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Positioning Food Hubs for Success when implementing the NFSS

The Government of Canada's National Food Security Strategy (NFSS) has the potential to begin transforming Canada's food systems to be more equitable, sustainable and sovereign, as food system and security experts, advocates, and practitioners have been envisioning for many decades. It correctly identifies root causes of food insecurity at the household level, while identifying vulnerabilities at the national level, targeting underinvestment in local and regional food system infrastructure, weak coordination, and corporate concentration. As members of the Common Ground Network–a group of over 200 leading academics, practitioners and community organizations with expertise in food systems–we are encouraged by the Strategy's recognition of the potential role of Food Hubs in connecting producers and consumers across local, regional, and national food systems. We are also pleased to see rural, remote, and northern communities explicitly named in a way that acknowledges that these different contexts will require different frameworks for implementation. These understandings lay part of the necessary foundation for the Food-Link Fund, which encompasses measures to invest in and support Food Hubs and terminals. But to get this part of the strategy right, and have maximum impact, we strongly encourage the Government to reframe Food Hubs to reflect the full range of services, value, and impacts that they encompass when it comes to supporting food security. Further, it must be realized that Food Hubs do not, by themselves or directly, lower food costs.

This speaks to an overarching tension we have all observed within the NFSS Strategy document released in June that we believe should be addressed: namely, the tension between affordability and increased local food consumption or reduced dependence on other countries. These two objectives are not wholly incompatible, but they are often in tension with one another. We have a food system that is dependent on imports because we allowed local production to compete with lower-priced imports, and small-medium farm products to compete with large conglomerates in a race to the bottom. Local production can provide affordable, nutritious food–and many studies comparing baskets of produce across farmers' markets and grocery stores have found the prices to be the same (Stephens et al., 2025)–but it may not always be the cheapest option at the checkout and needs to be prioritized for reasons other than price. Fortunately, there are many good reasons to prioritize it–environmental, social, economic, and political. Foreign imports are often cheaper due to large government agricultural subsidies, exploitative labour conditions, unaccounted for environmental externalities, and year-round growing climates. In this

document, our focus is on Food Hubs, offering recommendations for their inclusion and successful implementation in the NFSS.

What is a Food Hub?

The NFSS does not offer a specific definition of the term 'Food Hub'. It implies (pp. 19-20) at times that Food Hubs are smaller versions of food terminals, appropriate for rural and remote regions, and offers one example of a Food Hub (which performs far more than the aggregation and distribution functions of a terminal). Successful integration of Food Hubs through the NFSS requires understanding that a "Food Hub" is not a homogenous concept. It is an umbrella term that captures a range of place-based organizations contributing to improving local food systems resilience through a range of functions. Common Food Hub functions include:

- Aggregation and reliable distribution of local and/or imported products;
- Accessible and shared infrastructure for food processing and value-added products;
- Warehousing, dry and cold storage, both frozen and cooler;
- Coordination of established relationships with farmers, processors, and local organizations.

Beyond these basic definitional criteria that focus on "hard infrastructure" characteristics alone, most Food Hubs also share a set of norms, values, and services that are essential to combatting food insecurity in a comprehensive fashion:

- They are place-based–that is, they take on forms and functions that correspond to the needs, constraints, and opportunities of the place and unique sociodemographics in which they are situated which varies widely across Canada;
- They offer additional benefits to surrounding communities, including:
    - offering employment and volunteer opportunities and/or training (e.g. food production, processing, safety/handling, advocacy, etc);
    - combatting social isolation and exclusion through community programming;
    - Being co-located with and/or connected through referral networks to other wrap-around supports (e.g. community health, employment, settlement, housing, addiction services, etc.)
    - Providing incubator and entrepreneurial supports and resources for small, emerging food businesses and entrepreneurs and newcomers
    - Diverting 'rescued' and 'surplus' food (i.e. from producers, manufacturers, grocery stores, etc.) that would otherwise be wasted and redistributing it in a free or subsidized manner

- Renting or sharing space with food-related programs; serving as base of operations for food banks.

