FOOD SECURE CANADA
SÉCURITÉ ALIMENTAIRE CANADA

Where agriculture, environment, health, food and justice intersect
Le pont entre l'agriculture, l'environnement, la santé, les aliments et la justice

DISCUSSION PAPER 2

# Food Sovereignty in Rural and Remote Communities

**Food Secure Canada** is a national membership-based organization committed to fighting against hunger and to building a healthy, fair, and ecological food system. Our vision is encapsulated in *Resetting the Table: A People's Food Policy for Canada*.

## FOOD SECURE CANADA DISCUSSION PAPERS

The People's Food Policy is based on ten detailed discussion papers. These discussion papers were generated through 350 Kitchen Table Talks, hundreds of policy submissions, dozens of tele-conferences, online discussions, and three national conferences. Over 3500 people participated in their development. These papers cover a breadth of issues and include detailed policy recommendations for rebuilding Canada's broken food system. Unlike *Resetting the Table,* they are not consensus documents and not every member of Food Secure Canada has signed on to every recommendation in them. Rather, they are living documents, intended to inform debate, stimulate discussion and build greater understanding of our food system and how it should be—and must be—fixed.

1) Indigenous Food Sovereignty
2) Food Sovereignty in Rural and Remote Communities
3) Access to Food in Urban Communities
4) Agriculture, Infrastructure and Livelihoods
5) Sustainable Fisheries and Livelihoods for Fishers
6) Environment and Agriculture
7) Science and Technology for Food and Agriculture
8) International Food Policy
9) Healthy and Safe Food for All
10) Food Democracy and Governance

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# Food Sovereignty in Rural and Remote Communities

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The industrial food system raises numerous challenges for the food sovereignty of rural and remote communities. For communities that are further away or more tenuously connected to commercial centres, the cost of store-bought food is higher and the nutritional value lower.

Pressures of centralization leave many rural communities without the required facilities to inspect or process food for local consumption. Food knowledge relevant to the local ecology is being lost, while research and training opportunities are focused on techniques not suited to the diverse bio-regions in the country.

For rural and remote communities, solutions to the food sovereignty crisis strengthen the capacity of these communities to provide food for local and regional consumption. By building the resilience of each community's food system, we build a diverse, local, and resilient national food system. Proposed solutions include:

- Establishing community-based knowledge exchange networks to facilitate the exchange of food knowledge, information, and ideas across cultural and generational lines.
- Providing infrastructure and support for research and post-secondary training in food production that reflects the diversity of rural and remote bio-regions (including northern regions) and is inclusive of a range of food sources (e.g., traditional or forest food) and non-industrial methods.
- Developing a national food/land protection system in which land-use planning prioritizes and protects food cultivation and is inclusive of all food sources, including those used for hunting, gathering, fishing, and agriculture.
- Developing approaches to inspection and processing that are flexible, responsive, innovative, and bureaucratically streamlined in order to accommodate the less industrial, more seasonal, and variable approaches of small-scale local producers and their unique needs.
- Identifying food as a priority area for small business development and employment training.
- Developing regional trade networks for the promotion, marketing, and movement of food products among communities within a given region.

# INTRODUCTION

The People's Food Policy envisions a resilient food system rooted in rural and remote communities empowered with the capacity to offer their citizens nutritious food. A resilient food system is one that is primarily regionally based, socially just, sustainable, and grounded in a continuously adapting knowledge base of local food provision and preparation.[i] Rural and remote[ii] communities encounter unique challenges to achieving food sovereignty due to their distance from the centres of commercial food processing and distribution and the effects of modern industrial activities on their local foods.

There are also some differences between rural and remote communities in relation to food sovereignty. Communities that are rural but not remote may have more agriculture and greater food infrastructure; they can also often connect more easily with other rural communities and with urban communities. On the other hand, remote communities in Canada are frequently in locations where there is limited opportunity for agriculture and most local food provision comes from hunting and gathering (country food), fishing, and small-scale gardening. Their economies are typically based on 'resource extraction' such as forestry or mining, which can degrade both agricultural land and country food.

