

FOOD HUB CASE STUDY

Eastern Ontario Food Hub Constellation September 2015

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Eastern Ontario Food Hub Constellation

Rationale

This food hub constellation consists of three independent food hub initiatives (the Ottawa Food Hub, Two Rivers Food Hub, and the Eastern Ontario Agri-Food Network food hub initiative) that are closely related in their development, and serve geographically overlapping markets in Eastern Ontario and to some extent South-Western Québec. Each of these three hubs has its own history, unique organizational form, and scale. However, what they have in common is an intertwined shared historical development and recognition that they need to work closely together to ensure that each one can live up to its mandate, while maximizing synergies and avoiding duplication of services to both producers and consumers. The recognition of the need to work closely together came out of conversations amongst members of The Eastern Ontario Local Food and Farming Collaborative, a coalition of non-profit organizations working together to support local food and farming in Eastern Ontario. While recognizing other food hubs in Eastern Ontario that focus on distributing local food to the household market, these three hubs (at different stages of development) aim to increase production, aggregation, processing, and distribution of local food at county levels while still thinking about larger regional development in the agri-food sector. Combining the three initiatives into a single case study offers some interesting perspectives on the experiences of collaborative, as opposed to competitive, food hub development. It must be noted, however, that each of these hubs is continually changing as they exist in an emerging sector that is shifting quickly. What we document here speaks to their status at this point in time. We cannot predict what the hubs will look like even a few months from now.

Background Information

Eastern Ontario Agri-Food Network

Eastern Ontario Agri-Food Network (EOAN) was incorporated in 2010 to promote local food, help producers become more commercially viable, and connect consumers to local food in the counties of Stormont, Dundas, Glengarry, Prescott and Russell. As a non-profit organization, EOAN relies on a volunteer board and one part-time paid coordinator who is supported by the United Counties of Prescott and Russell. Additional income has been obtained through membership fees (from producers, restaurants and businesses that support local food), nutritional labelling assistance, service fees from events, and provincial and federal government funding. Having completed a feasibility study with a consultant, the network is in the process of establishing a physical food hub with a commercial kitchen and a distribution centre that will facilitate its aggregation, processing and distribution efforts. Among its successes to date, the EOAN has developed a line of specialty branded beef products (to be sold locally) that come

from cattle that are raised and slaughtered within Eastern Ontario. The EOAN has also developed a refrigerated local food 'counter' (with accompanying interactive displays on the provenance of the food and its traceability) which has been established in an outlet of a major grocery store chain.

Ottawa Food Hub

The Ottawa Food Hub (OFH) is the result of more than three years of collaboration between Just Food Ottawa and Natural Gourmet to establish new components of the Ottawa Food Hub (OFH). Just Food Ottawa undertook a regional needs assessment, followed by a more formal distribution study, which pointed to the absence of a physical food hub in the Ottawa region to supply locally produced food in wholesale quantities to larger buyers. To fill such a gap, Just Food recognized that its own background in social enterprise and community economic development (including the establishment of the 'Savour Ottawa' brand for locally-produced foods) would be best complemented by a business with existing infrastructure and experience in food safety regulations, HACCP compliance, employee training, and selling to large retailers and institutions. This realization led to the partnership between Natural Gourmet (an existing food processing and distribution business in the region) and Just Food (an incorporated not-for-profit organization) to establish the Ottawa Food Hub.

The development of the OFH has been taking place in phases. One early step was the decision by Natural Gourmet to purchase the distribution business of Mountain Path to ensure that a grain operation existed in Eastern Ontario because increased grain production is an important component of the work (the Mountain Path milling operation was purchased by Homestead Organics). Another step was to build a season-extension processing kitchen on the premises of Natural Gourmet. The OFH partners are now working on putting all of the pieces in place (e.g. traceability and nutrition labelling) in order to have branded 'Ottawa Food Hub' product. A branded product will be aggregated from local farms in Eastern Ontario (and Western Québec) who are verified as local to this region. Verification is presently done through Savour Ottawa (a partnership with Farmers' Markets Ontario) – however this could shift to a broader Eastern Ontario verification. OFH-branded product will be distributed through Natural Gourmet's existing supply channels (which includes interested institutional buyers who have been waiting for the option to purchase aggregated local product) as well as new channels formulated through hub development. Investments into the Ottawa Food Hub's infrastructure are a combination of business loans (through Natural Gourmet), local government funding, foundation grants, and in-kind support. In particular, the partners' expertise, staff time, and volunteer hours have been essential for establishing the hub.

