote local food initiatives called *Explore Local*,⁴ which seeks to increase growth opportunities in Alberta's local food market through information sharing, learning opportunities, coaching, mentoring and advocacy. However, support for domestic consumption and the local food industry should be equally matched to the government's focus on significantly ramping up food production for export.⁵ In the course of feeding the world, Alberta must be able to feed itself.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends that the Government of Alberta:

1. Work closely with food exporters to identify opportunities to establish a stronger domestic market and make food a driver for local economic development.
2. Leverage and expand the *Explore Local* program to improve the bottom line profitability of local food distribution, making food production for domestic consumption more accessible and profitable.
3. Encourage regional economic development alliances to focus efforts on attracting and facilitating business retention and expansion and new business opportunities in urban agriculture⁶ and local/regional markets.

² SPIN-Farming is a non-technical, easy-to-learn and inexpensive-to-implement vegetable farming system that makes it possible to earn significant income from land bases under an acre in size. SPIN is being practised by first generation farmers because it removes the two big barriers to entry - land and capital - as well as by established farmers who want to diversify or downsize, as well as by part-time hobby farmers.

³ Edible forest gardening is the art and science of putting plants together in woodland-like patterns that forge mutually beneficial relationships, creating a garden ecosystem that is more than the sum of its parts. <http://www.edibleforestgardens.com/>

⁴ Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development [http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/explore13596](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/explore13596)

⁵ In 2010 the Government of Alberta began calling for food production in Alberta to double by the year 2050.

⁶ Urban Agriculture is the growing, processing and distributing of food and other products through intensive plant cultivation and animal husbandry in and around cities. [Community Food Security Coalition](#)