Remote First Nation and Inuit communities experience additional challenges to food sovereignty, in particular the loss of traditional knowledge (see Discussion Paper 1).

Food sovereignty issues faced by rural and remote communities include the following:

- One outcome of the industrial, market-oriented system of agriculture is that rural agricultural communities end up primarily serving the needs of the market before they feed themselves. The market controls the type of crops that are grown and the methods by which the land is managed (see Discussion Paper 4).
- Access to land for small-scale agriculture is limited in rural areas where the cost of land is prohibitive for smaller growers and where large-tract (non mixed-use) land planning prioritizes commercial, residential and industrial uses without incorporating food-growing.
- Rural communities lack local infrastructure and equipment and are dependent upon highly centralized infrastructure for food production (e.g., abattoirs, grain storage), which are difficult for smaller growers to access.
- Policies and market forces favour industrial, large-scale food production businesses that undermine the capacity of smaller local growers to produce food for local consumers in a sustainable and less energy intensive manner.
- In both rural and remote communities, there is a lack of knowledge of locally available food and the means of acquiring and preparing this food, as well as a lack of training opportunities for young people.

- Poverty is higher in rural and remote communities than in urban areas, making it more difficult for residents to afford nutritious store-bought food.[iii] Increased distances to stores and a lack of public transportation can exacerbate the effect of poverty in rural and remote communities.
- The cost of store-bought food (especially fresh produce) is higher and the quality and nutritional value of this food is lower in remote communities because of the increased distance from urban centres and the difficulties associated with tenuous, seasonal, or air-only access.[iv]
- Access to traditional (forest) food is hampered in remote communities when the activities of industry (e.g., forestry, mining, hydroelectric projects) and climate change alter and contaminate the ecosystem and food chain.
- The capacity of remote communities to harvest and trade (locally or regionally) their own traditional food (including fish, game, berries, etc.) is undermined by the current regulatory system. This system inadvertently makes these communities dependent upon the long distance import of less-healthy market food in exchange for natural resource extraction.

Given the range of challenges to food sovereignty in rural and remote communities, a number of policy ideas could be considered. The following policy statements speak to these main issues.

## KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT AND EXCHANGE

Remote and northern communities tend to be of two types: single-industry towns that exist to exploit local natural resources such as mining, oil production and forestry, and Aboriginal communities. Residents of single-industry towns may lack the knowledge and skills needed to produce food in their particular geographic and climactic location, relying instead on food imported in exchange for exported natural resources. While Aboriginal communities have long established traditional food production practices appropriate to their environment, in many cases this knowledge has been lost through repressive legislation, loss of access to traditional food gathering places, disruptions to inter-generational teaching, and bad landscape management and environmental pollution.[v] For these remote communities to achieve food sovereignty, it is essential that opportunities for knowledge development and knowledge exchange be fostered. Communities that are rural but not necessarily remote often contain significant expertise in food production. However, new training in sustainable and less energy-intensive techniques to produce food for local consumers will be needed.

- Support the emergence and mobilization of local knowledge relating to food production and preparation.

- Establish community-based knowledge exchange hubs that facilitate the exchange of food knowledge, information, and ideas across cultural and generational lines.
- Use models of community-based learning that embrace the knowledge and adaptation of all community members to foster diversity in knowledge and increase the likelihood of innovation and community adaptation, particularly in changing and challenging conditions of climate and geography.
- Make use of online tools to build these knowledge exchange hubs while creating safe physical spaces for people to remember and exchange food knowledge. The local knowledge emerging from each unique community hub can then be further exchanged across communities through a 2-way network, with a national food knowledge hub potentially housed within Agriculture Canada (or a broader Food Canada).
- Provide infrastructure and support for research and post-secondary training in food production that reflects the diversity of rural and remote bio-regions (including cool climates) and is inclusive of a range of food sources (e.g., traditional or forest food) and non-industrial methods.
- Support the development of agricultural schools or colleges in a greater variety of communities across Canada.
- Build local food production into the entire elementary and secondary school curriculum while allowing flexibility for each community to define how food is produced in that particular local ecological setting.

