

Dedication, Drive and Collaboration at the Nova Scotia Food Summit

The Nova Scotia Food Summit brought stakeholders together to strategize and plan for the success of Nova Scotia's local food and agriculture. The Summit was based on the Friends of Agriculture in Nova Scotia food declaration:

We believe that a healthy and sustainable food system is necessary to meet the challenges facing Nova Scotians. Our food system must support the health of people, communities, economies and the natural world. We will act to create a resilient food system to help ensure against rising costs, the changing climate, hunger and obesity.



The population may be lower than other provinces, but pride and commitment to local food is high. The Summit occurred first in 2009. This year the province can celebrate significant new additions to the local food landscape, driven by a combination of partnerships, community-based capital through the innovative FarmWorks organization, and tremendous dedication from knowledgeable people giving many hours of volunteer time to make it happen.

The Summit was organized by Friends of Agriculture in Nova Scotia, together with a group of students from Acadia University. The two days featured numerous presenters on topics from farm to fork. The presence of a range of stakeholders indicates a high level of promise for future partnerships and planning. The group included producers like Richard Melvin



who grows commercial crops including cauliflower, and others focused on farmers' markets and CSA sales, and even one CSA co-op. There were brewers: Jeremy White of Big Spruce Brewery and Emily Tipton of Boxing Rock Brewing, meat producers: Chris de Waal of Getaway Farms, retailers: Annabelle Singleton of the Port Grocer and Café, and Shaun Gallagher of Local Source Market in Halifax, and restaurants: The Flying Apron Inn and Cookery. Representatives from public health, community organizations and local government were also in attendance. A two-day tour provided by two leaders and local food champions from FarmWorks introduced wineries, distilleries, restaurants, diverse crop farms, a nursery gardener and more across the foodscape of Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley.

Nova Scotia has a significant agricultural economy, although it supplies only 13% of what Nova Scotians eat (down from 60% in 1990). There are few abattoirs, and agricultural employment has declined (14% of all employment) while agriculture GDP has increased by 20%; the trend reflects Canada's general trends towards consolidation and export agriculture. Food insecurity is at 16% (Tarasuk 2013), higher than the national average, and higher than the southern provinces. The Summit was a chance for stakeholders to gather and strategize to create a more robust and resilient local food economy that combines agricultural security (more regional production, distribution, retail, consumption) with food and health solutions.



Presentations covered a range of topics, reflecting the diversity in the room. An initial panel and recurring topic focused on institutional procurement; Joshna Mharaj provided insights from her experience with Ryerson and other institutional procurers. Initiatives already underway to improve access to local food ingredients at Acadia

University, where the event was held, gained momentum. Other presentations looked at the overall food system and how change can occur, and how success will be measured in a sustainable food system. Specific topics covered links with community issues (gardening and mental health support), and the experience of new farm families who are providing some of the dedication, drive and determination to rebuild a local production system. The stories people brought to the table indicated that the local food and farming movement is driven both by long-term residents and residents new to the province, together creating a resilient local food system. The link between food and health was also addressed, both by public health representatives at the table discussions and by a panel of doctors who were refreshing with their "food as medicine" approach.

Capital access for new farmers and food entrepreneurs was also a key topic. Nova Scotia has been a leader in Canada with the FarmWorks Investment Co-op, that has provided

over 1 million in loans to more than 55 food and farm businesses. The repayment history has been excellent, and repayments are immediately moved into new loans. For many of the FarmWorks clients speaking at the Summit, conventional capital from banks or even farm credit associations was not available to them, as the innovation in methods, scale, or regional market focus increase the risk rating. FarmWorks was the only option; many of the businesses would not exist without this financial support for start-up or expansion.

FarmWorks, like other innovative local food and farming loan funds, focuses on lending based on character, as well as reviewing financial plans. They have been able to recognize the drive and commitment to build a small business that has led to an excellent payback history. FarmWorks investors are able to benefit from a Nova Scotia tax credit that allows them to move their RRSPs into “Community Economic Development Investment Funds) (CEDIFs) which mobilize capital for businesses focused on the local economy and local markets. The model has been replicated in some provinces, and should be available across Canada.

FarmWorks is unusual in that it is a blind pool CEDIF. Investors place their money in the portfolio without knowing which project it will go to. A group of experts and adviser assess loan applications in a lengthy and careful process that includes farm visits and discussions with potential clients. The aggregation of financial support from people who believe in a sustainable food and agriculture system in Nova Scotia has allowed the FarmWorks group to act as a key catalyst for food and farm entrepreneurs.

Many of the key stakeholders in Nova Scotia’s local food world were busy planting, selling and promoting and were unable to attend. In the future, winter might be a better time for the Summit, or early spring. Many people who did attend spoke of long hours and busy days, attesting to the growth of the local



food sector. While the growth of local food and farming, both for producers and for the markets, seems to be healthy and continuing, much of the momentum has been driven by communities and non-profits, or entrepreneurs. There seems to be a disconnection between the impact on the economy (as well as environment and society) and government recognition. Programs like the Local Food Fund in Ontario or the new Small Flock Growers Program (now the Family Food Program) have not been implemented in Nova Scotia. Some sectors have remained quite restricted for innovators due to quota costs and requirements. These could be adjusted to support new entrants without

eliminating the important protections of supply management, as in the case of the new small flock chicken program in Ontario.

Overall, it is clear that Nova Scotia is showing rapid growth in local food and farm businesses, both new and expanding. Although the idea of local food may not have become part of Nova Scotia's identity yet, there is some important promotion and marketing around local food. Taste of Nova Scotia, a member based organization in Dartmouth that was launched as a public/ private partnership in 1989, has over 180 members and provides a detailed "Culinary Adventure Guide" highlighting the members by region of the province. From one or two breweries a decade or so ago, Nova Scotia has 30 breweries, around a dozen wineries (and 70 grape growers) and 8 distilleries. A Good Cheer trail has been created to guide tourists through the maze of beverages produced locally; the name recalls the Order of Good Cheer social club that was launched in Port Royal in 1606 by Samuel de Champlain. Buy Local Atlantic and Local Connections Halifax also promote local producers through free magazines. Beverages may be the wedge to open the door to broader local food commitment by consumers and governments.



The Summit brought together stakeholders from many of the sectors that can help to realize the vision of a healthy and sustainable food system. With practitioners, people to guide partnerships (like the Friends of Agriculture or FarmWorks),

facilitators to catalyze new ideas, investors, and communications developers, Nova Scotia seems poised to break even more new ground in local food and farming. Many attendees agreed that Nova Scotia can benefit from scale and flexibility, as well as existing resources, expertise and capacity, to become the leader in local food and farming in Canada.

Photos provided by Sally Miller and Linda Best/ FarmWorks
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