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Sound Bites

The newsletter with a vision of regional food sustainability

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Small Scale Food Processor (SSFPA) “Co-operation and the Small Producer: Creating Regional Food Economies”—

The Small Scale Food Processor Association played a key role in the founding convention and Annual General Meeting of the BC Co-operative Association by presenting a forum entitled “Co-operation and the Small Producer.” The presentation gave SSFPA a strategic opportunity to put forward its vision for small and regionally-based food economies. And, just as importantly, it enabled a large, diverse and motivated group to learn about this goal and discuss how it can be developed.

Participants included food producers, processors, and technologists; representatives from First Nations; people from various levels of government, non-profits, the co-operative movement, and the financial sector.

SSFPA's presentation featured a dynamic and inspiring address by Terry Ackerman, General Manager of OntarBio Co-op, the largest organic dairy organization in Canada. OntarBio Co-op sprang from a handful of grain farmers in Ontario in 1989. It now sells 45 certified organic dairy products from Victoria, BC to St. Johns, Nfld and also distributes its members' certified organic grain products in North

America and overseas. Terry said that “Every decision OntarBio takes must be based on our vision: respect for the family farm. “

In outlining the history and growth of OntarBio Co-op, Terry emphasized four basic principles:

- Primary commitment to its co-operative vision: “We, the members, envision strong sustainable family farms united in providing wholesome organic food.”
- Use of sound business practices;
- Development of communications and training policies, particularly board training;
- Establishment of an effective and innovative distribution network.

After discussing Terry's approach and experiences with him, the 35 participants in the SSFPA forum broke into smaller groups and focused on whether and how a co-operative model could be used to develop regional food economies.

Common themes for a co-operative business model for small-scale food marketing:

- Express a clear and consistent vision.

- Build from the current infrastructure of producer and retail co-operatives, existing small-scale businesses and organizations, and First Nations communities.
- Draw inspiration (and perhaps mentoring) from successful



- enterprises like OntarBio Co-op.
- Support opportunities for people to develop products, form buying clubs for inputs, share commercial kitchens and product testing, and market and distribute goods

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“Co-operation & the Small Producer: Creating Regional Food Economies”

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Summary of Forum (continued)

- Focus on local product development, with regional branding programs.
- Provide systems for education, research (including consumer education), peer mentoring, and two-way communications.
- Build structures that honour the diversity, geography and history of our farms and communities, including First Nations.
- Develop a voice for the small food sector so that standards, regulations, and liability requirements are practical and reasonable.
- Create HIGH QUALITY products.

The forum suggested that BCCA provide:

- Mentoring in terms of co-operative and general business development
- Resource inventories, research, and tools
- Risks/benefits analyses
- Assistance in access to finance issues

While the BCCA’s AGM took place in the afternoon,

SSFPA hosted a second session, featuring discussions with two of its partners, the Growing Green project (represented by Kathleen Gibson) and Farm Folk/City Folk (represented by Heather Pritchard). See the boxes below for more details on these organizations.

Afterwards, SSFPA co-chairs Pattie Whitehouse and Godfrey Ferguson signed a Memo of Understanding with representatives from Farm Folk/City Folk. The two associations are now collaborating on a plan to develop a flexible marketing/distribution network. The purpose of the network is to address the challenging needs and principles determined by participants during BCCA’s “Co-operation and the Small-Scale Producer: Creating Regional Food Economies” forum, facilitated by SSFPA.



Representatives of SSFPA and FF/CF sign a Memo of Understanding (MOU). Information on this MOU is available upon request.

Next Steps to Create a Regional Marketing Cooperative

- Work from a vision, a solid business foundation, marketing knowledge.
- Specialize in what we have developed skills in and connect with others that like to do the other things in value chain.
- Develop partnerships and use existing local infrastructure
- Start with benefits (i.e., buying/selling clubs) for shelf-ready goods.
- Form regional partnerships of producers and processors.
- Develop federal certified, community kitchens coordinated with farmers’ markets.
- Develop inventories of existing kitchens.
- Build relationships with Western Diversification and Community Futures Development Association.
- Focus on just-in-time processing and regional in-season products.

SSFPA Partner: Farm Folk/ City Folk

FarmFolk/CityFolk (FF/CF) is a non-profit society which supports:

- Access to healthy food.
- Promoting the right to know the source and content of food.
- Supporting local, small-scale production.
- Encouraging healthy financial returns to farmers.
- Encouraging healthy growing methods.
- Preserving farmland in BC.
- Working with multicultural communities.
- Developing local Food Councils.

FF/CF offers:

- A popular resource library, web site, and quarterly newsletter.
- Expertise on food issues.
- Annual “Feast of Fields” celebrations.

For more information, see www.ffcf.bc.ca.

SSFPA Partner: Growing Green

Growing Green is a law and policy reform project. Its focus is on federal, provincial and local law and policy as it applies to growing food in and around BC’s urban areas. Its priorities include:

- Establishing a Food Council in the Lower Mainland.
- Showcasing model Official Community Plans and bylaws for agriculture/food.
- Contributing to provincial public health legislation; connecting, in particular, food security as key to public health.
- Working with the SSFPA and others to identify regulatory incentives and barriers to strengthening small-scale food processing businesses in BC.

For more information, see www.ffcf.bc.ca/GrowingGreen.html.

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