

THE CLOVERBELT LOCAL FOOD CO-OP

A Case Study

September 2017

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Sustainable
Food Systems



*Nourishing
Communities*

This work was made possible through generous funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Suggested citation:

Streuker, A., Levkoe, C. and Nelson, C. 2017. The Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op: A Case Study. Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, Wilfrid Laurier University.



Table of Contents

PROJECT OVERVIEW	4
BACKGROUND	5
GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT	9
KEY FEATURES	10
CLFC COMMUNITY GREENHOUSE	10
REGIONAL FOOD MAP	12
OTHER ACTIVITIES SUPPORTING REGIONAL FOOD INITIATIVES	14
OPEN SOURCE SOFTWARE	15
COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP	16
EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY EVENTS	17
NETWORKS	17
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CLFC SOCIAL ECONOMY	18
INCREASING SOCIAL CAPITAL	18
INCREASING PROSPERITY	19
CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS	22
CONCLUSION	24
REFERENCES	25



Project Overview



We want the farmers to retain their independence. We're not buying and reselling their product – just distributing it – so they can keep their freedom.” ~ Jen Springett, Co-op President

This case study examines the Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op (CLFC)—a non-profit local food initiative based in Dryden, Ontario—and how it increases social capital, prosperity, and resilience in the Northwestern Ontario (NWO) region. CLFC operates primarily as an online food co-op where members can buy and sell local products, but it is also involved in a number of other activities intended to “foster a thriving local food community” across NWO

(Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op Membership Handbook, 2013). These activities involve promoting relationships between farmers and consumers, making local food more accessible, and educating community members about the benefits of eating healthy, local foods. As the first online food co-op in Northwestern Ontario, CLFC provides unique insight into the contributions of the social economy of food to community resilience, with possible applications to other Northern and remote communities.

All of the information in this case study was collected through discussions with individuals involved with the co-op in some form or another. This included farmers and growers who sell their produce through CLFC; processors, who sell processed food and nonfood items; distributors; and CLFC's board members and staff. The data collected was used to create a comprehensive picture of how CLFC functions and the impacts that it has on NWO. Specifically, this case study explores how CLFC increases social capital and prosperity in the region, and how it builds adaptive capacity and resilience among communities, and within the NWO food system as a whole.

BACKGROUND

CLFC has grown very rapidly since its beginning in 2013. What started with just 85 members in the Dryden community has now grown to a current membership of over 1,200 in more than five communities across NWO, with expansion to more communities currently under way. All products are sold through the co-op's website (www.cloverbeltlocalfoodcoop.com), which operates year-round and is open to anyone in NWO interested in buying or selling locally-grown foods and other goods. Along with significantly expanding its membership base within four years, CLFC has accomplished major projects such as a community greenhouse and an online interactive map showing the location of local producers throughout NWO (discussed below), both of which support the co-op's overall goal of building up local food within the region and connecting producers.



CLFC emerged from a desire among farmers in the Dryden area to be better connected. [Before CLFC was founded, there was a concern that the agricultural community was becoming smaller, disjointed, and did not attract new producers. For the few remaining farmers in the area, there were not many opportunities to come together as a community to sell their products. Overall options were limited to seasonal markets that required producers to spend ten or more hours each week traveling to these widely-scattered markets rather than spending this time on farm production. They could sell at the Cloverbelt Farmers' Market, which operated in Dryden and the nearby township of Oxdrift, Sioux Lookout, Vermillion Bay and Kenora, but these markets only ran during the summer and early fall months when fresh produce is abundant. Another option for



farmers to sell local was the LocaVore Box program. Consumers can pay an up-front fee to receive a box of in-season local food items every two weeks, but it was difficult for some farms to regularly supply the exact amount of products expected of them, especially the small farms that did not have the capacity to offer items in bulk. Moreover, it was difficult for small farms to compete with larger ones in other parts of the province, which often have much more capital to cover the costs of shipping, packaging, and other operations required for their products to meet regulatory standards.

It was clear that there was potential for a market system that could reach a reasonable number of local consumers while still being a practical option for small local producers, with the capacity to operate year-round.

To explore how to best fill the gaps left by the existing local food programs at the time, a few farmers, members of the Northwest Training and Adjustment Board, and food systems researchers from the Food Security Research Network (FSRN) met in the winter of 2012 to discuss the different options that could be successful in the region. The farmers gave their first-hand experiences on Dryden's unique strengths and needs as a local food system, and eventually it was agreed that a co-operative model, where producers share their resources and capital rather than competing, would be best. An online system seemed appropriate to overcome many of the obstacles faced uniquely by farmers in the north and, as a legally recognized entity, a co-op would have many benefits such as cost-saving opportunities and the availability of joint grant applications. The Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) had completed a feasibility study examining the potential of an online co-op in the NWO region about a year prior, which was ultimately put on a shelf to collect dust because many of the farmers in the region were older adults with little experience in using computers. Based on this study, an online co-op in Dryden was deemed potentially sustainable with 20 local producers and 100 consumer members. With these numbers in mind, CLFC was incorporated in the summer of 2013 and launched its first order cycle on December 2 of the same year.



The Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op

In only four years, new distribution hubs have developed in Kenora, Ignace, Sioux Lookout, and Upsala, with hubs in Thunder Bay, Emo, and Fort Frances currently being established and expanded upon (see Figure 1 for a map of hub locations). In Dryden, order cycles occur every week, while the other four hubs currently run on the third Tuesday of each month, due to the lower numbers of early start-up members in these areas and high transportation costs. As CLFC is quickly moving forward, both of these issues are currently being addressed, thanks to expanding partnerships with various funders and researchers.

Each week, producers list their current products on the website before Thursday, and then consumers can then log in and fill their basket from Saturday to Monday morning with any products listed on the website that week. Once the ordering cycle closes, producers work filling orders until Tuesday. They then drop off their products in the early afternoon at the designated hub location in each community, where volunteers compile the orders and consumers pick them up in the late afternoon/early evening. Customers pay for their orders on-site, using cash or cheque, or they can pay beforehand using electronic money transfers. The weekly cycle is beneficial because it makes it easier for producers to coordinate and ship their products together, reducing costs and the environmental impacts of transportation.

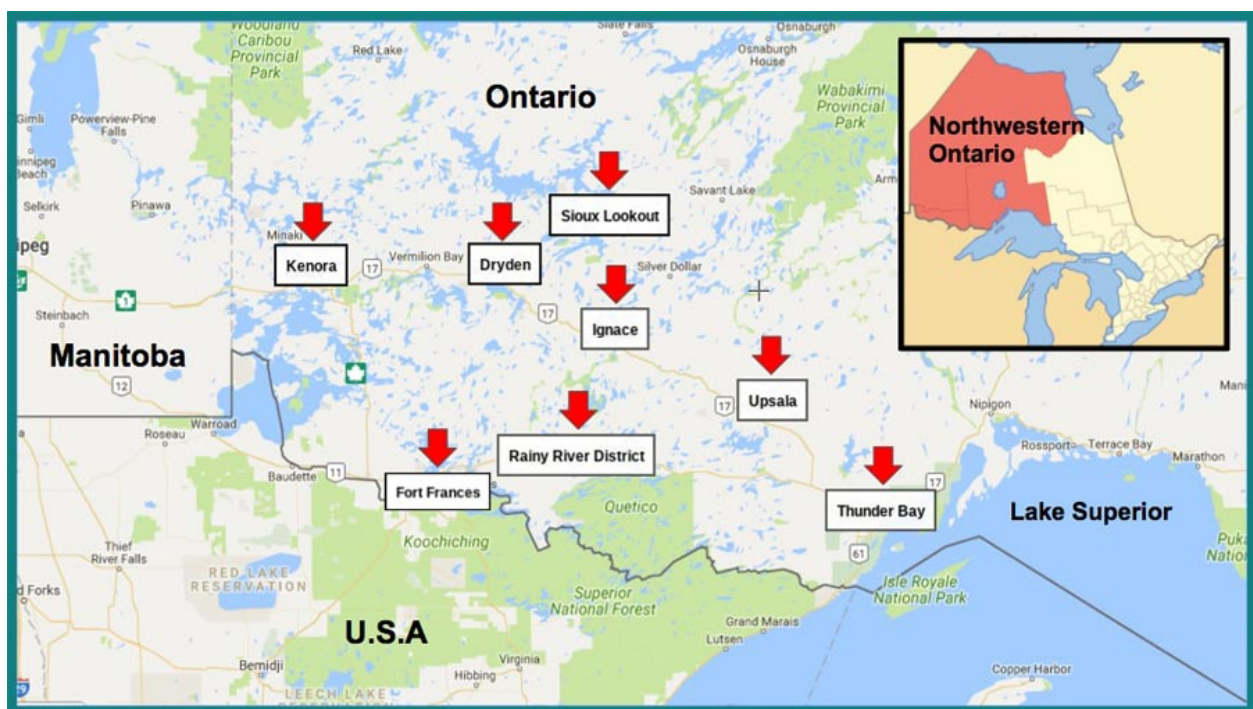


Figure 1. Map of CLFC Hub Locations

Additionally, the online ordering system is effective in NWO for a few reasons. First, it allows people to connect across a number of communities and long distances. A lot of



these communities have their own farmer's markets, but CLFC expands each person's options beyond their own community, while still buying products from within the region. CLFC does not intend to compete with local markets, but rather to complement them and support local food as a whole. Secondly, because producers decide how much of their product they want to make available each week, there is no pressure for them to meet specific quotas or quantities. This means they can adapt to things like changing seasons or test out new products to see how well they will sell. Third, a modern way of operating is appealing to young producers, so that CLFC will



continue to operate and be sustainable in the future. This flexibility is one of the main reasons that CLFC has grown so significantly in such a short time. Finally, without a physical storefront, there are no additional expenses for storage or inventory.