Two Rivers Food Hub

Two Rivers Food Hub developed from several years of local food efforts by the non-profit, non-government organization ecoPerth/Lanark Local Flavour. Based in Smiths Falls, the hub now has a large commercial kitchen and is working to establish a stronger aggregation and distribution operation. Currently, they are working with about 50 farmers, the smaller of which are organized into a multi-farmer CSA. The organization is just emerging from the umbrella of Rideau Community Health Services (whose Board oversaw the hub in its initial stages). Two Rivers was incorporated in March 2015 and now has 1.5 paid employees – a full-time general manager and a part-time coordinator. Their revenue comes from a combination of federal and local government funding, membership fees, donations from community members and local charities, food sales, and facility rental fees. In-kind contributions and volunteer time have also been instrumental in the development of this hub. The hub estimates that 25-30 dependable volunteers – those who volunteer regularly and over longer times – put in enough time to equal five full-time positions.

The challenge, as well as the opportunity, for these three hubs lies in the fact that they are geographically proximate to one another, and are based in overlapping markets. The two smaller hubs (EOAN and Two Rivers) each serve a distinct

regional market of suppliers and buyers (to the east of Ottawa in the case of the EOAN, and to the south-west of Ottawa in the case of Two Rivers), but producers from these regions also sell into the larger Ottawa market, which the Ottawa Food Hub is gearing up to supply more thoroughly. Furthermore, the Ottawa Food Hub, through Natural Gourmet, already has distribution networks in larger grocery store chains established in the counties that surround Ottawa. While there are differences in scale and scope among these three projects, there is overlap in their mandates and markets.



All of us in Eastern Ontario had to rely on each other because mainstream local food institutions all centre on Toronto. So we've all been building trust with each other. We all work together and that is the Eastern Ontario Local Food and Farming Collaborative.

-C. Nash, Two Rivers Food Hub

It's a matter of finding out how we can complement each other. Maybe we'll have a niche here that they don't and we'll need things that we don't have here. So we need to find a way for a regional complementary service and find how we can help each other.

-G. Bougie

The hubs developed out of initial shared discussions, and their ongoing shared interests mean that they continue to work together to discern how to best aggregate and distribute local food in the region.

Stories from Up and Down the Supply Chain

Each of the three hubs (represented by the non-profit organizations that worked to establish them) conducted a regional assessment (using shared assessment tools) of local farmers, businesses, and institutions to try to understand what stakeholders in their areas would need in order to distribute more local food. For the EOAN, support for a regional hub has spurred a food hub feasibility study currently being conducted by a Gatineau-based consulting company. The study surveys various hub initiatives around North America and will recommend a model for EOAN to follow, taking into consideration local circumstances. Funding for the study has come from all three levels of government. A formal business plan will follow the feasibility study. Expressed support from the Two Rivers regional assessment led to the creation of an ad-hoc steering committee to complete a business plan for the hub, which was completed in the summer of 2014. The plan was approved by various stakeholders (the farming community, buyers and municipal administrators) and this initiated lease negotiations with various locations in the Smith Falls region. Smith Falls was chosen due to its centrality amidst the counties of Leeds, Lanark and Grenville. The hub was eventually established at the Gallipeau Centre in Smith Falls. For Just Food, a formal distribution study followed from the regional assessment in the Ottawa region, which surveyed both for-profit businesses (restaurants, caterers, hotels, etc.), as well as public institutions – both larger (hospitals, universities, colleges) and smaller (community organizations, daycares). It became clear that a sufficient number of producers and buyers were willing to pay for the service of aggregation and distribution. The relationship between Just Food and Natural Gourmet developed quickly, as both espouse similar social values including support for local producers and ensuring an environmentally sustainable regional food system.

