
FOOD SECURITY: OUR SEED TO SURVIVAL¹

Susan MacVittie[©]

Fifty years ago, Vancouver Island farmers produced 85% of the Island's food. Today, Island producers provide only about 10% of the food consumed; the rest is imported at the economical and ecological expense of all of us. Why we aren't able to access more local food led the *Vancouver Island Good Food Box Collective* to spearhead a research project in 2007, *Contending With the Local Food Access Puzzle*. What they found out echoes the sentiments of farmers and local food activists: it doesn't pay to farm because of the impacts of the globalization and industrialization of food systems.

The production cost of local food is much higher than that of foods imported from countries that are unfairly subsidized and/or where labor and environmental standards range from questionable to non-existent. The impact of the current system, which depends on oil for production and transportation, is under serious question by health and environment activists. In many communities around the world, local economies have been decimated as local food production supply chains have withered.

For instance, *The Food Security Risk Index 2010* has identified the food supplies of Afghanistan and nine African states as countries that are most at risk and vulnerable to rising food costs. Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly vulnerable to food insecurity because of the frequency of extreme weather events, high rates of poverty, conflict, and failing infrastructures, including road and telecommunications networks, which decrease both production and distribution capacity.

With our food systems so globally intertwined, the wheat export ban from Russia this August due to fires, sparked price increases in commodities markets around the world. As environmental analyst Lester Brown explains, world grain reserves should not drop below 70 days of consumption but as of August 12, the *US Federal Department of Agriculture World Agricultural Supply and Demand Estimates* were close, at 72 days of consumption.

Toward Food Resiliency

Food security is a complex sustainable development issue. Many argue that we have enough food in the world to feed everyone, but the problem is distribution. Here in BC, it is estimated that our farmers produce 48% of all foods consumed in the province (excluding seafood). With the population in BC projected to grow by 30% from 2001 to 2025, the demand for food will similarly increase by 30%. A study conducted by the *BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands* in 2006, *BC's Food Self Reliance: Can BC Farmers Feed Our Growing Population?*, says that the area of BC farmland with access to irrigation would have to increase by nearly 50% by 2025 to provide a healthy diet for all British Columbians. To maintain our current level of land-based food self-reliance in 2025 would require a 30% increase in agricultural production, particularly for fruits and vegetables.

Only 5% of the land base in BC is productive agricultural land, and 90% of the population resides in three southern regions, where the most productive agricultural land occurs: the Fraser Valley, the east coast of Vancouver Island, and the Okanagan Valley. One-tenth of the total land

¹ Watershed Sentinel, September 12, 2010. <http://www.watershedsentinel.ca>

in the *Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR)* lies within these three regions, and it is the most productive agricultural land in BC and contributes the greatest amount of dollars to the economy. Yet there is huge pressure on these remaining highly productive regions to remove the land from the *ALR* for residential development, industrial land, recreation, senior care facilities, and transportation infrastructures.

Local governments need to be encouraged to establish urban containment boundaries, include agricultural land zoning in official community plans, and create policies and bylaws to support and encourage local food production. Indeed, the need to produce and support local food initiatives and build our food resiliency is here now. As the world's oil supplies decline and fuel prices spike, our ability to buy Chilean grapes and Mexican tomatoes will be a thing of the past.

Across the world, people are mobilizing. Food security analysts with the *United Nations' World Food Programme* are identifying and mapping food insecurity and vulnerability to be used in determining intervention and assistance. The US recently pledged \$3.5 billion (€2.76billion) to the *Feed the Future* programme that invests money into improving food security around the world, and Arab nations plan to invest \$65 billion (€51.3billion) over the next 20 years to improve their agricultural sector.

Investing money is not enough to solve the problem, particularly when simply increasing standard farming practices leads to increased chemical fertilizer, pesticide use and genetically modified crops. Although local initiatives, such as urban farming, are a growing trend with city folk turning grass sod into food crops and "buy local" campaigns are catching on, farmers need land, water, and marketing and trade changes.

The Challenges

Producing enough food to feed our growing population requires changing the way food is produced, stored, processed, distributed, and accessed. Some of the approaches needed to re-localize the food system on Vancouver Island, identified in *Contending With the Local Food Access Puzzle*, are being adopted in many communities. Strategic market considerations include:

- shortening the supply chain by selling direct through farmers markets and gate sales;
- community shared agriculture models;
- agri-tourism businesses; and
- focusing on product quality.

When surveyed, Vancouver Island farmers spoke of gaps in the local food market, such as finding enough labor, lack of local/regional manufacturing infrastructure, lack of local distribution infrastructure, and lack of merchandising and marketing strategies for small and medium enterprise production. Other concerns are seed biodiversity, small-scale mixed farming, and organic farming. There are also policy gaps.

Current policy supports commercial farming, those with over \$250,000 (€190,000) gross income, while the rest of farming is not considered and is categorized as hobby or lifestyle farming. This eliminates most people who call themselves farmers in Canada. Farmers also face many legal barriers, including trade rules and food industry management, such as quotas and subsidies.

Changing policy requires advocacy in the political realm; the *BC Food Systems Network (BCFSN)* encourages people to look at opportunities to bring food issues to the forefront during elections at any level of government. Supporting the election of candidates who work towards a more localized, equitable and sustainable food system may be helpful, and the *BCFSN* have questions to ask your candidates in downloadable format on their website.

While food security conversations are happening locally, the poor continue to experience the impact of low nutritional food and rising food costs. In poor countries, such as Haiti and Zimbabwe, the steep rise in the costs of staple foods, such as wheat, soya, and rice, has led to riots. If food continues to be used as a weapon in the form of economic embargoes and be manipulated by powerful groups within a country, the threat of political instability looms. In the coming century, food security is likely to emerge as a major security concern. Poor agricultural planning or other forms of food security miscalculation could very well spark the next world war. Nothing is more pressing than the ability to access food and water – in fact, our very lives depend on them.