There are three main types of product suppliers for the co-op: producers; processors; and distributors. Producers are those who sell raw products, including meat (pork, beef, lamb, poultry, buffalo), grains, fruits, vegetables, dairy, and boreal forest foods (such as morel and chanterelle mushrooms and honey). Using local products, processors create their own value-added products, such as baked goods, gelato, sauces, sausages (pork, beef and buffalo), jams, jellies, clothing, care products, and crafts. Often, a member will be both a producer and processor, and these two groups make up the bulk of supplier members. One such member, Honey Mill Farms, provides a great range of products throughout the year, from eggs to vegetables to prepared meals, and allows anyone to come out to the farm to learn more about their products. [Honey Mill photo] Finally, distributors are those who gather products from producers and consumers so that they are accessible in one place, such as the Upsala General Store. Products can fall into four categories (see Table 1). When products do not fit into any of these classifications, they require special approval by the board. Categorizing products in this way is important to ensure that products are as local as possible, and so that consumers can understand exactly where their products come from and what goes into them. As the border between Manitoba and Ontario is just under 200 kilometers from Dryden, Manitoba

products are included, so that consumers can buy products that they may not be able to buy locally, while still buying them from as close as possible to maintain freshness and reduce environmental costs.

Table 1. Product Classification List

Product Classification	Description
Local product	All ingredients come from Northwestern Ontario
Partially local product	Contains some local and some non-local ingredients
Ontario product	Comes from Ontario but outside of Northwestern Ontario (only when such products are not available within NW Ontario)
Manitoba product	Comes from Manitoba (only when such products are not available within Ontario)

Geographical Context

Dryden is located in the Great Lakes Region, with a population of approximately 8000. It is the smallest residential area in Ontario to be considered a city, yet it functions as the geopolitical centre of NWO (see Figure 1), with air, road, and railway connections from Thunder Bay to Winnipeg. This makes it well situated to be the central distribution point for communities across the region, allowing CLFC to scale up and establish hubs in multiple locations (Nelson, Stroink, & Kirk, 2015). Communities in NWO are greatly dispersed and much less densely populated than other parts of the province, often connected by vast stretches of highway. The CLFC hub closest to Dryden is in Ignace, approximately an hour's drive away, while the furthest planned hub in Thunder Bay is nearly four hours away.

The city of Dryden was founded in 1895, when John Dryden, Ontario's Minister of Agriculture at the time, passed through the area by train and noticed lush stretches of clover growing. This area was eventually nicknamed the "Clover Belt," also known as The Wabigoon Clay Belt, which is a large area of fertile soil that stretches from Northwestern Ontario to Quebec (Parker et al. 2012). This is where CLFC gets its name, following the tradition of the Cloverbelt Farmers Market and other local organizations. Minister Dryden soon established the first permanent settlement, a small farm, and two

years later a sawmill was constructed. Over the next century the city grew dramatically, but the agricultural and forestry industries remained a significant part of its economy.

The region's climate is diverse, influenced by adjacent prairies, the nearby Wabigoon Lake, and the surrounding Northern Ontario ecosystem. Although the growing season in NWO is shorter than in southern parts of the province, the area receives enough sunlight and warm days for a range of crops and meat animals to flourish such as grains, vegetables, mushrooms, blueberries, beef, buffalo, and fish (Nelson, Stroink, & Kirk, 2015). This is reflected in the products sold through CLFC. For example, the producer member Canadian Pure Wild Rice sells naturally grown and sustainably harvested wild rice, traditionally called *manoomin*, which—despite threats of pollution from nearby mills to the water in which it grows—has long been a staple of the Ojibway people indigenous to the area (Laduke, 2011). With the climate warming in recent decades, there could be potential for more farming opportunities in the NWO area, as this could mean longer growing seasons, more rain, and warmer temperatures (Harry Cummings and Associates, 2009; Robinet, 2017). Compared to other parts of the province, prices of land in NWO are low, making entry appealing to new farmers.

Key Features

CLFC Community Greenhouse

"In Northern Ontario, we miss 2-3 months of prime daylight hours, because there's still snow on the ground. A greenhouse extends the growing season."
- Del Schmucker, Wickens Lake Sunshine

Although sales are important, CLFC is much more than just a functional intermediary for members to buy and sell products. Members are involved in a number of other activities supporting local food initiatives. In 2013, CLFC launched an Indiegogo campaign to raise funds for a community greenhouse in Dryden with the support of the FSRN. The crowdsourcing initiative raised over \$10,000, and by late 2014 construction of the greenhouse was underway. By the spring of 2015 the building was complete, with additional funding from the Rural Agri-Innovation Network (RAIN) providing the greenhouse with irrigation and ventilation systems.