The assessments from each of the three regions of Eastern Ontario indicate that this cluster of hubs addresses real regional needs. First, the goal of these hubs is to establish viable farm operations that can contribute to larger-scale food aggregation. Distribution may not be all that difficult, as existing distributors can be utilized, once the production is revitalized. Setting up a hub is a complicated and long process in the current context where local infrastructure and small farming have been virtually dismantled.

The next challenge to address is the one faced by many local producers – to find the appropriate price points. When selling locally, there is no added cost of long-distance transportation, but the product often comes from producers who are not mass-producing. There are also differences in farms' labour requirements, available subsidies, and adherence to ecological management that all affect the cost of production. A hub can allow for some scaling up within groups of producers to balance the fair price for them with affordability for the buyer, so the cost of the hub service becomes a worthwhile investment.

At Two Rivers, many of the farms that work with the hub are very small and in these instances scaling up takes the shape of assisting new farms with becoming established. Several 'emerging' farmers are not quite in a position to run a CSA by themselves, so they operate as part of a multi-farmer CSA. Aggregating and distributing their produce through the hub allows them to focus on establishing their farms and worrying less about marketing. "This is part of our principles, we want to go where the farming community wants to be. This is where [these eight farmers] want to be, so it's happening right now," notes Nash.

Much of this is a balancing act, as Nash describes:

What's in demand and what we have the capacity of supplying are two different things. We are going to where the farming community is. Right now, that is animal production – beef, lamb, pork. We [also] have the CSA piece. And there are crops that are easy to scale up without lots of infrastructure, so things like garlic, surpluses of berries and tree fruits of all sorts and root crops. The tricky stuff is perishables, like salad mix. I see some of that happening this year, probably not a lot. I see this to be more likely driven by advanced purchases or advanced scheduled production. For instance, Kudrinko's [¹] may say to us, 'we want a minimum of 15 pounds of salad mix a week through the next growing season,' and we will organize and schedule that production. So it's those highly perishable products that are going to be tricky.

To make things even more challenging, the demand is not a stable entity. Nash continues: "It moves daily. Two Rivers Food Hub moves like a river. It changes daily, depending on opportunities that are available, doors that open, doors that are shut. In part that's because of how volatile the local food value chain is in Eastern Ontario."

Impacts and Benefits

EOAN already offers a range of services for members and the larger community that includes marketing and branding assistance, business management guidance, food safety training, nutrition or cooking education, education about food systems and food donation to local food banks. The network also has partnerships with Healthy Eating for Better Learning (which is focused on getting local fresh produce into schools) and Growing Up Organic (which offers school programming as well as trying to get local produce into schools). Food donations are expected to become a mandated activity for the food hub, partly to ensure that fresh food gets to food banks and partly to address the issue of waste which sometimes occurs when a particular crop is ready for harvest in excessive

¹ Local grocer in Westport, see Kudrinko's case study in this report.

quantities. The EOAN members are already donating food and in the spring of 2015 the network supported an information session (organized by the Agapè Center, a food bank in Cornwall) with an accountant to provide the producers with information about the new 25% provincial tax credit on donated produce. “It’s nice because farmers have been doing that for a long time with no compensation,” states Fritsch-Paquette.

One of EOAN’s big successes has been the establishment of the local food counter at a national grocery chain store (the Metro store in Casselman). The counter offers a rare opportunity for consumers to conveniently access local products in a large grocery store – and every day, in contrast to once-a-week farmers’ markets. While small grocers in the area already carry some products, such as eggs, this counter is also an excellent way to promote local food to consumers who may not yet be actively seeking those products. The counter has facilitated an initial entry point for producers who would otherwise have a difficult time penetrating that market on individual basis. Because of its non-profit status, the EOAN was also able to access some marketing and traceability funding that may have not been directly available to individual producer enterprises.

