

CASE STUDY: CLOVERBELT LOCAL FOOD CO-OP

*Contributions to the emergence
of the Northern Ontario resilient
and connected food hub*

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Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op

Social Innovation

- First on-line food Co-op in Ontario
- Provides marketing and distribution system for local producers and processors
- Producer and processor driven as each producer/processor maintains their own on-line profile, determines products to sell on a weekly basis, sets pricing, sets weekly quantities for sale of each of their products, and decides on number of annual weeks of participation
- Scaling up to distribute local food throughout northwestern Ontario

Overview

The Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op is located in Dryden, Ontario, a community of 8,000. There are historic roots in agriculture due to the unique Wabigoon Clay Belt. This arable soil was deposited by glacial Lake Agassiz after the last ice age, along with much of the soil in Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota and even some of Saskatchewan. Dryden is experiencing a back-to-the-land movement, drawn by cheap land, clean water and air, and attractive lifestyle and landscape. The area proves suitable for grains, vegetable produce, and a diversity of meats – beef, pork, buffalo, rabbit, fish and poultry. Dryden is the geopolitical centre of Northwestern Ontario that is proving to be a huge asset to scaling up to distribute local food through the region.

Through extensive community input and effort, the Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op (CLFC) was launched in 2013 to fill a gap in accessing local food in the Dryden area. CLFC offers an on-line market [www.cloverbeltlocalfoodcoop.com] that enhances access to local food between producers and consumers. Prior to the formation of CLFC, access to local food primarily was done directly with farms, CSA weekly basket shares in-season or at weekly in-season farmer markets.

The Cloverbelt Local Food Co-Op, incorporated on August 20, 2013, allows local consumers to connect with local farmers from the comfort of their own homes. The first round of orders was on December 2, 2013 linking local food producers to a growing market of consumers. As explained by Jen Springett, President of the CLFC Board, *“The hope from the beginning was that the ease of marketing and distribution would be attractive to next-generation consumers and local farmers, in addition to being more readily accommodated in a two income-family’s schedule with young children, after-school sports and life.”*

Consumer members of the Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op each pay \$25 for one lifetime membership share which gives them the opportunity to make monthly orders of everything from locally raised and produced meats, vegetables, jam and preserves, homemade soaps and wild plant products like frozen blueberries, dried wild mushrooms and herbal teas (*15/01/14 Dryden Observer Milestone*). The order cycle opens on Saturday at 2 p.m., allowing members to place their orders online until 10 a.m. Monday. The orders are assembled and ready for pickup on Tuesdays between 4-6 p.m.

Producers each pay \$50 for a lifetime membership and 5% of sales toward operation costs. Local producer Calista Livingston, of Earth Spirit, explains: *There is no commitment, she says, we can produce what we want, or what we have time for and then put it on the website.* This ease of order and delivery has gained Earth Spirit, and other local producers valuable exposure and an added market. Livingston explains, *“Most people think you have to wait until summer to shop at the farmer’s market, but that’s not the case anymore”* (*02/14 Dryden Observer Eating Local Has Never Been Easier*).

The Cloverbelt Local Food Co-operative (CLFC) aims to strengthen food security by encouraging diverse local food production, thereby enhancing overall rural sustainability. This includes locally harvested wild morel and chanterelle mushrooms and blueberries. Off-season sales of morel mushrooms are a sun-dried product and blueberries are sold frozen. Moreover, the Co-op is committed to supporting forest and freshwater food entrepreneurs for the added benefits of including wild foods in our diets as they are typically higher in nutrients than their commercial counterparts. In addition, these wild foods occur naturally, which means when harvested sustainably, they are an environmentally friendly option (fertilizers, water, and the burning of fuel to prepare soil were not necessary), and they were not sprayed with herbicides or pesticides (*19/03/14 Dryden Observer Schupe Local Food Profile*). Another unique product comes from local buffalo farms where naturally grown buffalo is available as roasts, steaks, pepperettes and locally made sausage (*03/19/14 Dryden Observer Buffalo Local Food*).

Thus, the CLFC strives to foster a thriving local food community by:

- cultivating and facilitating farmer-consumer relationships;
- promoting the enjoyment of naturally grown, fairly priced, healthy food;
- providing education and resources regarding environmentally sensitive agriculture.

Springett sums up CLFC by explaining: *It’s about better food, fresher food, sustainable practices, and making meal time more enjoyable for everyone!*

CLFC is guided by a seven-member volunteer Board of Directors. Operational and strategic decisions are made at the Board level. CLFC has a Distribution Coordinator, a newly hired Marketing Manager and an NOHFC intern to assist with communication and web development and input. The current President of CLFC plays a pivotal leadership role in coordinating the continued growth of CLFC, communication with supporters and grant sources, and the development of sustainable funding. CLFC also has a core group of community volunteers that assist on Tuesdays to receive food from producers and sort for distribution to consumers.

Impact & Benefits

CLFC has seen tremendous growth in their first year of operation, where CLFC sales exceeded \$150,000! That's a remarkable investment for local producers, processors and the Dryden area economy.