The 32' x 148' greenhouse holds seventeen 4' x 12' raised garden bed plots, built by the Grade 11 Dryden High School Construction Technology Class. These plots are available to the local horticultural society, 4H club, elementary schools, CLFC members, and if there are any remaining plots, the general public.

The community greenhouse is invaluable to CLFC for a number of reasons. First, it allows the co-op to add to the amount and diversity of food that it produces, so that there are more options offered to consumers. It also lengthens the growing season, as

The Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op

the warm environment means that seeds can be planted earlier and plants can continue to grow later into the fall. This is advantageous in a cool, northern climate and helps to ensure that local demand can be met. Second, the greenhouse acts as a visible structure for CLFC and for local food. The fundraising and building of the greenhouse helped to raise awareness of CLFC in the Dryden community and was an opportunity for the public to become educated about and engaged with the co-op.



Education is an integral part of CLFC; and the greenhouse offers a physical location for events and workshops to take place. A number of classes from local elementary schools are given tours and offered plots in the greenhouse each year, where they can learn about how their food is grown and get hands-on experience in growing themselves. Students learn about how far food in the grocery store travels to get to them and how it loses its nutritional value in the process; the advantages of growing and eating local food; and how easy it can be to do this. The food grown by the students has also been used in meal programs at the schools, so they directly benefit from the hard work they put in. Getting children interested in local food at a young age is the first step for some of these children to become the next generation of producers for the co-op. In this way



the greenhouse supports not only the short-term growth of CLFC, but its long-term growth as well.



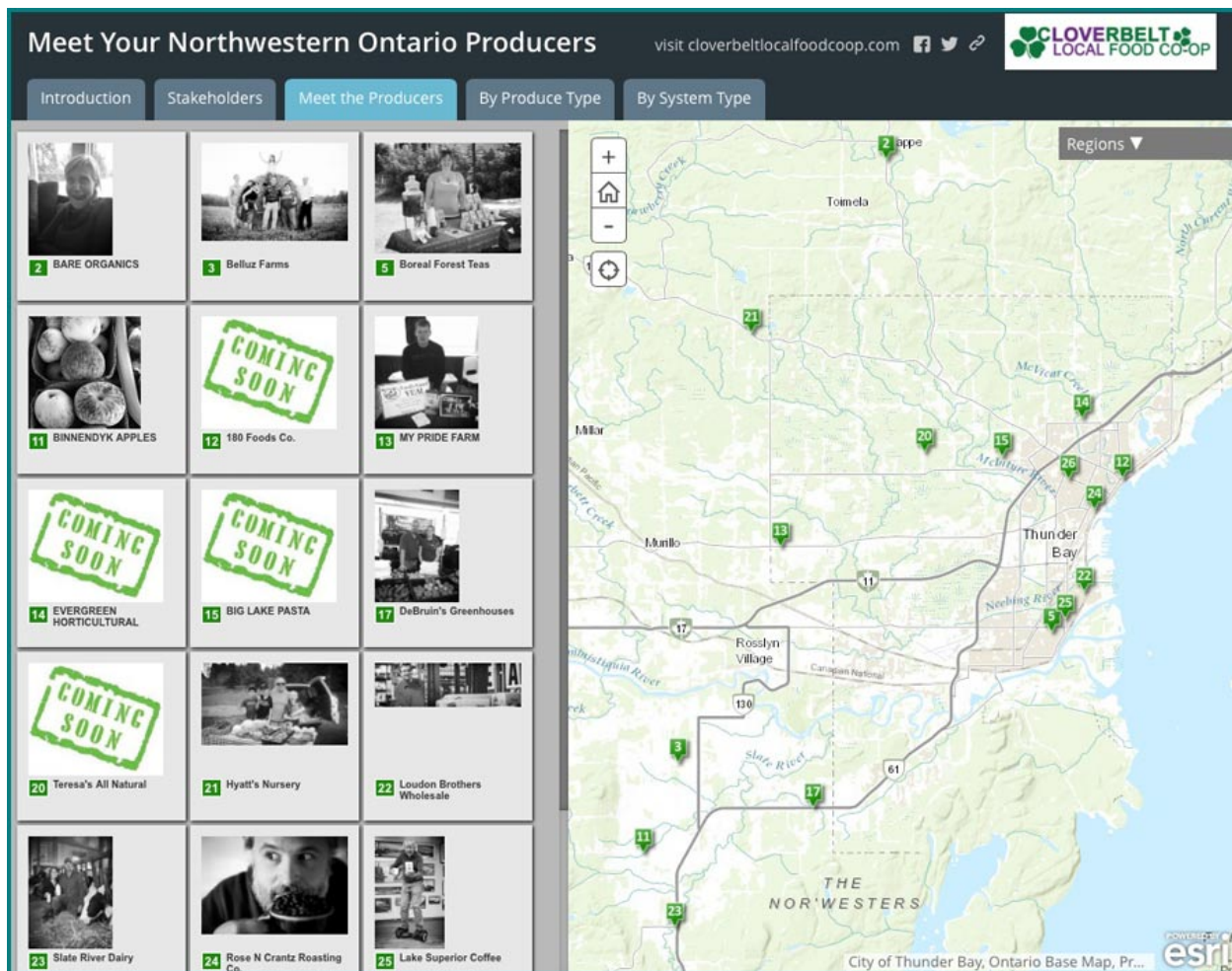
Finally, as the greenhouse is open to everyone, it provides an informal environment for members of all ages to interact and share expertise with one another. Younger generations interacting with those who will soon retire will have the opportunity to learn tried-and-true skills, while another grower might notice her neighbour using an unique technique and have a chance to try something new. CLFC has used the greenhouse to test out a hydroponics system, which is more efficient and can produce greater yields for growers. Members can see how this process works and learn a new method of growing that they can try for themselves. Innovation and diverse ideas are an essential part of the co-op's sustainability and growth.