Ottawa Food Hub’s initial focus has been on establishing infrastructure to support some of the requests that came out of the feasibility study and the regional assessment. To that end they have established a processing kitchen with season-extension equipment, coolers, freezer space, and a variety of slicing, dehydrating, cooking and baking equipment, available for one-time processing or on an ongoing basis. In terms of distribution, sourcing locally verified food and supporting local producers is a priority. Only if the product is not available in the Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec catchment is the product then sourced from elsewhere in Ontario (and this approach distinguishes the Ottawa Food Hub from the other two hubs in the cluster, which do not intend to source products from elsewhere). At this point, Natural Gourmet has been able to incorporate more local product into its existing supply channels, however, full integration of local food as an option for buyers depends on (re)building the capacity to produce local food at sufficient quantities. Thus, a main priority for the Ottawa Food Hub is to support the development of local food production. Consequently, providing the infrastructure for that development is critical. “The reality is that Just Food is supporting a broad food and farming system, which means supporting a whole wide range of businesses that have diverse needs with respect to scaling up,” says Garahan. Once there is more local food produced, the Ottawa Food Hub will be able to leverage Natural Gourmet’s existing supply channels. Natural Gourmet is already the main vendor of fruits and vegetables to Hospital Food Services, a non-profit organization that provides food services to Ottawa’s hospitals.

The ‘Community Food Hub’ is another aspect of the Ottawa Food Hub project, though it represents its own operation. This operation aims to provide fresh and

nutritious food to local organizations that combat food insecurity (e.g., school breakfast programs, seniors' meals, shelters, food banks, community food initiatives, good food markets, and mobile markets). Agencies and initiatives working to increase access to food for those who are most food insecure have to prioritize securing fresh, nutritious, affordable food. The origin of that food has to be secondary to what they do. The Community Food Hub will incorporate local food when possible, but not at the cost of affordability, partly because food access also remains a core part of Just Food's mandate. It is a non-profit, with management fees from Natural Gourmet being provided pro-bono. Says Garahan: "The CFH is genuinely a community-minded project."

Two Rivers is another already-established hub and is, at the time of the writing, launching a number of branded products. For example, it is creating its own brand of beef and lamb. As well, produce from multiple farms is being processed at the hub's commercial kitchen and branded under the Two Rivers name.

Two Rivers is also supporting Meals on Wheels, a service provided to persons who cannot do their own shopping or food preparation. The service is province-wide and delivered by various community associations. In the case of Two Rivers, the program is supported by co-op students from a local high school. The main goal is to provide nutritious meals; it does not necessarily incorporate local food. Two Rivers plans to incorporate "seconds" (produce that is misshapen or deemed improperly coloured) later in the growing season.

Each of the three hubs is also delivering food safety and business management training. These components should be viewed as integral to food hub development, a way of addressing the new challenges and regulations that aggregation brings for farm businesses. Thus, the development of a food hub offers the benefit of skills enhancement to the local community.

Challenges and Limitations

Meeting customer expectations is a delicate dance commonly experienced by local producers, and EOAN has been no different in that respect. As Fritsch-Paquette explains: "To a certain degree you want to train people to be more seasonal and find a middle ground – to provide things longer than you'd normally have them, but also to educate people about staying in season."

Another challenge that EOAN foresees is the fact that funding is much easier to access for planning and paying consultants than for securing resources for infrastructure. As Bougie explains: "It will get harder because there are [fewer] grants for building or construction... We will have to do renovations and buy equipment, [but] equipment is not really something that funders like to fund... It's more complicated... and [requires more] follow-up."

Finally, inter-provincial trade barriers were identified by the EOAN as a concern especially with meat because of meat inspection regulations. Meat inspected by a provincial inspection facility cannot be sold outside of that province, and with the proximity of Quebec markets (and producers) to the far eastern tip of Ontario that the EOAN food hub will serve, this may complicate aggregation and distribution.

