

CASE STUDY: NORTHEAST COMMUNITY NETWORK

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

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Northeast Community Network (NeCN)

Social Innovation

- NeCN is a created diverse catchment area of 12 municipalities, 4 federally funded Community Futures Development Corporations and two First Nations communities.
- NeCN was formed to explore innovative approaches to facing challenges of rural forest-based communities.
- NeCN aims to engage in innovative strategies to build a resilient regional area that is self-sufficient in energy, clean water and food production.
- Food security is viewed as a pivotal justification for renewing interest in agriculture given the current distances to outside agricultural/agri-industrial based sources.
- NeCN emphasizes the shared value placed on the vibrant past history of agriculture as an important cultural landscape.

Overview

Agriculture has a long history in Cochrane District based upon the favourable soils of the Northern Clay Belt and adequate crop heat units. However, since a peak in the mid-1900s, this industry has experienced a decline with an economic shift towards other resource-based industries such as forestry and mining. Today, municipalities within NeCN's boundaries recognize the importance of diversifying the economy to include agriculture once again so as to neutralize the 'boom and bust' cycles of forestry and mining.

The Northeast Community Network (NeCN) is an incorporated, regional, not-for-profit organization that promotes collaborative economic development, applied research and support for tourism, mining, agriculture sectors, as well as business development services. NeCN services communities in the Cochrane District primarily located along TransCanada Highway 11 from Black River-Matheson to Hearst. Their vision is *a community network which employs innovative strategies for economic development to create sustainable and resilient community systems by working toward self-sufficiency in energy, clean water, and food production.* (<http://www.opportunitiesnortheastontario.ca/index.php/about-us/>)

NeCN's objectives are to create and promote regional coordination of resource opportunities in the NeCN region by:

- Seeking ideas from the communities about how to achieve regional stability, recovery, growth and diversification;
- Conducting studies and research on regional resources and identifying regional economic development needs;
- Advocating on behalf of the NeCN with various federal and provincial ministries;
- Creating partnerships and cooperating with universities, colleges and private sector partners involved in developing sustainable energy and food projects.

To initiate and promote regional economic development projects that:

- Assist and encourage entrepreneurs to start-up a business or expand existing businesses toward developing self-sufficiency in energy, clean water, and food production;
- Provide technical advice (updated continuously) and assistance to develop resource-based projects.

To encourage all economic development opportunities in all sectors:

- Working in partnership with community regional stakeholders;
- Promoting the cultural diversification in the NeCN region.

To anticipate future changes so that the communities are prepared to deal with them by:

- Assessing the impact of those changes in the local and regional economy;
- Seeking community input to build a regional vision for the NeCN region.

Integrating municipalities/First Nations, local economic development organizations and the private sector, the NeCN undertakes regional projects that help transform the economic landscape of Northeastern Ontario. Through its activities the NeCN aims to increase the competitive capacity of the region and enhance its attractiveness to potential investors, entrepreneurs and in-migrants. As explained by Stéphanie Boucher, past NeCN Regional Coordinator, *“NeCN provides leadership as we move to align our efforts and resources toward regional development”*.

NeCN has a Board of Directors from varying government, private and non-profit sectors. Committees include catchment area representatives from all levels (government, for profit, and non-profit). Strategic decisions are made at the Board and Committee levels, and operational decisions are made at the Committee/Staffing levels.

Northeastern Community Network (NeCN) acts as a liaison to help agriculture producers start and build their businesses in the ‘Northern Clay Belt’. The

Northern Clay Belt, is home to rich and fertile soil suitable area for growing crops. The Canada Land Inventory has identified 4.4 million acres of the Northern Clay Belt as Class 2, 3 or 4, which are suitable for cultivation. This region accounts for 9.3% of Ontario's Class 2 Land, 50.4% of Ontario's Class 3 Land, and 67.8% of Ontario's Class 4 Land.

(<http://www.opportunitiesnortheastontario.ca/index.php/the-northern-clay-belt-soils/>)

NeCN's role is to facilitate opportunities in the agriculture sector in their region. They connect producers with supports to get them started or to expand. NeCN is helping to slowly build capacity for an expanded agricultural economy in Northeastern Ontario.