Regional Food Map

In order to support the collaboration of producers and processors, CLFC began a Regional Food Mapping and Distribution Project which pinpoints the locations of local

The Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op

food contributors in NWO on an interactive online map [<http://www.nwofoodmap.com>], including producers, distribution centres, processing facilities, and restaurants serving local food, along with a description and the contact information of each. Having all this information in one place allows consumers to know exactly where their food comes from, and means that producers can see restaurants nearby to whom they might sell their products, as well as other producers with whom



they might share transport, storage, or equipment. The map can also be used to plan transportation routes. New producers or those looking to expand their production can use the map to identify what types of products are not currently available and where there may be potential markets. As CLFC operates primarily online, it can be difficult for members to connect. The map helps to overcome this challenge. There is also significant potential for the map to be used in the future to establish hubs in new communities, including remote, fly-in First-Nations communities. For the work on this map, CLFC received the 2016 Premier's Award for Agri-Food Innovation Excellence,



awarded by the Ontario government to businesses that support the province's economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Other Activities Supporting Regional Food Initiatives

In addition to the greenhouse and the regional food map, CLFC has consolidated with Cloverbelt Country Meats, an abattoir in Oxdrift. Formerly Griffith Country Meats, the meat processing facility was in need of a number of upgrades to remain open, so CLFC offered to take over the business. This way, the abattoir became a non-profit and was able to receive funding for the improvements needed to remain open. The long-term goal for the abattoir is to become a co-op hub, storing meat from local producers when there is enough freezer space available. Farmers would then be able to kill their animals all at once and store them at the abattoir, which would sell the meat through the CLFC website, making it much easier for the farmer. There are still many renovations needed at the abattoir, but there is also a lot of potential.

Additionally, CLFC posts current news on its website and uses social media to stay in touch with its members. It has a Facebook and a Twitter account, which are updated regularly to keep members in the loop on new products and hub locations, contests, upcoming events, job and volunteer opportunities, and the co-op's future directions. Members have the additional option of subscribing to a weekly email newsletter, where

they can get all the aforementioned information right in their inbox. These electronic methods of communication make it possible for CLFC to stay in touch with many members over long distances and are attractive to the co-op's young and future members. They also assist producers by advertising their products and reminding members to place their orders, thus supporting sales.



Open Source Software

The CLFC website utilizes an open-source software program to list and sell products (See Figure 2). This type of software is made freely available online for anyone to use and modify for their own purposes, allowing people to collaborate and benefit from the software collectively. The specific software that CLFC uses is called Open Food Source (OFS), which was designed for use with local food systems [<http://www.openfoodsource.org/>]. The software was developed and shared by Roy Guisinger, a member of the Nebraska Food Co-op in the United States, and is used by a number of other co-ops across North America.

OFS helps to coordinate and keep track of the activity of multiple buyers and sellers in one place. It is different from most other commercial websites as ordering occurs on a weekly cycle rather than whenever the customer chooses. Whatever is in members' shopping carts at the end of the ordering cycle is what they order for that week. Similarly, producers must log into their account and update what products they have available each week. The benefit to producers is that they have flexibility in what they offer. If they run out of a certain product in a given week, they simply do not have to list it. Producers can offer what is in season and adapt to weekly demands. This cyclic method requires a little more conscious effort for all members, but is advantageous in a location such as NWO where communities are spread over an immense geographic area. The cost of transporting products between hubs can be high, so having a system that only requires producers to ship their products once a week can reduce costs.