For the Ottawa Food Hub, the challenges were largely similar, though not the same. Balancing supply and demand is a big task. The hub will present data on imported food purchased by buyers who want to purchase local food as a way of giving producers an idea of where to focus production as there is already a determined demand. That said, it is the technical requirements regarding traceability, inspection and labelling that are the foundational pieces that require investment of time and money, and this is the focus of the Ottawa Food Hub's work in the region. Indeed, organizers are learning that they cannot simply establish a food hub; they must first shift the entire local food system so it can support aggregation of local food in sufficient volumes to supply large markets.

Timing is another big challenge in several ways. The hub has to move at a pace that works for stakeholders. It has to also be able to adapt to the shifting



Non-profits are asked to be innovative, to take on issues that do not have structured support and in so doing to demonstrate a high level of sustainability very quickly. That combination [is very difficult to achieve], if not impossible.

-M. Garahan

grounds of technology, consumer preferences and business needs. These requirements must be matched with timing requirements for funders. Garahan illustrates this: "Everyone wants to be a cost-shared funder. [For example, one agency will put up 25% once you have

the other 75%.] To come up with an investment plan that is timed according to each funder's objectives and timelines has been very, very challenging."

Garahan also identified the province-wide definition of local as problematic: "We believe consumers define local at regional levels first. Each region can self-define." This perspective echoes the feelings of Cheryl Nash (Two Rivers Food Hub) and the findings of previous research in Ontario (Knezevic, Landman, Blay-Palmer and Nelson, 2013). The imbalance of growing seasons, infrastructure, and consumer base across the province undermines the motivation for local producers to invest in particular forms of production if they are competing with producers from elsewhere in the province. As Garahan puts it:

We believe very strongly in the Foodland Ontario logo. We value the partnership we have with them and we co-brand with

Foodland Ontario [locally] at all times. But we believe that this needs to be understood as Ontario food and that local is a tier below that. I think that what has happened with the *Local Food Act* is that as a legislative piece of work it had to circumscribe what it defined as local food in a legal document. So it described it as all food produced in Ontario. People view this document as sanctioning a definition of local food as meaning ‘from Ontario,’ where this was not the intent. The government of Ontario acknowledges the importance of a regional element in local food. This is critical in supporting the very vibrant and exciting buy-local networks that are happening across this province.

Garahan is correct to suggest that the intent of the *Local Food Act* was to strengthen local food economies, not undermine them. The preamble of the *Act* refers to “robust and resilient



While I can't speak for folks that live in [other areas] of Ontario, I understand that they might have a different perspective of what's local. But around here, our buyers, our residents, our local consumers, really mean local. A couple of years ago, we ... held a survey and 75-80% of respondents thought that "local" meant an hour or so drive. Some might have included Quebec. Nobody thought Province of Ontario, not one.
-C. Nash

local food systems” throughout the province of Ontario, not only one local food system that encompasses the entire province. Further, the *Act* stipulates that maintaining and growing Ontario’s regional food systems requires a “shared vision and a collaborative approach.” Legislation, however, requires strict definitions and the defining of “local food” as “food produced or harvested

in Ontario” (Bill 36, Local Food Act, 2013) poses challenges to those food systems that are not in the most agriculturally established and climate-friendly regions of our province.

For EOAN the goal of the hub is to really localize food sales. As Bougie puts it: “The goal is trying to feed our people first – Prescott-Russell and Stormont-Dundas-Glengarry counties”; the EOAN aims to only sell outside of the region only if there is a surplus of something. Sylvie Fritsch-Paquette adds: “Local food on local plates.” These efforts are meant to help reconnect local producers and consumers, but this shift may have to take place in stages. For instance, the local food “counter” that EOAN established in a major grocery store features products from local producers that also sell outside of their region. The producers involved are interested in expanding markets closer to home, seeing this as a complement to broader provincial and national markets. A hub is seen as the mechanism that can help build and serve these more local markets.