(Edge & Regnier-Davies, in press; Papargyropoulou et al, 2024; Pettman et al, 2023; McShane & Coffey, 2022; Nelson & Landman, 2020; Sharpe et al, 2020; Wills, 2017).

- They adapt over time to changes in the needs, constraints, and opportunities around them (Levkoe et al., Harris et al., 2026; McLean et al., 2025);
- They provide an efficient model in the face of increasing land scarcity, rent, and property taxes that are displacing essential food retail, health, and social services (Manis et al, 2022);
- They "aim to contribute to a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable local food system by strengthening connections among local and regional food producers, eaters, and communities" (McLean et al., 2025);
- They recognize that food security is multi-faceted–it is not just about affordability, but also about access, cultural appropriateness, equity, social inclusion, well-being, community and entrepreneurial development, education, skills and more. That is why Food Hubs themselves do not just aggregate or distribute food. They try to close the gap between producer and consumer in a holistic way (Overend et al., 2026).

As noted in our recommendations below, a fully fleshed out NFSS and the policies that flow from it should articulate the definition of Food Hubs in line with the definition offered above, so that implementation partners are all working from the same accurate, evidence-based, and transformative model.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Articulate the desired outcomes of Food Hubs more concretely and comprehensively.** As explained above, the definition of Food Hubs in the NFSS is too vague and narrowly conceptualized to operationalize, and risks excluding or at least disadvantaging the most realistic and viable form of a Food Hub. There needs to be clarity in the desired outcomes, but flexibility built into how these outcomes are achieved to allow Food Hubs to reflect the affordances of their surrounding communities–meeting local needs, working within local constraints, leveraging existing infrastructure and programs (e.g., existing shared digital infrastructure).
2. **Incorporate Social KPIs into the evaluation of Food Hub success and viability.** Food Hubs are being linked in the NFSS to lowered food costs for Canadians, but they do not lower costs or make food more accessible through distribution and aggregation alone. Food hubs help people access food and combat food insecurity through social programming (e.g. food banks, community kitchens and gardens) that use the Food Hub's social, digital, and physical infrastructure (Right to Food, 2026). A more robust measurement of social KPIs–which measure the more complex link between Food Hubs and food security–is required. In addition to measuring how

many Food Hubs get established (with a goal of ten at the outset of the program), the NFSS must measure social impact, ownership, producer viability, regional capacity, and whether the hubs become durable alternatives to dominant supply chains. To these ends, we have included a long list of social KPIs that we have vetted and reduced to the most important and reliable measures as an appendix to this document and as a standalone attachment for ease of use.

3. **Leverage the Food Hubs that already exist–including their existing assets and shared physical and digital infrastructure–to pilot and scale up place-appropriate ways to achieve desired outcomes and key performance indicators.** We estimate that there are around eighty organizations that currently call themselves Food Hubs and approximately 1,000 organizations that could be characterized as "Food Hub adjacent" in Canada. The creation of new Food Hubs where ones currently exist, particularly in rural and remote regions, is counterproductive, inefficient, and may result in damage to existing local food systems. Leveraging existing hubs will also help to identify and prioritize the creation of Food Hubs in those areas that are un/under served. Further, it has become increasingly apparent that virtual platforms allow food actors to share information about resource needs, availability, supplies, while also helping users to consolidate loads, eliminate waste, and reduce costs, all the while strengthening food system networks. As yet many Food Hubs lack such digital capacity, so augmenting such infrastructure is vital. There are promising examples of digital infrastructure in development, such as Grow & Connect in BC. In order for digital infrastructure to support the NFSS's objectives, it must: i) be built on a foundation of real/hard infrastructure and ii) prioritize local wealth generation over extraction/investor interests.

