

# **New Farmers Initiative - Northern Report**

Kim Rapati, Hay River Northwest Territories

February, 2015

## **Introduction**

Agriculture in the North is fairly young, having been established around the 1840s with the arrival of European traders and missionary churches who built farms and gardens (Serecon Management Consulting Inc. 2007). Before people started to gather in central locations instead of moving nomadically, the people in the north had a complete and functioning local food system. For this reason, many Aboriginal people are excited and open to the idea that they can produce their own food in the north. Here, there is a healthy opportunity to incorporate wild harvesting with domestic food systems to recreate a sustainable northern food culture.

There are even some advantages to farming in the north. There are less pests and diseases that may destroy crops, there is a high demand for local food and the interest in food security and creating opportunities to empower local people is growing. There are significant challenges, as described by the stakeholders interviewed for this report, but with an increase in policy catered to the growers of the north and more access to education from experienced northern farmers, there is great potential for a bright future for local food production in our northern communities.

## **Farmers of the Yukon**

The Yukon has a well-established farming scene with the majority of farms located around Whitehorse. There are 148 producers in the Yukon, selling forage, potatoes, kale, cheese, jam, meats, vegetables, fresh produce, sod and bedding plants (Serecon Management Consulting Inc. 2007). This constitutes a \$4 million niche industry (Statistics Canada, 2006).

The Yukon Agriculture Association (YAA) was established in 1974 and still has a strong board of directors and staff. YAA works to provide support for farmers throughout the territory and work on issues with their collective voice to reduce barriers. They have recently leased a 65-hectare parcel of land, equipment for rent and a great website to share news and information. The YAA also started the Yukon Young Farmers Association which works to connect with young people who are just starting in farming and make sure they have support and resources. Other popular groups have been established to help support farmers get their produce to consumers such as the Growers of Organic Food Yukon, the Fireweed Community Market, and the Potluck Food Co-op.

The Yukon Government has also shown a lot of support for farmers and an openness to develop policy that will support the industry. An Agriculture Branch was created

in 1986 (Government of the Yukon, 2006) and today has an Agricultural Director who meets regularly with an Agriculture Industry Advisory Committee.

## **Barriers**

Land acquisition and infrastructure are the main barriers. Another is not having enough northern-specific farming knowledge, which goes with not enough access to training programs. The third main barrier are having funding programs that fit the specific needs of small-scale multi-product growers of the north, the programs that are in place are for larger-scale profit-based models. This makes it difficult for a new farmer to start small and grow their skills as their farm grows. With organic farming practices, which most of the new farmers are interested in, it is important that their personal skill development has a time to mature. With funding programs based around how much money you can make right away, there isn't this incubation time for new producers to get established.

## **Policy to Help**

What would substantially help the new farmer in the Yukon are opportunities for mentorship programs. There also needs to be increased support for the small-scale and organic growers.

One of the big advantages in the Yukon is that there are opportunities for young people to become leaders, as promoted by the Yukon Young Farmers Association, which has been providing training for board training. By joining together, they have greater strength to represent the Yukon farmers with one strong voice and they are looking forward to moving policy changes forward with that.

## **Farmers of the Northwest Territories**

Agriculture in the NWT has seen a strong resurgence in the last few years from the growing desire for sustainable and healthy food sources. Historically, there have been many agricultural projects ranging from experimental farms, dairy farms, an abattoir, and large market gardens in most communities. Today, there are 29 farmers in the Northwest Territories, on industrial poultry barn and many community gardens and 'hobby farmers' (Ecology North, 2014).

Some of the biggest contributors to the agricultural scene in the NWT is the supportive government programming through the Growing Forward Program which has been providing funding for community gardens capital for farms. The Northern Farm Training Institute was created in 2013 for training people from around the NWT on northern gardening methods and has proved very successful for building the skills for new farmers. Hay River has a long-running 'Fisherman's Wharf', which is a weekly market that sells garden produce from a few local farms. The Yellowknife Farmers Market, established in 2013, has demonstrated the ability

to contribute almost \$1 million in yearly economic impact (Yellowknife Farmers Market, 2014).

