

A TALE OF TWO FARMLANDS¹

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You're probably eager to find and eat all the delicious, nutritious, reasonably priced local food you can get your hands on. But who's going to grow it? Who is going to gather it and get it to your local store shelves? After all, local food isn't sustainable if local producers can't get by:

- The average Canadian income in this industry is \$8,000 per year (a number that has decreased steadily since the 1950s).
- Canadian farmers are getting older (the average age of a farmer is 52 years old) and fewer of their children are there to replace them.
- There is less land on which to grow healthy food (since the 1970s, Canada has lost more than 14,000 square kilometres of its most fertile soil to urban development).
- Canadian farmers are losing out in a global market, where cheaper labour costs and fluctuating exchange rates make it harder to stay competitive. (The Okanagan Valley once grew and packed about 10 million boxes of apples and pears every year -- now that number has dropped to 2.5 million.)

Those are some of the daunting facts that spurred The Tyee to embark on the multi-part series that begins today: *Growing the Local Bounty, Reports from Farmlands in Flux*. For the past two months, we reporters -- Colleen Kimmett, Justin Langille and Jeff Nield -- traveled to two of the most productive agricultural regions in the entire country: Ontario's Greenbelt and British Columbia's Fraser Valley -- to talk to farmers, policy makers, food activists and academics. Our journeys landed us in a hundred-thousand-dollar combine, a Mennonite produce auction, and took us into the egg industry in Abbotsford and Vancouver's urban farms.

Sprouting Questions

Along the way, we sensed first hand not only the challenges holding back local food systems, but also the dynamic cultural shift that offers hope for those dedicated to making sustainable local food flourish. It's a shift away from the industrialized food system and towards good taste, pride in place and renewed appreciation for the people who provide what is essential for human life.

Consider: farmers' markets are growing at a national rate of 30 per cent a year, pumping \$3.1 billion dollars into local economies. Just recently, Wal-Mart announced a Heritage program aimed at putting more regionally produced fruits and vegetables on its shelves. When the largest corporate food distributor in the country starts talking about the marketing potential and fuel saving that comes with sourcing local food, you know you've got a mass movement on your hands.

People are hungry for change. But the reality is that consumer demand alone won't create the kind of food system we want. What will it take? What are the ingredients of truly local,

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sustainable and equitable food systems? These are the questions that we seek to answer with this series produced by The Tyee Solutions Society.

In pursuing our reporting, we found reason to be optimistic. We heard from older, traditional farmers who are experimenting with organic methods, renewable energy and co-operative business models. We met young farmers, like Eric Rosenkrantz in Brampton, who is making a living on roughly four acres and who calls urban farming "an up-and-coming industry." Or new farmers, like Bob Baloch, an immigrant from Pakistan who left his stressful job in IT to become a farmer and used his tech skills to create a farm planning software program.

We learned that, while farmers must innovate and adapt, so too must the distribution networks that will bring their food to urban markets. Warehouses, coolers, packing houses and processors have all moved south to where labour is cheaper, but there are efforts to bring it back -- and good reason to. Agriculture has the highest economic multiplier effect of any industry. One B.C. report indicated that a single buy local campaign was estimated to have created 1,900 jobs in food and food processing over a three-year period.

In Vancouver, a group of farmers and food activists are attempting to bring back some of this infrastructure with the New City Market. Amy Robertson, chair of the *Vancouver Farmers' Market Association* says such a food hub, which would include permanent farmers' market stalls, cooler and freezer space and a commercial kitchen, could serve as an incubator for local food processing businesses.

Highlighting Levers for Change

We heard that local governments and public institutions have tremendous power and leverage points to respond to the needs of their communities and push forward the local food agenda. *Local Food Plus* is one non-profit that is working with municipalities and universities to create local, sustainable food procurement policies, for example. With its help, the City of Markham became the first municipality in Canada to require a percentage of local and sustainable food in its operations, and one residence at the University of Toronto is now purchasing 22 per cent of its food from local growers. "These institutions are spending millions of dollars on food every year," said Local Food Plus executive director Lori Stahlbrand. "We write the language that goes into the requests for proposals for food service contracts. It helps to scale up the whole system, it helps to educate the public through these institutions, it's a part of how these institutions can meet their climate change requirements."

From the non-profit sector, we heard about new efforts to democratize local food, making healthy choices available to all. *The Stop Community Food Centre* was one of Toronto's original food banks. Now it's gone beyond the food bank model to bring affordable farmers' markets, cooking classes, gardens and greenhouses to its low-income members. "The immutable truth," says The Stop's program director, Kathryn Scharff, "is that low-income people don't have money to spend on food, and that local sustainable food costs more. We are trying to bridge that gap."

'Growing Food is a Labour of Love'

Most of all, we heard over and over that public support for local food and local farmers must be backed up by a cultural shift that places greater value on food. With the demand for local food must come a willingness to pay a premium for it. "I really hope that we can change the food system before we lose our farmers," said Jenn Pfenning, an organic farmer near Waterloo, Ontario. "Growing food is a labour of love for most of us. We have to learn as a society to value

and protect that. People have to understand that \$10.25 an hour minimum wage means their potatoes have to cost more, they have to. The true cost of production has to be paid."

The local food movement is really a collection of local food *movements*, based on the needs and unique attributes of communities in which they grow. The solutions we look at in the series might seem modest, but they are first steps, and important ones. Because sooner or later, as the price of fuel increases, the real costs of importing cheaply produced food from thousands of miles away will be realized. Sooner or later, a shifting climate might make production in places like California or Mexico impossible. The question is, what will be left for us by then?

Please visit The Tyee in the coming weeks to read the unfolding answers. You'll meet Dave Ferguson, a cash cropper who is investing in solar, Jenn and Ekk Pfenning, farmers and local food activists in Waterloo, rogue organic egg producer Karl Hann from Abbotsford, and Ian Walker, a man on a mission to create a local canned tomato in B.C. If that whets your appetite, we look forward to meeting you here on Thursdays and Fridays, as we publish the latest installments of *Growing the Local Bounty: Reports from Farmlands In Flux in Ontario and B.C.*