4. **Leverage government procurement for maximum impact.** One of the most promising and achievable goals in the NFSS is using the National Food and Beverage Procurement Strategy and the Buy Canadian Policy as levers to increase demand for local products. Institutions act as anchor purchasers through value-based criteria, regional procurement targets, supplier development, coordinated logistics, and purchasing pathways for smaller producers. It creates predictable demand, improves Food Hub operating stability, opens institutional markets to smaller producers, allows infrastructure to operate at a useful capacity, redirects public spending into regional economies, and gives governments leverage to require fair pricing, transparent ownership, decent work, and public-benefit outcomes. To take full advantage of this lever, the NFSS should ensure clear pathways for Food Hubs to supply their local school food programs with produce and/or shared infrastructure. Similar strategies should be developed for other large institutions (e.g. hospitals, government offices, etc.). Private companies should also be encouraged to source their food through Food Hubs as a component of corporate social responsibility.

5. **Do not overemphasize the economic viability of any one Food Hub.** We recommend prioritizing organizational viability as much as, if not more than economic viability, and we also recommend thinking about economic viability at the

level of the entire system rather than at the level of individual Food Hubs. To these ends:

a. Viability should be conceptualized holistically, encompassing not just financial margins but organizational readiness, governance, fiduciary responsibility, leadership capacity, and fundraising and communications strategy. Not all Food Hubs will have these characteristics fully developed at the time of funding, but they should be supported to develop them and should demonstrate consideration of them in their proposals.

b. The economic viability of the Food Hub system is more important than that of individual hubs. Given the variability of affordances across Canadian communities (economic capital, labour, markets, existing infrastructure, natural resources, corporate capture of local supply chains), it is highly likely that some Food Hubs will take longer to mature than others; just like ordinary citizens, some will be net 'takers' and some will be net 'givers' and these relationships are likely to change over time with shifts in economy, demographics, environment and more. But Food Hubs, by definition, function in networks. Only funding hubs that can demonstrate their individual economic viability actually weakens the potential for a strong system. The government should also consider whether there are financial policy levers that can be used to help Food Hubs stay afloat over and above direct funding.

Recommendations 6-8 unpack this point further, emphasizing the distinct needs, functions and structures of Food Hubs that should be accounted for in and supported by the implementation of the NFSS.

6. **Fund "Soft" Infrastructure and Human Capital.** To ensure the long-term success of the strategy, it must explicitly prioritize investments in "soft" infrastructure and human capital alongside its focus on physical assets. While building distribution centers and acquiring delivery fleets are important, case studies of Food Hub closures demonstrate that over-investing in physical infrastructure before securing experienced personnel is a primary driver of failure (Feldstein and Barham, 2017). Operating a successful Food Hub requires a highly specialized set of core competencies: such as large-scale business logistics, warehouse management, and fresh-produce wholesaling, meaning that relying on inexperienced staff or volunteers can severely hinder a hub's viability (Feldstein and Barham, 2017). Furthermore, the operational success of these regional networks relies heavily on "relational infrastructure," which is the trust, ongoing communication, and coordination cultivated between producers, distributors, and institutional buyers (Day-Farnsworth and Miller 2014, Rogoff 2014). This relational work, such as mapping local networks and forging connections, must often be done even before a hub is formally established (McLean et al., 2025). Therefore, we advise to structure funding so that it provides dedicated operational capital (see also recommendation #8 on timelines), allowing Food Hubs to hire expert staff like supply-chain coordinators in

key positions and to sustain the critical human relationships that make physical infrastructure function effectively.

7. **Ensure that non-profits (and collectives of non-profits working collaboratively) are eligible for and not disadvantaged by the terms of the funding.** Eligible operators are described only as "commercially-viable independent and cooperative grocery and buying networks" (pp. 19-20) which excludes many existing food-hub programs. This is highly problematic if one of the goals is to reduce corporate concentration and over-consolidation, and provide resources to organizations that are serving Canada's most food insecure populations. It is particularly problematic for rural and remote locations that lack the economies of scale for commercially profitable Food Hubs. Food Hubs must be considered critical infrastructure that is worthy of public investment (much like roads, energy grids, waste management, etc.). Doing otherwise puts the food infrastructure created and/or supported by the NFSS at risk of being captured in the same way that the food system writ large has been.

