

Abstract (Max 150 words. Please note the abstract will be shown to third parties in order to find reviewers who are not in conflict of interest with the proposal).

Many communities in Ontario do not have adequate access to local, healthful food. In particular, northern Ontario faces challenges associated with production and distribution systems, which limit availability and impact food sovereignty. It is, therefore, important to understand food access limitations in northern Ontario and how access to food can be improved. Our research project will pursue this from the perspective of individual farmers and seeks to evaluate the availability of local food (i.e. food produced in and intended for consumption for local markets) in Northern Ontario. This research will identify systems currently in place to produce and distribute this food, and the success of network systems in other communities, such as the North East Community Network. Through an understanding of current food networks and linkages between nearby communities, we plan to assess the possibility of these communities creating partnerships in order to improve distribution systems. This research will include a case study of new farmers including the Anabaptist farm community, young farmers and new immigrants and their recent migration to northern Ontario, specifically looking at their impact on local food and role within a local food network.

Benefits (Max 350 words per theme). Describe the benefits of the research to Ontario's agri-food and rural sectors. Identify who will gain from the research and how they will gain

Theme 1 - Food for Health

Food has a direct link to the health of all Ontarians. Access to healthful food, in particular food that is grown, processed and distributed within a local market is not equally available across the province. Many communities, especially those located in northern Ontario, do not have access to locally grown food and as a result, these consumers have limited healthy food options. The proposed examination of local food systems and expansion of existing agricultural endeavours into northern Ontario will benefit the following stakeholders:

Farmers

With the recent movement of new farmers, including the Anabaptist community, young farmers and new immigrants to more northern communities, the agricultural field in some communities has expanded north. This research seeks to better understand the opportunities that exist for further expansion of the farming community and challenges these farmers faced. Furthermore, this research seeks to better connect these farmers with distribution systems in order to improve access to local food and create a regional agricultural network in northern Ontario.

Northern Ontario Residents

These residents will also benefit from this research through a clear understanding of issues associated with access to local food. In working with local municipalities we intend to assess current local food movements and provide best practices for developing a local food network that will improve access to local food. An expanded agricultural sector and networked food distribution system will improve food sovereignty/security and access to local food for all northern Ontario residents.

Rural Northern Communities

Many rural agricultural communities have limited agricultural opportunities and unstable economic bases. In identifying opportunities and best practices for the expansion of agriculture, including attracting new farmers, access to local food can be expanded and new sources of economic growth can be attained.

Decision Makers/Municipalities

Based on the lead applicants experience, many municipalities across the north are trying to identify the means and tools by which they can re-establish and expand the northern agricultural sector. This research will identify and flag tools and best practices to help make this happen through a collaborative network approach. A jurisdictional scan will also provide best practices for policy development.

Rationale for the research. (Max 500 words. Explain why the research is needed and the research priority(ies) being met

e.g. the problem the research will tackle, or the gap in current knowledge that will be addressed)

Healthful local food is not equally available across Ontario. Many northern communities have a significantly limited supply of local food and many locales can be considered food deserts. Issues of health and wellbeing subsequently arise and can be directly linked to the consumption of food. Access to locally produced food is necessary in order to address these issues. It is important to understand what food is available locally and what potential currently exists to improve food sovereignty/security and increased access to local food. Unfortunately, research examining local food systems in northern Ontario is limited and little is known about the production, processing and distribution and availability of such food. Existing research is largely limited to small-scale local food movements and does not explore the role of producers in a significant way.

Food sovereignty/security are intrinsically linked to the local food systems. In order for the needs of residents to be met, the production, consumption and distribution of food must be controlled by the community. As such, we need to understand the current food production and distribution system in northern Ontario in order to understand the issues of access facing northern residents. This research proposes to examine the existing food system in northern Ontario and evaluate the potential expansion of the agricultural sector and potential to create a network for food production and distribution. Given the remote location of many northern communities and limited resources available, the creation of a network linking food producers and distributors is needed in order to increase access to local food. This research will build off of a previous project that explored the Northeast Community Network and the challenges and opportunities associated with network development between communities in northern Ontario.

