



TRENDS WE'RE SEEING: REINVENTING THE AGRIFOOD SECTOR

Vancouver Island has always been a prime food production region and was home to some of the earliest commercial agricultural operations in BC. The sector was diverse, once yielding up to 90% of the region's food needs. Today, the region supplies only 10% of its food needs.

In the past few decades, the agri-food industry has seen significant change. The consolidation of supply managed operations has led to a decrease in animal production and a generational shift has seen new producers focused on small scale, specialty food production and high value food processing.

In a 2012 partnership between ICET and the Province of BC, a 'Framework for Action' was developed to help strengthen and grow the agricultural sector. In 2014, the Cowichan Valley undertook a **study**, with ICET funding support, to identify barriers and opportunities for expanding food processing in the region.

Since then, the region has seen a wide range of agri-food related initiatives which speak to the recommendations in these two reports.

In the Cowichan Valley, a Land Match Program addresses one of the key challenges to attracting younger farmers - providing affordable access to farmland - by connecting new farmers with landowners looking to lease their land.

Other innovative community-led initiatives include the Cowichan Green Community's Food Recovery project, which has reclaimed over 40,000 lbs of unwanted foods destined for the landfill and redirected them to sustainable streams like animal feed and compost. The group's ICET supported **Seed Farm Incubator project**, also addressed security and quality issues around local seed production, creating a seed production social enterprise.

The next step for the Cowichan Valley is a Food Processing Strategy. Through

consultation amongst regional food processors, education and health institutions, beverage-sector producers and others, the project will quantify demand for local food inputs and new shared production opportunities.

"This data will help us identify demand for locally grown and processed foods, including institutional demand," explained Amy Melmock, Manager of Economic Development Cowichan. "We will then be able to move forward on shared resources for processing, quality assurance, distribution, or other innovations which can support small scale food operations."

The reinvention of the agri-food sector is leading to innovative tech startups and migration into the region. In the Cowichan Valley, EIO Diagnostics is successfully pioneering new technology to screen cows for mastitis, with early global adoption success. In the Comox Valley, Anandia Laboratories is nearing completion on a

\$20M innovation and testing facility for the cannabis sector.

The Comox Valley is leveraging agri-innovation in traditional agriculture as well as emerging areas such as e-commerce, pharmaceuticals and biotech. A new **Agriculture, Agri-food and Seafood Innovation Strategy**, currently in development, will serve as a long-term roadmap for future development of the sector.

Campbell River is a community which has been reinventing itself, with a focus on a more knowledge-based economy.

"Campbell River is not top of mind when it comes to agricultural production," explained Rose Klukas, Economic Development Officer for the City of Campbell River. "However our efforts to build out the tech ecosystem have continually uncovered agri-food as an area to add value."

This new focus is driving the community to look at sectors such as agriculture and agri-food with a different lens. In partnership with North Island College, the city will deliver an agri-incubation workshop series, with potential for more intensive programming and supports down the road.

While communities are looking at novel ways to transform the sector, ICET supported regional marketing initiatives are leveraging strengths in small-scale food production as a destination for culinary visitors.

The emergence of the craft beverage sector in the region is one of the dominant agri-food trends, with award-winning wines, spirits, ciders and beers. Initiatives such as the BC Ale Trail, or the Wayward Distillery, Merridale Ciders and **Townsite Brewery Economusée** locations, are successfully leveraging small scale craft beverage producers into experiential agri-tourism destinations.

The **"Island Good"** campaign is an example of regional collaboration focused on the agri-food sector. By branding and promoting food products grown or produced on Vancouver Island, to both visitors and residents, the campaign aims to increase the strength of the local food economy.

Another example is the BC Farmers' Markets Trail, which is creating direct sales channels connecting producers to visitors and locals. The new Island and Coast **regional showcase** provides trip planning information and landing pages for several dozen markets, providing in-depth features, imagery, farmer and product profiles.

Through a range of initiatives, from agri-food innovation to regional marketing, the region is scaling up its opportunities in small scale and niche food production and processing, finding favour with local markets and exporting its unique offerings to the global marketplace.