Figure 2. Screenshot of CLFC Website

The screenshot shows the CLFC website interface. At the top, there are 'Home' and 'Login' buttons. Below them is a 'Products' section with a search bar and a 'FULL LIST BY CATEGORY' link. A message indicates 'Found 528 items'. A pagination bar shows 'Page: 1' through '22'. The main content area is titled 'Vegetables — Greens and Lettuces' and lists products from 'Honey Mill Farm'. Each product entry includes a small image, a status 'Ordering is currently closed', a product ID and name, a description of availability and details, a 'Picked Fresh from Our Farm to Your Table' note, and a price per unit.

Vegetables — Greens and Lettuces				
Honey Mill Farm				
Ordering is currently closed		#1497 – Bag of Spring Mix Lettuce 22 more Bags available. Order number of Bags. This is a colorful bag of mixed baby greens cut fresh Grown the natural way...no herbicides, no pesticides	All Natural NON	\$5.00/Bag
Picked Fresh from Our Farm to Your Table				
Ordering is currently closed		#1495 – Red Leaf Lettuce 17 more heads available. Order number of heads. Red Leaf Lettuce	All Natural NON	\$3.00/head
Picked Fresh from Our Farm to Your Table				
Ordering is currently closed		#1498 – Romaine Lettuce 11 more heads available. Order number of heads. Beautiful Romaine Lettuce	All Natural NON	\$3.00/head
Great for Caesar Salad Picked Fresh from Our Farm to Your Table				



Collective Ownership

As a non-profit co-operative, CLFC is owned by all its members. Annual General Meetings are held where members can give their input on the co-op's activities, and decisions are made with each member receiving one vote. Consumer members must place an order at least twice every year and producer members must have products for sale at least once every year, as the regular participation of these members in the co-op's activities is essential for its long-term sustainability. As long as producers continue to sell their products and consumers continue to buy them, CLFC will continue to grow and prosper.



CLFC is overseen by a Board of Directors, which is elected annually by all members. The Board is responsible for approving new products, monitoring sales, removing members if necessary, and ensuring the overall smooth operation of the co-op. It also gives input on the various events and programs that CLFC hosts. As the co-op grows, there is the possibility of establishing individual committees at each hub location to make such a large operation more manageable, and so that the individual interests of each community are met, as locals know their area best.

Additionally, the co-op has hired full- and part-time staff members and interns to take on important roles that facilitate its sustainability, thanks to various grants and funding. These include the administrative coordinator, who runs the co-op's day-to-day duties; the agricultural coordinator, who focuses on helping farmers connect; and the education coordinator, who is responsible for supporting local food initiatives in classrooms and working with students in the greenhouse. CLFC also has several volunteers who help unload and organize products on hub pickup days, assist with fundraising and finances, write grant applications, and help members without internet. The input of these individuals is an indispensable part of CLFC's success.

Education and Community Events

CLFC has hosted a number of events to keep members engaged and educate the public on the advantages of eating and buying local. These include regular "Meet the Producers" nights, where producers set up tables with samples and anyone can come out to try new products and meet the people that make them; "For the Love of Food and Farming," a conference where presenters give talks on farming-related topics, local food is served, and farmers can meet with others to discuss similar interests; and "The LocaWars", an annual cooking contest between local restaurants to prepare the best dish using local foods from the co-op. The co-op has also hosted a number of other talks, workshops, and information sessions for members and for the general public so that they can educate people on various food and farming related topics and receive input on the future directions of the co-op.

Networks

Community partners and other sponsors have played an immense role in CLFC's expansion and success. These networks of individuals and organizations have supported CLFC, helped get the online co-op off the ground, and continue to work alongside it. They include the Northwestern Health Unit, which is a member of the Board of Directors and has helped implement a school breakfast program in local schools using CLFC products, the Northwest Training and Adjustment Board (NTAB), which has helped to fund Food Safety Handling Training for producers along with other projects, the FSRN, which has helped with research, networking, and project ideas, as well as Patricia Area Community Endeavours (PACE), the Carrot Cache, and the Kenora District Soil and Crop Improvement Association (KDSCIA), which provided funding and support to get CLFC up and running. These and other partnerships across the NWO region are essential for the co-op's continued success. Connections with organizations that prioritize social values drive a stronger local food movement.



Characteristics of the CLFC Social Economy



Increasing Social Capital

Increasing social capital is the main reasons why CLFC was created. There was a desire to have greater connections rather than competition among farmers in the Northern Ontario region, so building connections within and between communities is a huge part of everything CLFC does. The online marketplace means that producers and consumers can connect from different communities in NWO that may not have been previously able to buy and sell from each other. However, the downside of the online platform is the lack of face to face contact, which can make it more difficult to build relationships between members. CLFC makes up for this by hosting events such as the ones mentioned above. This way they can keep current members involved and educated and open the door to new members.