The Ontario-wide definition of local allows purchasers that are compelled to set and meet targets for local procurement (such as institutions and grocery stores) to fall back on existing supply chain arrangements (for example buying produce from large growers that supply the Toronto Food Terminal) and skip local growers in their immediate vicinity. This is also a challenge to any efforts by producers to enter large grocery chains as they tend to prefer less restrictive definitions in order to maintain flexibility for their purchasing.

Nash offers this definition of 'local': "It's a sophisticated definition to my mind. It's a series of concentric circles. Local beef for me is the farmer down the road but my asparagus is Westport because at the moment that's as close as we can get it. It's complicated... When you add up the distance travelled and the efficiencies of that distance it's whatever makes the most sense from the systems perspective."

For Two Rivers (and this is in line with findings from our previous studies – see Knezevic, Landman, Blay-Palmer, and Nelson, 2013) policies are often a further challenge to establishing a vibrant local food hub. From government regulation to corporate purchasing (in retail chains), to institutional requirements (if selling to institutions), navigating the policy requirements can be quite a task. Nash explains:

A founding premise for the Two Rivers Food Hub is to seek out opportunities where we can do the best we can for the farming community. That means working to develop stable markets and opportunities for expansion as well as respectable prices. With the exception of one-off opportunities, institutions currently don't provide us with a solid path forward in that respect. And our farmers aren't there yet either. Many of the farmers that we work with are not full-time producers. It's not that they don't want to be but they just haven't found themselves in an economic position where they've had the opportunity to do so. So there's going to be a fair bit of scaling up on their part and there's going to be things like GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) certifications required in order to access some of those institutional markets. At the same time, the food hub facility itself would have to follow HACCP [food safety regulations applying to large institutions]. But because many farmers use [the hub], obtaining HACCP certification means that everybody has to be at the same level [of food safety certification] and that means that some of our stakeholders could potentially be excluded.

Strategies for Success

Garahan found interest in local food to be increasing due to a number of factors. Community gardens and container gardening are in resurgence. Food literacy, the number of farmers' markets, requests for local food at festivals and events, and support from funders for local food initiatives have all been increasing, as has the interest of big business in providing local options. While some of the big business interest may be about image, Garahan noted: "I do believe that there's a high percentage now of businesses who are looking at genuine incorporation of more social and local economic objectives." Capitalizing on the interest in local food and local economic development requires sustained collaboration and a recognition and respect for relationships among like-minded groups.

EOAN has been able to identify a number of opportunities in their area. Expanding local fruit and veggie, beef, and pork marketing would not be a unique strategy, but they also identified some unusual opportunities. For example, sheep dairies are common in their area but not elsewhere, and they also have a unique smoked sturgeon producer. They also see collaboration as essential to success. As Fritsch-Paquette explains: "We know that we *need* to work together and we *want* to work together and there's no question that none of us can survive just as a little island. We absolutely need to work together and find a way to collaborate." They also want to see a balanced linking of local food marketing and culinary tourism, and they would like to replicate the concept of the local food counter in multiple grocery chain stores.

For the Ottawa Food Hub, the collaborative approach has also played a key role. Balancing the strengths of a non-profit organization (Just Food) and private business (Natural Gourmet) has been to the hub's advantage, as has collaboration with other food hub initiatives in the regions. Garahan notes: "Two Rivers has the facility up and running and it has very similar types of attributes to the processing kitchen at the Ottawa Food Hub at Natural Gourmet, but the scale is different. That's very intentional so that we're not building duplicated infrastructure across Eastern Ontario, but [rather] are working collaboratively to support various sizes of producers and processors, so there's an ability to scale-up or also participate if you are not scaled up at that point in time."

For Two Rivers, relationships have similarly proven critical in establishing and managing the hub. Nash notes that "sympathetic buyers," such as restaurants and independent grocers, have been key because they want to see the hub succeed and will patiently work with the hub to "iron out the wrinkles" in its operations. Support from Rideau Community Health Services (RCHS) has been fundamental to the creation of this food hub. RCHS was able to manage Two Rivers' start-up funding and provide a range of organizational supports:

They helped us set up our books, they provided our governance, they provided legal support for us, and they helped us set up our bylaws. We could focus on things like working out the lease with the Gallipeau Centre instead of diddling around figuring out where we're going to open a bank account. They provided all that administrative support and structure; they were our umbrella organization, their Board took responsibility for us. We [could] focus on opening a hub!