   Non-profits aren't named (though a vague reference to "food-system organizations" appears under a separate Processing program on p. 23), but non-profit Food Hubs are viable. Moreover, very few viable for-profit Food Hubs exist in Canada today, and that is an issue that cannot be resolved with one-time funding: the commercial model works where there is a 365-day growing season, which most of Canada does not have. Building this network will likely require non-profit operators or for-profit/non-profit partnerships. Non-profit Food Hubs in operation in Canada today have a number of distinct attributes that offer value but require careful consideration in the design of this policy:

   a. Existing relationships: non-profits already have direct ties to School Food and Food Bank networks that could provide consistent procurement demand for local food. Many are also well connected with local producers, a foundation to build on rather than duplicate, undermine, or start from scratch.

   b. Social value: volunteer opportunities (e.g. high school students, seniors and newcomers looking to gain experience, etc.), job-skills pathways (such as through ODSP/Ontario Works in Ontario), college/university placements and research, and partnerships with community programs (e.g. medically tailored meal delivery for isolated seniors, cooking classes, food banks, etc.), none of which a commercial-only model replicates. This represents a more comprehensive approach to addressing affordability than focusing on food prices alone, as it considers underlying determinants of purchasing power and the ability to flourish in Canadian society. Lowering food costs without providing opportunities for individual and community development perpetuates socio-economic dependency and exclusion for many segments of society.

c. The capacity constraint: most non-profits already run at full capacity. A hub build needs funding, board approval, risk mitigation, and dedicated staff; capital alone could put either a for-profit or non-profit at risk.

8. **Adjust the timelines for establishment and for return on investment.** Food Hubs need a long runway to reach self-sufficiency and scale. Vermont, a comparable cold-climate jurisdiction with one of the most mature non-profit-led Food Hub networks in North America, took roughly two decades to reach its current hub infrastructure, and its statewide local food strategy needed a full ten years to meaningfully move the needle on local food's share of sales.[1]

   Moreover, Food Hubs need to be deeply embedded in their local context as well as robustly engaged in larger networks to be successful. Research on extant Food Hubs is clear that even before they are established there is important relational work to be done in mapping local networks, forging connections with partners, and understanding local needs, constraints and opportunities (Maclean et al., 2025). Food Hubs are often established with a one time, short term grant that under-resources them, necessitating seeking additional grant funding. However, new grants typically broaden the scope of the Hub, compounding the issue and risking long term financial viability (Harris et al., 2026).

   Given that success depends on local embeddedness, relationships, and a social purpose, an aggressive 2026-2028 timeline or policy that does not directly and meaningfully support non-profit Food Hubs will exclude the organizations best positioned to deliver lasting local impact.

9. Work with ISED's Rural Team (Strategic Policy Sector) to rural proof the NFSS and the Food-Link Fund, and contribute to rural appropriate KPIs. The forms and functions of rural and remote Food Hubs, and the antecedents and markers of their success, will be different than for urban hubs in diverse, high-density neighbourhoods. This includes variation in their functions, but also scale. The Food-Link Fund should be examined through a rural lens to ensure not only that rural places are not inadvertently disqualified or disadvantaged, but that rural/remote regions that are significantly underserved and rural Food Hubs that have the latent capacity to expand and have a greater impact are prioritized in the criteria for infrastructure allocation. To that end, we recommend a dedicated funding for rural and remote in a separate funding stream, enabling application of differing criteria and more equitable competition. Rural Food Hubs might require additional upfront investment, longer runways, and need to be more multi-purpose than urban ones in order to be viable. They may also need to be networks of smaller hubs working together, as a single regional Food Hub is unlikely to effectively serve a large rural region. Including rural representation (matching the population % in each province)

[1] https://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/goals/demand-vermont-food-will-increase

in the engagement and advisory board recommended above would also help ensure that rural realities are captured by the Fund and related policy.