NeCN is currently focusing on the following agricultural food production projects:

- 1) To promote available farmlands in the region;
- 2) Work with Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC) to help farmers get funding for start-up or expansion costs, or for tile drainage and land clearing;
- 3) Promote the Sustainable Northern Agricultural Program (SNAP) program/funding to farmers and agri-entrepreneurs in their area;
- 4) Agricultural food crop trials;
- 5) Build capacity by sharing best practices and new opportunities.

Impact & Benefits

NeCN's agricultural focus is a natural complement to the focus on tourism and mining which has dominated the Northeastern Ontario region for decades. Agricultural production is growing in the NeCN region. Agriculture production and expansion provides a viable economic base from which to grow and diversify the local economy. Currently, there is enough supply to meet demand, but as awareness of, and demand for, local food grows, so will production.

The tile drainage initiative has been instrumental in helping to boost production for farmers. The research on the Northern Claybelt soil fertility was instrumental in promoting the agriculture opportunities in the area. As a result, the region is seeing provincial, national and even international interest in available agricultural land.

The NeCN catchment area has some small Farmers Markets operating on a seasonal basis. Many producers also sell at farm gate. NeCN is working to help build capacity for producers, as well as increase awareness and interest from local and regional consumers to expand opportunities to purchase local food.

Opportunities for Growth

There are tremendous opportunities for growth within NeCN. If more of the available lands are purchased and converted to farmlands, or grazing pastures, this could increase yields. If the tile drainage program is expanded, this could help increase yields for both new and existing producers. Increasing agriculture land prices in Southern Ontario and forecasts for climate change that may enhance agricultural opportunities both support a renewed interest in agriculture in the NECN catchment area. Increases in agricultural production can then have a 'trickle down' effect on local abattoirs and other production infrastructure facilities can also increase.

Currently there are one million underutilized acres in the region that could be converted to agriculture. NeCN wants to grow agriculture "one step at a time". First they will attract and support the producers. Opportunities exist for produce, meat, dairy, and grain crops. Secondly, once supply is available, the focus will shift to distribution to consumers.

Strengths of the NECN catchment area include good road networks and connectivity with ample truck transportation services along the TransCanada Highway 11. Support is available from nearby research stations, agriculture associations and grain storage facilities.

Challenges & Limitations

The NECN catchment area seems very favourable toward agriculture expansion from a soils/climate perspective. The biggest challenge has been the very short growing season for crops in the region. The tile drainage program is addressing this concern and allowing producers to extend their season and outputs. This can open up more opportunity for consumer interest in local food sources.

Another ongoing challenge, as with all other producers in Northwestern and Northeastern Ontario, is the issue of transportation. NeCN's catchment area covers a large distance. Kapuskasing to Hearst is a three hour drive in good weather. Transportation logistics require significant resources and planning.

Lastly, many provincial regulations are designed for large-scale farming operations and may hinder growth due to excessive regulatory and administrative filing requirements for smaller-scale operations.

Visions for the Future

Once production is ramped up, the next step is to increase infrastructure like greenhouses, grain storage, production facilities, etc. to allow for greater yields and wider distribution. Alongside this are ongoing marketing and outreach campaigns to potential consumers.

There are many agricultural opportunities within NeCN's catchment area. With the right supports, agriculture could become a sustainable industry in the region. NeCN is building capacity at the grassroots/producer level first, and then focusing on market expansion and distribution.

Strategies for Success

NeCN is innovative in their approach to diversifying and solidifying their regional economy. As a primarily forestry and mining region, NeCN has helped to build and grow a third pillar of agriculture that is emerging as an economic mainstay in the region.

NeCN is working with producers to implement innovative practices and procedures such as tile drainage to improve the agricultural and economic viability of the region.

NeCN is fortunate to work with the Rural Agriculture Innovation Network (RAIN) to share lessons learned, to explore new ideas and to cooperatively work on potential opportunities. Having other networks as supports means a stronger agricultural community.

NeCN sees its role as a liaison between producers and funders/regulatory bodies as a crucial first step in expanding the local agricultural sector through accessing start-up funds and expansion capital. NeCN is a catalyst for creating a viable food production system in their region.

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