## LAND USE PLANNING AND LAND VALUE

The value placed on land used for producing food is meagre compared to the real value that such land has for the food sovereignty of communities and the nation in general. Some rural communities face constant pressure to increase the recreational use of land, such as for second homes and golf courses, or for the encroachment of suburban residential and commercial development on agricultural land. In remote communities, land that would be otherwise used for the production of food for people in nearby communities through hunting, trapping, and gathering is valued more for its mineral, timber, and hydro-electric resources. Policies are needed that recognize the inherent value of food producing lands and that protect these lands and their capacity to produce food even in the face of demands that appear more lucrative in the short term.

For rural communities, there needs to be a balance between urban and rural lands to ensure that agricultural lands near urban areas are protected from encroachment and development. At the same time, urban populations need to achieve sovereignty over their food supply, which will largely come from these rural lands. The issue is not who has control – rural or urban municipalities. The issue is that these lands are managed appropriately. Likewise, for remote communities, food producing lands and waterways need to be

managed so that the food sovereignty of people is recognized as being a greater priority than the scale and efficiency of resource extraction.

- Food producing land in and around rural and remote communities must be protected in a manner appropriate to the sensitivities of the ecological and human context. Land use planning must adopt a process that prioritizes and protects food-producing land and is inclusive of all food sources that feed people in rural and remote communities, including those used for hunting, gathering, fishing, and agriculture. The aim of a food-land protection system would be to prohibit the selling, use or contamination of an appropriate area of food producing land of a given quality. This is especially valuable in places where there is extensive natural resource exploitation and/or recreational activity that undermines land use for food production locally or within a watershed.
- Explicitly recognize food production as a meta-priority that guides all other policy in areas relating to land use in rural and remote communities.
- Develop an algorithm to stipulate a given percentage of food producing lands within a specified number of kilometres from the city or town centre, based on population density, that each town or city of a certain population is required to protect.

Land use planning can also be used proactively in municipal policies to foster food system resilience by focusing community development around food production. Such policies would recognize the inherent value of a community food supply, and integrate the development of that supply into the fabric of community design and layout. This is relevant to both rural and remote communities.

- Where ecologically appropriate, plan community parks and green spaces to include spaces for independent food production, for example, community garden lands, nut tree plantings and orchards.
- Convert unused or underused lands into food producing lands where it would not disrupt natural spaces and ecosystems.
- Offer incentives to homeowners for converting lawn into lands for food production.
- Offer incentives such as taxation bylaws, as well as education support, to encourage landowners to produce food.
- Make use of schoolyards and school-based food learning programs (see Discussion Paper 9) to produce food for rural and remote communities.
- Require that at least one organic food producing farm be situated within a specified radius of all new residential development.
- Support the development of Food Policy Councils or other organized bodies of citizens to provide a voice for local food issues at the level of town, band, or regional government. These organizations can offer information, funding, advocacy, education, provide federal grant funding to set up these coalitions

- Develop and reconsider municipal policies to prioritize food production in areas where food-producing lands adjacent to rural lands are used for residential or recreational purposes.
- Support the development of innovative social entrepreneurial movements or organizations through which land owners could partner with individuals willing to produce food from these lands for local markets.

## LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCES

The globalized nature of trade and the market driven production of food (see Introduction) have resulted in a centralization of infrastructure that undermines the capacity of rural and remote communities to provide for their own food needs. Small-scale food producers in rural and remote communities are unable to transport their goods great distances to large centralized processing or grading facilities. In some cases, government policy adds layers of bureaucracy that undermines the capacity of small-scale producers to supply food to the community. The following policy recommendations support local food self-reliance and resilience by improving infrastructure, removing barriers, and facilitating linkages among food producers, retailers, and consumers. These can be organized into three sections: Infrastructure, Decentralization, and Policy Barriers.