Sharing is exemplified by encouraging support networks between producers. There is currently a shared transportation system, where Brule Creek, a local flour mill from the Thunder Bay area, transports their products to the CLFC distribution centres each week, picking up empty order boxes on the way and bringing back full ones. This isn't done for profit but out of a desire to work together and build up the local food market in the north. CLFC also supports and connects with local food in other parts of the province. It presently sells products from the Ontario Natural Food Co-op, which operates out of Mississauga. CLFC carefully chooses products to sell that are local to Ontario but may not be available in the NWO region.

Not only does CLFC value social connections over competition, but so do its individual members. For example, Freshwater Cuisine, which is known for their unique Walleye Wings and other freshwater fish products, has built connections with a number of First Nations communities in the north that provide the business with its fresh fish. Another producer, Bare Organics, sells natural skin care products but prioritizes the educational value of these products over the economic value. Their goal is not to expand so that they can make as much profit as possible, but rather to focus on manufacturing only their bestselling products and putting their extra time into giving workshops that show people where to find information on safe, natural products and how they can make their own. Here, education and knowledge is valued over profit.

The Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op

Many of these producers did not begin their businesses strictly for the money, it was simply a hobby or something that they grew up doing. However, with CLFC they saw that there was a demand for their products and they could make money doing what they love. For example, Del Schmucker of Wickens Lake Sunshine, which produces tomatoes and lettuce in a hydroponics greenhouse, grew up on a farm and began growing as a hobby to get back to his roots. After buying a greenhouse from a friend, he found that his “inner farm boy” soon came out, and after much experimenting, reading, and attending workshops on how to grow hydroponically, is now capable of harvesting between 120-270 lettuce plants per week once production starts.



Similarly, consumers tend to hold personal reasons for buying from the co-op rather than economic ones. For example, Sonja Waino, who is manager of the Northwest Training and Adjustment Board and is a customer of the co-op herself, says that she would “happily pay a little more for fresh, local food over products that travelled hundreds of miles to reach the grocery store”. She grew up eating food from her mother’s garden, and wouldn’t have her meats and vegetables any other way than fresh. Consumers can trust their products, knowing they are grown nearby, and producers can take pride in their products, knowing what Northern Ontario is capable of yielding.

Increasing Prosperity

Money is not the main driving factor for CLFC and its members. Rather, CLFS is more invested in building the community, the health and environmental benefits of eating local, and the enjoyment and fulfillment of the producers in what they do. However, CLFC does provide an opportunity for people to start new businesses or expand their existing customer base; and there are a lot of producers whose main source of income is what they sell through CLFC. Other producers use it as a secondary source of income,



or only sell at certain times of the year or when it is convenient to them. Overall, there is plenty of room for diverse economic activity; producers do what works best for them. This is very different from the larger economy, where the bottom line is most important and there is lots of rigidity and very little adaptability in production. Producers are able to share facilities, reduce costs and work together rather than compete.

Many producers have taken advantage of CLFC's well-established customer base to help get their businesses off the ground or reach more markets. They are able to provide unique, northern products that customers cannot buy at the grocery store, such as Freshwater Cuisine's Walleye Wings, Algoma Highland's wild blueberry BBQ sauce, Northern Buffalo Ranch's grass-fed buffalo meat, and 180 Foods Co.'s foraged chaga tea. For the consumers, this diversity means that, if for any reason certain crops fail one year or the price of certain products at the grocery store goes way up, they have options and will be able to adapt to these changes. CLFC combines traditional production methods with modern ways of connecting producers and consumers in order to bring together young and old generations, overcome the challenges faced by those in distant northern communities, and find innovative ways to bring good food to more people.



Building Adaptive Capacity and Increasing Resilience

CLFC helps to strengthen the economy and social relationships within communities, increasing each community's resilience and ability to adapt to challenges, but it also strengthens ties between communities, increasing the resilience of NWO. Previously, much of the produce in these communities was brought in from other places such as Southern Ontario and Manitoba, and the economic and social benefits of food production would leave the area. But people are starting to realize that they know their local strengths and demands better than anyone else, and producers can capitalize on this for their own economic benefit and more importantly the community's overall benefit. With more local producers, there is the opportunity for more facilities for processing, storage, grading eggs, etc., which in turn means more jobs, more capacity for local food, and the cycle continues. Local investments pay off.

As hubs grow larger and demand increases, CLFC will adapt to each location's needs. Some hubs currently only operate once a month, but this structure is not rigid and allows for expansion along with sales. This adaptability is imperative for sustainability. Eventually, each hub may be able to operate its own activities with local committees and boards. This would ensure that each community's specific food needs are met, as again each area knows its strengths, weaknesses, and needs best and can respond to local feedback loops. CLFC makes sure not to compete with established seasonal markets in potential hub communities, but rather waits to be invited when there is a demand. A resilient overall local food system requires working together, not competition and the monopolization of one business or organization.