## **Barriers**

Land availability is one of the main barriers. An agricultural policy is currently being worked on by the Territorial Government, but without significant agricultural industry, there is little previously established land and no clear procedure to procure land. There is much confusion around how to obtain agricultural land stemming from not having a Territorial Agriculture Policy, hardly any community governments with their own municipal agricultural policy, unsettled land claims, and devolution.

Education is another barrier as there are few locally skilled farmers. The Northern Farm Training Institute's programs are addressing this need to educate and inspire local community members to develop their own initiatives in their own communities.

## **Policy to Help**

The Territorial Government should continue to support new farmers through their successful localized Growing Forward programs that provide capital and training money. The most important way to clear barriers is to support municipal, regional and Territorial strategic agricultural planning that will help address challenges in land acquisition.

## **Farmers of Nunavut, Nunatsiviat and Nunavik**

Agriculture is the most new in this region compared to other areas in the north, but there is a similar growing interest, also related to having access to more fresh and healthy food at manageable prices. In the past five years, the Nunavut Harvesters Association administered federal funding through the CAAP program which mainly funded muskox and caribou meat processing plants and food safety courses. Currently, there are community greenhouses in Iqaluit, Kuujjuac and Arviat. The Nunavut Food Security Coalition is a new project from the NU Department of Health which has six main themes, one of which was local food production, although contacts have acknowledged that this branch of the program was the one with the least work done on it. The Food Security Network of Newfoundland and Labrador have been very successful in working with community members to develop local food research projects in isolated Labrador communities.

## **Barriers**

A very large barrier for this region is the lack of government support and funding. There was insurmountable confusion over whether the Government of Nunavut had signed onto the Growing Forward 2 Funding program and who to contact for details

regarding that. Another large barrier is education as there is a lack of skilled farmers with knowledge of what to grow (that will satisfy local tastes) and how to grow it.

## **Policy to Help**

Government support would really help this region – there needs to be a clear contact for communities to go to for finding support for their agricultural initiatives. This would considerably help community initiatives get traction. These funding programs need to be specifically designed to support the current situation – they need to support fundamental skill development in a community non-profit category as there are no ‘farmers’ that have the skills already to initiate commercial agricultural ventures. That would change if community members with the interest had access to northern mentors and training centres that would help them develop the skills they would need.

## **Conclusion**

Although the northern region is large and varied, there are some clear opportunities and needs across the territories. The first thing to point out is that there is a lot of interest for increased access to local food and therefore clear opportunities for market development. The main barriers are access to effective northern farming education techniques; efficient and well-coordinated government support; and, policy around agricultural land so that there is a clear and accessible way for new farmers to start up.

## **Interviewees**

We would like to acknowledge the time and effort from participants we had the opportunity to interview from all across the north. Thank you very much to the following interview participants:

Bev Buckway	Yukon Ag Association
Sheena Adams	Inuvik Community Greenhouse
Tiana Zakus	Yukon Young Farmers Association
Jackie Milne	President of NFTI
Kevin	
Wallington	Choice North Farms
France Benoit	Farmer/creator of YK Farmers Market
Stephen	
Leyden	President, Iqaluit Community Greenhouse Society
Brian	
Lendrum	GOOFY
Brian	
Zawadski	NU Harvesters
Sara Statham	Territorial Food Security Coordinator
Paul Wiedrick	GNWT Manager, Trade and Investment

Kristie Jameson      Food Security Network of Newfoundland and  
Labrador  
Brad Barton      Gov of YT Agriculture Research Tech

**References (attached)**

Ecology North, 2014. State of Agriculture Report – Agricultural Land Use Survey. Territorial Farmers Association, Hay River, Northwest Territories.

Government of the Yukon, 2006. Vision for Yukon Agriculture: 2006 Yukon Agriculture Policy. Whitehorse, Yukon.

Serecon Management Consulting Inc. 2007. Multi-Year Development Plan for Yukon Agriculture and Agri-Food 2008-2012. Yukon Agriculture and Agri-Food Industry, Yukon Government Agriculture Branch, and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Whitehorse, Canada.

Yellowknife Farmers Market, 2014. 2014 Yellowknife Farmers Market Final Report. Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.