10. Build broad-based community and sectoral engagement into the governance, design, implementation, and evaluation of the Food-Link Fund. The recommendations thus far have pointed to the importance of community embeddedness for Food Hub success, and the same goes for the NFSS policy itself. The policy will be most successful if it is engaged with the geographic, and socio-demographic communities it intends to serve and support. This is particularly critical in rural communities where the NFSS identifies strong needs. Rural citizens often feel overlooked, unheard, and underinvested in. Rural resilience is becoming a key cornerstone of Canada's sovereignty, we recommend following the OECD's guidance on "supporting community-led initiatives and strengthening rural leadership to build capacity for effective involvement of local communities as partners in the multi-level governance process" (OECD 2020, section 4.1). Concretely, we recommend:

    a. establishing an expert advisory group comprised of food systems researchers, Food Hub operators and users, food producers, and other food systems actors operating in different geographies to oversee the design and implementation of the Food-Link Fund. The advisory board should have representatives from each province and territory, with a representative mix of rural and urban-based members.

    b. supporting a National Food Hub Network. As noted above, Food Hubs are, by definition, networked. To be successful, that network needs to be robust, continuous, and visible. A National Food Hub Network, established alongside the funded Food Hub and terminal system by ensuring that selected sites are connected to one another and working together, could render Canada's food systems visible and make them easier to evaluate, intervene in, improve, expand, and more. It would also make it easier for Food Hubs to start and scale. A Network should create a map, database, and shared digital infrastructure, and facilitate, fund and/or conduct research to develop case studies, identify best practices, carry out Food Hub evaluation to validate KPIs, and inform the governance and oversight of the Food-Link policy.

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OTHER MEDIA

Checking in on the BC Food Hub Network
Podcast: https://farminginbc.ca/episode/checking-in-on-the-bc-food-hub-network

General BC Food Hub "Resilience and Regional Food Systems"
website: https://selkirk.ca/research-innovation/regional-innovation-chair/resilience-and-food-systems

Grow and Connect Interior: https://growandconnect.ca/

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APPENDIX: SOCIAL KPIs

Based on our expertise and experience, we recommend the following social KPIs, with the caveat that not all indicators will be appropriate for all food hubs. Each should have a "N/A" option so that food hubs that do not engage in that area of programming can opt out. Rural, remote, northern, and urban hubs should use the same broad KPI categories, but they should not be held to identical numerical thresholds. A rural hub serving dispersed producers and thin markets may create considerable public value at a lower sales volume than an urban terminal. The baseline and target should reflect the function the hub is funded to perform. **Hubs should also be resourced and supported to collate the data for required KPIs–this will require a mix of soft and hard infrastructure.**

I. **Public and anchor-institution procurement.** Public procurement can provide the stable demand that allows hubs, processors, and producers to plan, invest, and remain operational. Tracking it measures an important component of viability, and also captures whether public spending is being redirected into regional food economies.

- Dollar value and percentage of participating institutions' food spending purchased through the hub / terminal from local / regional producers and processors.
- Number and value of multi-year purchasing agreements with schools, hospitals, universities, long-term care, municipalities, correctional facilities, and other anchor institutions.
- Percentage of hub revenue supported by predictable institutional demand.

II. **Producer viability and value retained.** As noted above, greater throughput is not helpful if farmers remain price takers and/or absorb the costs of "affordability". The objective should be to improve market access *and* producer returns, rather than simply increase the volume of local food sold.

- Total sales generated for small and mid-scale regional producers and processors.

- Change in producers' net revenue from sales through the hub.
- Percentage of the final sale value retained by producers and processors.
- Number of producers gaining access to institutional, wholesale, or independent retail markets for the first time.

III. **Affordability.** A key objective of the NFSS is to lower food prices, but those prices cannot be achieved by squeezing farmers, workers, or small processors. Farmers are already seeing stagnating returns on their products even as consumer prices are increasing (NFU, 2026). Price and producer-return indicators should therefore be reported together. In other words, a hub should not be considered successful for lowering prices if the savings come from reducing producer returns or worsening working conditions.