**Infrastructure Policies:**

- Increase local storage, especially winter storage, for food. Invest in community freezer programs or community canning and preserving facilities and events.
- Make equipment available for loan to community groups for food production.
- Ensure that people have access to community-based resources, such as equipment and space, which could be used to produce or prepare foods. For example, support the development of communal facilities and events for freezing, canning, and preserving vegetables and fruits that families grow and gather themselves; make use of seized hydroponic equipment; support facilities and events for safely smoking or salting fish and preparing hunted meat for a local supply.
- Support research and innovation that will enhance the capacity of remote and northern communities to increase their local food production in ways that are sustainable and synchronous with the particular local ecology.
- Adopt green technologies to build food-producing mechanisms, such as high tunnels and green greenhouses that use geo-thermal, photovoltaic, and other alternatives to lengthen and enhance growing conditions.

**Decentralization Policies:**

- Localize and decentralize the processing and inspection of food destined for the local market.

- Develop approaches to inspection and processing that are flexible, responsive, innovative, and bureaucratically streamlined so that the less industrial, more seasonal, and variable approaches of small-scale local producers and their unique needs are accommodated (e.g., consider adopting techniques similar to "remote surgery" for food inspection).
- Ensure that these responsive approaches to inspection and processing enable remote communities to develop local and regional trade in their own locally available foods, including wild meat (e.g., moose, partridge, etc). Regulations that reduce excessive centralization may also be implemented. For example, limit the distance that animals can be trucked for slaughter to both support decentralization and reduce cruelty.
- Support innovative organizations, partnerships, and co-operatives that provide small food producers with greater access to local markets and a critical mass for advocacy and negotiation.
- Invest in marketing and branding programs to increase recognition of local produce.
- Improve local warehouse or broker relationships between producers and purchasers by way of a local agriculture coordinator to advocate and interact among producers, government, retailers, etc.

**Policy Barriers:**

- Revisit food safety policies to strike a better balance between the need to protect people from food-borne illnesses and the need to build food system resilience and community food sovereignty. For example, current food safety policies undermine the food sovereignty of remote communities where they prevent (as opposed to regulate) the trade or sale of wild meat.
- Revisit policies that present barriers to the sale of fish, wild meat, and other forest products within a small-scale, regional food system. These policies should balance the protection of the natural resource with the capacity of rural and remote communities to access local food supplies.
- Enable backyard livestock in rural towns and remote communities, as well as in urban centres (small-scale livestock for personal use in municipal zones).
- Develop the policy infrastructure and procedural capacity at provincial and federal levels of the government to support licensing of commercial food production from the forest (e.g., tree syrup, berry harvesting, mushroom harvesting). Currently, such capacity exists only for the licensing of timber harvests.
- Map forest areas and inland lakes licensed for food production and coordinate a flow of information so that herbicidal spraying and other activities for timber production do not adversely affect active food activities in the forest.

## POVERTY AND ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

The effects of poverty on people's access to healthy food are exacerbated by a number of factors unique to rural and remote communities. Rates of poverty tend to be higher in rural and remote communities than in urban areas, and the greater distance of transport makes store-bought food more expensive than in more central areas. The greater transportation distance also results in a reduced availability of fresh produce and other more nutritious foods. Residents of rural and remote communities often have further to travel in order to reach grocery stores, a situation that is worsened by difficult weather conditions or by aging and disability. These factors may exacerbate the effects of poverty on health in rural and remote communities, as discussed in Discussion Paper 9.

