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Food Insecurity in Canada's North

In the spring of 2012, flooding washed out several sections of the Alaska Highway, cutting off the only transport link to Yukon Territory. Cut-off from southern food supplies, Whitehorse's main grocery store had bare shelves within two days and rural communities did not have time to stockpile supplies. This was a wake-up call for the Yukon and now local communities are taking it upon themselves to ensure they are more self-sufficient when it comes to food security.

In Yukon, over 6000 people are food insecure (17%)¹, the majority of which are Yukon First Nations. In the Northwest Territories food insecurity rates are 20% and in Nunavut, 45% of its residents are food insecure. When we look at children, food insecurity rates are even higher in the North (Yukon 20%, NWT 32% and 62% in Nu)¹.

In a report published this year by the Council of Canadian Academies, food insecurity remains the dominant challenge faced by northern communities². Clear evidence exists that food insecurity has negative implications for human health, including cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes and mental health³. Northern Indigenous people believe that this is a result of not being able to practice our traditional activities and eat our traditional foods; which is causing reduced physical activity, greater reliance on market foods, and a major change in diet. Food security for Aboriginal peoples in Canada involves understanding the cultural, nutritional, and spiritual significance of specific types of foods such as traditional foods like moose, caribou, and salmon^{2,4}.

Climate change and a rapidly changing environment are directly linked to rural communities' food security, namely through affecting our access to traditional foods. This is putting all northerner's health and well-being at risk. Not only are we not able to access our traditional foods, but we are not able to practice our associated cultural traditions. Elder's pass on their knowledge to youth through activities such as harvest camps, but there are fewer opportunities to do so. As Indigenous peoples of the North, we strive to prioritize culture and ensure that our youth have the experience and knowledge they need to be culturally strong leaders for many generations to come.

In Yukon we have a tight supply chain depending on only one transport route for our food. Within Yukon, there are small-scale farms and some locally produced foods. Farmers are a growing movement in the Territory, but face many challenges related to climate, and high costs for importing feed, soil amendments, tools, and other materials.

It is essential that there is support for developing local food systems. This will require a collaborative effort within and between the Territories and nationally. Currently, the territories

and provinces are talking about food and working on food security issues to various extents, but not in a comprehensive way. We need a National Food Policy for Canada that priorities community and locally based strategies within our Territories.

Questions for MPs:

1. What are you personally going to do about the pressing food insecurity situation in Northern Canada that I have described?
2. How would you recommend that the federal government act to enhance food sovereignty in the north, including more local and community food programs.

Background and References:

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2. Canadian Council of Academies. (2014). Aboriginal Food Security in Northern Canada: An Assessment of the State of Knowledge. Ottawa, ON. The Expert Panel on the State of Knowledge of Food Security in Northern Canada, Council of Canadian Academies. <http://www.scienceadvice.ca/en/assessments/completed/food-security.aspx>
3. Butler Walker, J., Kassi, N., & Eamer, C. (2009). *Food Security in Times of Change: A Policy Brief on Food Security for Northern Canada*. Whitehorse, (YT): Arctic Health Research Network-Yukon.
4. Kuhnlein, H., Receveur, O., Soueida, R. and Egeland, G. M. (2004) Arctic Indigenous Peoples Experience the Nutrition Transition with Changing Dietary Patterns and Obesity. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 134 (6), p. 1447-1453.