CLFC has a network of over fifty producers and processors that sell through the co-op. Many of which have been profiled in Dryden Observer articles (*04/14 Table Bakery Vermillion Bay, 05/14 Beth and Will Local Food Producer Profile, 08/14 Busters Barbecue Smoked Meats*). Cloverbelt feels that community partnerships are the key to their ongoing success. CLFC has tremendous community support from agricultural, horticultural, business and economic development associations. There is overwhelming community support to grow the co-op and make local food availability a reality. The nearly 500 hundred members represents about 5% of the community population, an amazing achievement for one year.

CLFC's impact includes reaching out to schools where youth can gain awareness of the benefits of local food including participation in community civic service by assisting in the Tuesday sorting process. For example, Madame Lynn Konkle's Grade 8 French Immersion class at St. Joseph's school in Dryden has been inspired by the Cloverbelt Local Food Co-Op's donation of a garden plot to their school and has begun serving fresh food to their peers through their weekly *Bistro Santé*. Using donated fresh foods, Madame Konkle's class researches and prepares a menu incorporating the items received, which she says helps to not only teach the kids to use what they have and save for the days when they don't have so much (i.e. Freezing zucchini) but also helps to connect them to the source of their food. *They know that the food has to be grown first and that it's good to grow your own food so that you don't have pesticides and stuff, but many of them don't know where the food comes from, they don't know that a carrot grows underground or where celery comes from, so it's good for them to learn that. (Madame Konkle)*

Learning through hands on experience incites interest in most students and Mitchell Turcotte (student) says he jumped at the chance to have such a wonderful opportunity. (29/10/14 *Dryden Observer Bistro Sante School French*). At Open Roads School Marisica Ferrielo, Grade 5 Teacher, has initiated 'Fresh Food Fridays' where here Grade 5 students prepare healthy food snacks for the whole school (24/09/14 *Dryden Observer*). In addition, Ferrielo has engaged her students in greenhouse tours and assisting CLFC in sorting weekly food boxes. Open Roads will have a plot in the CLFC greenhouse. Through these school initiatives, students are becoming more mindful of how food impacts their health and furthers awareness of career options in local agriculture.

CLFC, within their first year, has demonstrated how shopping locally keeps dollars within the region, stimulates jobs, helps enhance food security and the accessibility to fresh local foods.

Opportunities for Growth

There are lots of opportunities to grow the breadth and depth of local food offerings through the co-op. They currently have enough supply of certain items, but do not have enough poultry, eggs or veggies to keep up with consumer demand. As interest from consumers continues to grow, producers and processors will be challenged to keep pace.

Even before the recently announced planned expansion to distribute local food across Northwestern Ontario has officially been launched, producers and processors from outside the Dryden area have already been attracted to participate in CLFC where they are now responsible for their own deliveries each Tuesday (23/04/14 *Dryden Observer Jeff Burke*, 15/05/14 *Dryden Observer Local Food Producer Profile: Rainy River Meats on the Last Art of Local*). Many of these out-of-Dryden area producers are coordinating shared distribution to CLFC. Another out-of-town major local food producer has arranged for freezer space in Dryden. These self-organizing producer/processor initiatives are proving the value and need for a Northwestern Ontario NWO FoodEx distribution system.

It is too early in CLFC's growth to adequately service low-income customers or institutions. However, already CLFC has two schools that are members. CLFC has donated local food produce to two school classroom food activities.

Cloverbelt has been fortunate to work with other innovative food hubs and producers to manage their growth. CLFC worked extensively with the Nebraska and Oklahoma Food Co-operatives [<https://www.nebraskafood.org/>] in the United States for the creation of an accessible open-source software program for their

online store, as well as for sorting out logistics like transportation (29/10/14 *Dryden Observer Nebraska Co-op Studying Cloverbelt's Successes*).

Recently, CLFC forged a partnership with Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) dedicated to “creating local opportunities and sustainable solutions to improve food security for all remote communities.” KI is a remote First Nations community located 435 kilometres north of Sioux Lookout. As a producer member for Cloverbelt, KI will sell locally crafted items to the online co-operative store in Dryden. (19/11/14 *Dryden Observer Northern Community working with Cloverbelt Co-op to Address Food Security*) This partnership is innovative as it's the first producer member from a fly-in only Northern Ontario community. It's hoped that this partnership will build sustainability and resiliency in both communities and serve as a model for expansion.

With the recent announcement of \$50,000 from FedNor for CLFC for support of a regional Northwestern Ontario food distribution system (Northwestern Ontario FoodEx), many of the current challenges of matching enough producers to consumers without burdening producers/processors with having to be responsible for their own transportation will be addressed. With the new transportation system there will be more opportunities to sell local food and have access to it. Additional regional hub pick-up points will be established. Many partner supporters will assist including the Food Security Research Network whose mandate focuses on building a resilient Northwestern Ontario local food system (<http://www.cbc.ca/superiormorning/episodes/2015/01/06/dryden-cloverbelt-co-op/>).