CLFC provides the NWO area with more than sales and social benefits. All CLFC's activities also take into account environmental sustainability as this is part of their mandate, and many producers strive toward making their products as environmentally friendly as possible. Local food means that products do not travel thousands of miles to get there, reducing ecological pollution. Transport sharing reduces this further. Producers such as Freshwater Cuisine aim to get people more interested in environmentally-conscious foods such as walleye and pike—freshwater fish local to Ontario. Many people do not prefer these fish and they are less commonly served in restaurants, but Freshwater Cuisine aims to change that. With CLFC, there are countless possibilities for customers to find products that they love that do little or no damage to the environment. Because of the value it places on such practices, CLFC has won the Dryden Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Awards in the category of Environmental Stewardship in both 2014 and 2015, as well as the Premier's Award for Agri-Food Innovation Excellence in 2014 and the 2017 Business of the Year from the Influential Women of Northern Ontario.



Challenges and Future Directions

Viable transportation and funding continue to be two of the co-op's biggest concerns. Although producers pay 5% of their profits towards CLFC's overall budget, and donations and fundraising capital has been generous, there is still the issue of generating enough ongoing income to make the cost of transportation self-sufficient, as communities in Northwestern Ontario are very spread out. Costs are often the biggest challenge faced by many local food systems which attempt to succeed alongside large-scale food systems (Mount et al., 2013). CLFC continues to explore ways to make transportation more efficient, coordinated, and cost-effective.

Another significant issue facing CLFC and its members is the universal (one size fits all) government policies regulating products, such as the ways in which they are produced, transported, and sold. Although a lot of assistance and financial support has been given by the government for ventures such as CLFC, many policies make it difficult for individuals and organizations to expand and remain efficient enough to compete with global-scale markets. For example, hunters need a tag to be able to hunt moose, and obtaining a tag is much more difficult than it was a decade ago since the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry has reduced quotas in an attempt to slow the decline of moose populations in Ontario. Of those who do catch moose and wish to sell the meat, they must have it approved by an inspector. Small towns may not have any place for meat to be inspected, so hunters must bring it to the nearest facility that does. Once the meat is inspected, it must also be packaged and labeled a specific way, and many people would rather not be troubled with such a process.

The abattoir has also overcome many challenges. Situations such as these display the difficulties faced by smaller producers and businesses who may not have the capital to meet the regulations imposed on both small and large-scale businesses, which the larger businesses may have no trouble meeting financially. Because such policies might be regulated at the provincial and federal levels, they may be far removed from their actual applications. Policies which directly address the needs of the areas in which they operate, such as rural and northern locations, would be beneficial for cultivating and allowing for the expansion of current and future social economy organizations such as CLFC.

CLFC has also recently begun to distribute products to wholesale purchasers such as restaurants and large institutions. The challenge with doing so is that there are few producers who have the capacity to sell products in bulk, so that buyers have a difficulty getting what they need locally. However, if there are no institutions buying wholesale products locally, there is no market for producers to grow and sell to. For example, many local beef farms export calves West to Manitoba, where there is a greater wholesale market for veal. However, the Rainy River District Regional Abattoir, located in Emo, is presently only operating at 25% capacity. If more local restaurants

bought their beef locally, there would be a wholesale market available for beef farmers and the processing facilities available to reach this market. There is still much work to be done in creating partnerships with local restaurants, which requires both producers and consumers to trust that their needs will be met, but the opportunities for both are promising.



Finally, there is much potential for CLFC to continue to establish hubs in more communities, especially fly-in First Nations communities. Exciting potential initiatives to do so are ongoing. Transporting food to these communities via airplane can cost exorbitant amounts, especially fresh meats and produce, which have a short shelf life. The health of these communities is at risk because of this, with high rates of diabetes and heart disease. Providing these communities with fresh food from the Northern Ontario area would address many of these problems, but again the issue of cost is a significant impediment. There is potential for residents of these communities to sell fish, crafts, and clothing such as moccasins on return trips, which would help to cover costs and provide extra income for residents.



Conclusion

The continued growth and success of CLFC, despite prioritizing collective values over economic ones, demonstrates that a social enterprise can indeed be profitable. For example, between 2014 and 2016, CLFC's revenues have steadily increased from approximately \$208,000 to \$305,000. Moreover, CLFC has brought tremendous benefits to the NWO region aside from the bottom line, as described above. When organizations place their members at the forefront, bringing them together while still giving them freedom, everyone involved benefits. CLFC does not operate as a rigid, controlling structure, but rather adapts to its unique circumstances and location, which has made it more resilient in the long run.

This challenges the widely held notion that profit-oriented, inflexible operations are most likely to prosper. These types of systems may make significant earnings in the short-run, but over long periods are often unable to remain sustainable, nor do they leave communities in better conditions than before they began. Although CLFC is still relatively young, it has already both improved the welfare of communities and made considerable short-term profits for its members. With an adaptive mindset, the co-op's growth can remain tenable, and it can continue to connect people, support them in doing what they love, educate them, and overall strengthen the NWO region.



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