Indeed, people in rural and remote communities tend to suffer poorer health than their urban counterparts[vi], and this is particularly the case in Aboriginal communities (see also Chapter 1).[vii] In short, the mainstream food distribution system is not well suited to meeting the needs of people in rural and remote communities, making the need for greater self-sufficiency and food system resilience particularly acute in these communities. The following policy proposals explore ways to reduce poverty in rural and remote communities and are meant to complement the previous proposals regarding local food capacity in rural and remote communities (see also Chapter 3 for more poverty reduction proposals).

- Strengthen remote economies with supports for sustainable and innovative economic development initiatives (e.g., Green Energy Greenhouses, Local Living Economy initiatives). Identify food as a priority area for small business development and employment training. For example, unemployed individuals or those laid off from vulnerable resource-based industries in rural and remote communities could receive training and small-business loans to start up ventures in Community Supported Agriculture, local food co-ops, market gardening, and organic farming for local markets.

- Establish time-limited subsidies or price controls for healthy market food in Northern and other remote communities while investing in the capacity of these communities to produce their own healthy food. Build on regional trade networks to facilitate the exchange of fresh healthy food among communities in a remote region.

- Draw upon the unique culture associated with local food to provide economic benefit to rural and remote communities. By increasing community resilience, both in food and in the broader economy, a community can develop a unique cultural "flavour" that is enticing for tourists and potential new residents.

Rural and remote regions often experience a lack of affordable or public transportation in and between communities. This situation forces individuals who are unable to drive to access informal transportation networks or to hitchhike to centralized market-based food stores. These individuals risk their personal safety in order to access food.

- Ensure that affordable and safe transportation among and within rural and remote communities is available.

## SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION METHODS

Given the industrial and global scale of both agriculture and fisheries (see relevant PFP discussion papers), the long-term capacity of rural communities to produce food for local consumers may be undermined by the use of unsustainable and environmentally damaging agricultural and fishing methods. The situation is similar in remote communities where industrial activities and the extraction of natural resources often damages local wild food supplies as well as food-producing lands and waterways downstream (e.g., chemical leaching into waterways, disruption of animal migratory routes). The dependence of remote communities on the long-distance transportation of food along tenuous routes severely limits their resilience and food sovereignty and contributes to the ills of excessive fossil fuel use. The following policy proposals focus on protecting local food resources in rural and remote communities through the protection of environmental resources and the promotion of sustainable food production and distribution methods. See discussion papers on fisheries and agriculture for further elaboration of related points.

- Locally focused small-scale organic production methods can be more productive and produce fewer carbon emissions than industrial mono-cropping. Financial instruments need to be created to encourage these sustainable methods and to discourage industrial approaches. For example, the true costs of industrially produced foods are currently externalized. Financial instruments could require that these true costs were reflected in the price of the food.

- Reduce or eliminate the use of industrial farming techniques such as GMO, terminator seeds, antibiotics, pesticides, and so on (see Chapters 4 and 6). These techniques support export-oriented agriculture to the detriment of local food supplies, environments, communities, and economies.

- Develop regional trade networks for the promotion, marketing, and movement of food products among communities within a given region.

- Create an Internet portal or telephone network for remote communities to list locally produced food and organize transportation for trade that takes advantage of existing or ongoing movement of people and other goods (e.g., small aircraft currently flying back from remote communities under-load could carry locally available fish, meat, or berries, for trade with other communities).

The extraction, processing, transportation, and storage of energy and raw materials often have implications for the food sovereignty of rural and remote communities. For example, the damming of waterways to produce energy for industries and towns downstream has significant long-term consequences for the food sovereignty of communities who rely upon those waterways for food. Levels of mercury in dammed lakes can be high due to the decomposition of submerged plant matter. This can lead to dangerously high levels of methyl mercury in fish that lasts for decades.[viii] As another example, thousands of kilometres of oil and gas pipelines cross this country and at times pass through or nearby inland waterways. A rupture on one of these pipes could cause significant damage to the delicate ecosystems that support regional food sovereignty. Finally, proposals to store spent nuclear materials in remote areas have been thwarted by far-sighted First Nations communities who recognized the potentially disastrous consequences for their food sovereignty and the well-being of future generations.[ix]

- Ecosystem-based management (especially of the marine environment) will ensure the sustainable management of fish stocks. Similar techniques may be adapted to other food ecosystems.