RCHS Executive Director, Peter McKenna, also played an essential role in providing valuable advice about how to build an organization. As Nash explains: "Peter McKenna has lived here all his life and deeply understands our community. He has a stellar reputation and it's quite a coup for us to have him aboard."

Relationships among producers are important too; Nash pointed out that local farmers who work together to deliver CSA programs or to supply subsidized food boxes are always having conversations about who is going to grow what to ensure balanced supply to the local markets. Once again, these findings confirm earlier research on local food in Ontario that points to networks and social capital as essential to the success of local food (Nelson, Knezevic and Landman, 2013).

Finally, despite the current challenges to entering large food retail chains, Nash thinks that opportunities will open up: "The large multinational retailers want to be able to say that they have local product in store."

'Clustering'

To date, these organizations have each been busy establishing their own infrastructure, but they have also put much effort into working together as they scale up, developing a vision for continued collaboration. The economic phenomenon that they are focused on is known as *clustering*, an idea introduced and popularized by economist Michael Porter. According to Porter (1990), economic clusters confer benefits on entire regions (in this case Eastern Ontario) in three ways: by stimulating new businesses, by driving innovation, and by increasing productivity. *Stimulating new businesses* is particularly related to issues of scale – being able to work locally, but sell through related regional hubs where scale warrants it. *Driving innovation* and *increasing productivity* are also potential benefits relevant to the three hubs discussed here. Since they are clustered geographically, they will be able to buy and sell to one another quite easily, thereby functioning as an integrated regional network. The larger market that they collectively represent means that no single hub will be under obligation to take all of its members' production (should it be greater than what that hub can distribute or sell).

Another benefit of being close enough geographically to function as a cluster is that each hub need not perform the exact same functions or offer the same services. Instead, they can specialize according to the unique characteristics that their respective locations, facilities, producers and partners offer. For example, this differentiation can allow producers to sell their fresh produce to the closest hub, particularly during summer and fall, but also have the option of taking some of their product to one of the more distant hubs for value-added processing (e.g., through canning, cooking, packaging) which will allow producers to continue generating revenue through the winter months. (Note: the different hubs operate at different scales and offer different processing opportunities.) Each hub could also specialize in specific types of training opportunities or product/market development services, which could then be offered to members of other hubs.

Productivity can be enhanced by working together because the hubs will be able to take advantage of greater economies of scale. This can happen in at least four ways: 1) by being able to conduct integrated research and market analysis on regional and sub-regional levels; 2) by being able to cost-share on contracted professional expertise (e.g., legal, website, accounting); 3) by being able to share inventory portals and maybe even joint-order some non-local products like packaging or software, which could improve viability and help cover the overhead; and 4) by being able to collaborate to offer services to producers - e.g., technical services, marketing advice and business "incubator" services, mentoring and producer education.

Finally, as a cluster, these three hubs can increase overall economic productivity in the region by working with existing local and regional distributors in a coordinated fashion. For example, the Ottawa Food Hub can access larger supply chains (retailers, wholesalers, institutional buyers) through Natural Gourmet's existing distributional network. Smaller markets can be reached by partnering with more localized and regional distributors. This may be an economic win-win for Eastern Ontario as a region.

To sustain cluster performance, strong inter-organizational relationships must exist within the cluster (Eisingerich, Bell and Tracey, 2010). These three hubs continue to move in that direction. They have a history of working together through the Eastern Ontario Local Food and Farming Collaborative, and they have each expressed a commitment to further cooperation with one another. They each know that alone, the food hubs will provide a stimulus for new producers and an incentive for existing producers to scale up production, but collectively their impact can be that much stronger because of potential synergies. Our interviews indicated a significant awareness of this need among the hub leaders, but how much they will be able to bring this awareness into collective practice remains to be seen.

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