Specifically, the project will implement a comprehensive mapping study on shared-use food processing facilities, food systems, distribution networks, and the receptor capacity of remote First Nations. The project involves the collection and compilation of new and existing data about Northwestern Ontario's food network including: local food production, processing and distribution, storage, marketing, retail food stores and outlets, and nutrition and agricultural institutions. The resource mapping will then lead to developing a geo-spatial online tool to provide end-users with reliable information in one location. This information will also feed into the further development of the current Open Food Source (OFS) software that is in use by CLFC to expand the existing distribution network throughout the region and attract new consumers and producers.

Through a crowd-funding initiative inspired through networking with the Food Security Research Network, \$10,000 dollars was raised to build on Dryden District Agricultural Society land a greenhouse. Through huge community support the ground has been leveled, the 32' x 148' greenhouse has been purchased, disassembled and reassembled on the new CLFC site and eighteen 4' x 12' raised garden beds have been built.

Fifty percent of this greenhouse space is to be used by CLFC to extend the season for local sales of fresh vegetable and herb produce. The other 50% is available for community groups and schools for their own social entrepreneurship activities that can enhance revenue and access to local fresh food and keep dollars circulating locally. The Rural Agriculture Innovation Network (RAIN), another innovation reported on as part of the Northern Ontario case study has through a FedNor sponsored program SNAP (Sustainable Northern Agriculture Program) provided a greenhouse irrigation system, roll-up electric ventilation blinds, and plastic for the greenhouse cover. Thus, the connectedness between these northern Ontario innovations is reaching between eastern and western Northern Ontario.

Challenges & Limitations

As an organization in the start-up stages, external funding is still a requirement for staffing. It's hoped that in the coming year that CLFC will have grown enough to sustain the current one year contract position of Market Coordinator funded through the provincial Local Food Fund.

The benefits of the online store are the lower overhead and retail requirements (staffing), but the main drawback is the distance between communities and the barriers posed by transportation logistics. This challenge will soon be addressed through the expansion to a regional food transportation system – Northwestern Ontario FoodEx.

Most of the farmers are past retirement age, yet they STILL actively participate in the Co-op – even though it's operated online and they are not always computer savvy. They bring vast knowledge of how to grow in the Wabigoon Clay Belt and are emerging as mentors for new farm start-ups in the area.

One of the key challenges for attracting new farm start-ups is the current Farm Credit Corporations approach to what they label as “marginal” or “nonviable” areas. Commercial banks do not currently lend money to farm operations unless the FCC is at the table where FCC largely finances commercial-scale farm purchases. By not lending money to operations on the edge of established farm areas, or beyond the edge, they effectively force the farmed area to shrink. Changing the focus of Farm Credit Corporation from one of denying funding outside the main agricultural areas to one of preferentially lending on the edges and margins - special treatment for the ‘Frontier’ – would be very beneficial to the growth of producers in the local area.

As food security is addressed through the growth of regional local food, there is growing awareness of how current food system safety regulations have evolved to address issues that arise from large-scale production and transportation of food. Many of these current provincial and federal legislatively controlled regulations need to be revisited to be streamlined to fit smaller producers, and additional supports are needed to reduce input costs for growers and processors.

At the producer/processor level, regulatory quotas pose a problem for smaller-scale, rural and remote producers. These regulations prohibit growth in certain areas and do not reflect the scale or realities of the emerging Northwestern Ontario food hub system. Some producers are using the Locally Verified marketing feature offered by Farmers Markets of Ontario, but generally, the “southern Ontario” approach to food systems is not relevant to northern producers. Most producers find that organic certification procedures and related costs are impractical.

Visions for the Future

CLFC has grown a tremendous amount in a short period of time. Their goal is to increase visibility and access to local food in the community of Dryden and to support growth of regional local food through the development of a regional local food distribution system. As infrastructure, producer and consumer support grows, CLFC hopes to expand their network to reach more of Northwestern Ontario.

CLFC also aims to support producers, consumers and other organizations involved in local food production and distribution through educational and training opportunities and supports.

Keys of Success

- Tremendous community support from City of Dryden (www.dryden.ca), economic development office (<http://www.edco.on.ca/organization/dryden-development-corporation>), PACE Patricia Area Community Endeavors (www.pace-cf.on.ca), and NTAB Northwestern Training and Adjustment Board (www.ntab.on.ca)
- CLFC has created a system that provides the flexibility needed by small-scale producer/processor operations. Production quotas are set by the producers/processors thus allowing for independence in choosing when to participate or not and in price setting. This approach accommodates

seasonal fluctuations and also allows the single or small-scale producers and processors to have time to accommodate holidays. Thus, CLFC emphasizes a place-based approach to local food system marketing and distribution.

- By having producers/processors pay a 5% of sales fee, CLFC has become within one year sustainable in supporting a distribution coordinator and having additional funds to support new initiatives.
- Active networking within and outside the community to tap appropriate resources. This has resulted in very dense connectivity.

Recognition

- 2014 & District Dryden Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Award in Environmental Stewardship
- 2014 Premier's Agri-innovation Award

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<http://cloverbeltlocalfoodcoop.com>