- Price of a standardized basket of hub-supplied foods compared with major supermarket retailers in the same service area (similar to the work done by Dr. Phoebe Stephens et al.)
- Change in distribution, storage, spoilage, and coordination costs.
- Consumer or institutional price changes assessed alongside producer prices and worker compensation.

IV. **Regional economic circulation and import replacement.** Food hubs have great potential to contribute to regional economic development, especially in rural areas. They can achieve this through job creation and maintenance throughout the food supply chain, but their impact goes far beyond this. If done right, food hubs will help food spending circulate regionally/locally instead of continuing to leak outward through externally controlled supply chains.

- Dollar value and percentage of hub sales sourced within the defined region.
- Value of purchases shifted from out-of-region and/or corporate supply chains to regional producers and processors.
- Percentage of the hub's operating and procurement spending retained within the region.
- Local employment and supplier spending generated through hub activity.

V. **Ownership, governance, and economic democracy**. As in any other sector, local ownership is strongly associated with better social, civic, economic, and

health outcomes for local populations. Across community economic development scholarship, it is almost unanimously concluded that the most resilient economy, with the most benefits flowing back to society, is a diversified one comprised of small, locally-owned businesses (Steiner & Atterton, 2015:7; Varghese, 2006;). Compared to communities dominated by absentee-owned businesses, communities with a high concentration of local ownership perform better on an astonishing range of measures–stability of population, infant mortality, morbidity, civic engagement, strength of institutions, control over and wealth capture from local resources, and more (Steiner & Atterton, 2015; Varghese, 2006; Lyson 2004; Shuman 1998; Shortall and Warner, 2012). Looking at Food Hubs, the same warehouse can produce very different outcomes depending on who owns it, controls access, sets prices, and benefits from the surplus. This KPI distinguishes community-rooted infrastructure from publicly subsidized corporations.

- Percentage of publicly funded infrastructure held under public, co-operative, Indigenous, nonprofit, municipal, or community ownership.
- Formal voting representation for producers, workers, Indigenous rights holders, independent buyers, and community partners.
- Presence of asset locks, community-benefit conditions, or other protections against privatization and corporate acquisition.
- Percentage of operating surplus reinvested into the hub, participating producers, workers, or the regional food system.

VI. **Regional capacity, market diversity, and resilience**. As noted above, resilience comes from diversity, redundancy, interconnection, and regional adaptive capacity. A hub that depends on one dominant buyer or distributor may move substantial volume without creating a meaningful alternative to corporate concentration.

- Increase in accessible regional aggregation, storage, processing, transportation, and distribution capacity.
- Number and diversity of small and mid-scale producers, independent grocers, institutions, and community buyers using the hub.
- Reduction in reliance on a single distributor, buyer, processor, route, or proprietary platform.
- Number of rural, remote, northern, and underserved communities (or population) receiving regular service.

- Reduction in distance, time, or cost required for producers to reach processing, storage, and wholesale markets.

These indicators are a way of measuring the NFSS's progress toward its goal of strengthening competition and resilience–which are interdependent–in the food system (p. 15).

VII. **Community Well-Being.** Given the tendency of food hubs to offer social and community programming as part of their mission it is crucial to measure the impacts a food hub has on community well-being. The most reliable measures will focus on people who participate in food hub programming as volunteers or participants. Right to Food (2026) has used most of the indicators below and others in their evaluations of community food centres.

- Participant self-reported sense of belonging or connection to community
- Participants reporting increased food literacy, food budgeting, and confidence preparing food at home
- Number of shared community meals or cooking events held, and attendance
- Number of referrals to wrap-around supports
- Participant self-reported wellbeing and/or access to healthy food as a result of engagement with food hubs, using a validated short-form scale where possible
- Volunteers reporting an increased sense of purpose
- Percentage of participants who also volunteer at the hub