- Reverse the decision to reduce federal responsibility for environmental assessments contained within Bill C-9 of the 2010 budget. Environmental assessments, particularly assessments of the impact of industrial activities on food sources, should remain a significant role for the federal government.

- Require that any natural resource extraction or hydroelectric activities planned for a given area specifically address how food supplies will be affected by these activities and provide plans for the minimization of these effects.

- Recognize that actions and decisions occur within an interconnected web of human and ecological systems. Chains of cause and effect within and between these systems are rarely truly linear and outcomes can be unpredictable. Decisions and policies regarding resource extraction and industrial activities should be made within this framework and with the protection of food sovereignty as a key guiding principle.

## ENDNOTES

[i] Jaffe, J. & Gertler, M. "Victual vicissitudes: Consumer deskilling and the (gendered) transformation of food systems," *Agriculture and Human Values, 23,* 2006, pp. 143-162. See also Stroink, M.L. & Nelson, C.H. "Aboriginal Health Learning in the Forest and Cultivated Gardens: Building a Nutritious and Sustainable Food System," *Journal of Agromedicine, 14,* 2009, pp. 263-269.

[ii] Rural communities are those that are outside the commuting distance of larger urban centres and that generally have lower population and lower density. See Burns, A., Bruce, D., & Marlin, A, "Rural Poverty Discussion Paper," Rural Secretariat, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2007. Available online at: www.rural.gc.ca. Remote communities are also rural but we consider them to have a distinct set of challenges in that their connection to other communities is limited by greater distance or by seasonal or tenuous means of access such as winter roads, air, or water access.

[iii] "Rural Poverty Discussion Paper." Op. cit.

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[vii] Garriguet, D., "Obesity and the Eating Habits of the Aboriginal Population," Component of Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-003-X *Health Reports, 19(1),* 2008, pp. 1-16.

[viii] Stokes, P.M. & Wren, C.D. "Bioaccumulation of mercury by aquatic biota in hydroelectric reservoirs: A review and consideration of mechanisms," In T.C. Hutchinson and K.M. Meema (Eds). *Lead, Mercury, Cadmium and Arsenic in the Environment.* John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 1987. Retrieved from: http://dge.stanford.edu/SCOPE/SCOPE_31/SCOPE_31_2.11_Chapter16_255-277.pdf

[ix] Speeches by Mr. Adolph Rasevych and Chief Gabriel Echum of Ginoogaming First Nation from January 30, 1997. Available from the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency. See Panel report at: www.ceaa.gc.ca; Catalogue No.: EN-106-30/1-1998E

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Food Secure Canada is based on three interlocking commitments:

***Zero Hunger:*** All people at all times must be able to acquire, in a dignified manner, adequate quantity and quality of culturally and personally acceptable food. This is essential to the health of our population, and requires cooperation among many different sectors, including housing, social policy, transportation, agriculture, education, and community, cultural, voluntary and charitable groups, and businesses.

***A Sustainable Food System:*** Food in Canada must be produced, harvested (including fishing and other wild food harvest), processed, distributed and consumed in a manner which maintains and enhances the quality of land, air and water for future generations, and in which people are able to earn a living wage in a safe and healthy working environment by harvesting, growing, producing, processing, handling, retailing and serving food.

***Healthy and Safe Food***: Safe and nourishing foods must be readily at hand (and less nourishing ones restricted); food (including wild foods) must not be contaminated with pathogens or industrial chemicals; and no novel food can be allowed to enter the environment or food chain without rigorous independent testing and the existence of an on-going tracking and surveillance system, to ensure its safety for human consumption.