It is also important to understand the recent movement of new farmers to more northern communities. Young farmers, immigrants and migrants from the Anabaptist community have established farm endeavours in northern communities and have brought the notion of local food to many rural locales. Through a case study analysis, of the challenges and issues these farmers faced in establishing and expanding their farm operations will be identified and used to provide lessons and best practices for future agricultural growth. It is important to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with the migration of farmers to northern communities, as their experiences can better inform the process of expanding the agricultural base and access to local food. Furthermore, using these farmers as a case study will help to identify the role of new farmers in a local food network and will help to identify the appropriate markets for the distribution of their food.

It is necessary to determine the current state of food systems in northern Ontario in order to improve access to local healthful food. The opportunity to expand local food networks through a coordinated, community approach can improve food sovereignty/security for these inhabitants. Food and health are undoubtedly connected and efforts to improve access to food is necessary for the health of all residents.

Objectives (Max 150 words. Describe the purpose/ main goals of the research project - what the research is intended to accomplish)

The main goal of this project is to identify and analyze issues of local food access and how access to local food impacts food sovereignty/security for northern Ontario communities. This research will identify systems currently in place to produce and distribute food and will identify best practices for increasing access to local food. These best practices will examine existing rural community networks and advocate for the creation of a northern community food network that provides linkages between the production, distribution and consumption of locally produced food. Finally, a case study of the challenges and issues new farmers have faced during their recent migration to more northern communities will inform best practices to support new farmers and their role within a local food network for northern Ontario communities. This research will build upon the expertise of the PI and will have a decidedly municipal and farmer based orientation.

Methods (Max 750 words per theme). For each Research Theme: Describe your experimental plan for accomplishing the research objectives.

Theme 1 - Food for Health

This project will utilize a variety of methods, which are as follows:

1-At the outset, an advisory committee will be established. This will be comprised primarily of representatives from northern Ontario, including farmers, municipal staff, politicians, local Health Units and other key stakeholders, in addition to members from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. This committee will help scope out the geography and extent of the study area.

1a-This advisory committee will also help identify existing local food movements in northern Ontario, such as food hubs, distribution networks and other agricultural endeavours.

2-A literature review will be utilized to identify food sovereignty and food access issues as they relate to rural and remote areas and the connection between local food and health. This review will include consultation with other organizations/individuals conducting local food research in northern Ontario.

2a-A jurisdictional scan of policies related to the production and distribution of food and policies impacting local food both within Ontario and across Canada will identify best practices that can be adopted in Ontario.

3-A survey of northern municipalities will be conducted to determine access/availability issues of local food and the status of production and distribution systems. This survey will include any agricultural strategies that currently exist in northern Ontario.

3a- A socio-economic analysis of northern communities to determine which populations have limited access to local food, such as aboriginal communities, will be undertaken. This analysis will identify vulnerable populations and the challenges they face in accessing local food.

3b-This survey will also include a list of providers of services, such as butchers and farmers markets and create an inventory of existing services related to food production and distribution. This research will be organized according to the Standard Industrial Classifications System.

4-A case study will be conducted on newer farmers in northern Ontario. In particular, this will include the Anabaptist community, young farmers and new immigrants who have recently begun farming in more northern locales. It will utilize in-depth, semi-structured potentially recorded interviews in order to understand the issues and challenges faced by these new farmers. These interviews will also identify the role of these farmers within a local food network. In regards to the Anabaptist community, gaining access to these farmers will begin in southern Ontario utilizing existing contacts from the community. Access to new immigrants and younger farmers will be made through contacts in northern Ontario.

5-A survey of northern municipalities will be utilized to determine the movement of new farmers into these communities. This survey will be conducted through an interview of municipal staff (planners, economic development officers and clerks among others) and census data of current and historical connections to agriculture.

6-Best practices will be developed in consultation with the advisory committee.

7-A toolkit entitled "Facilitating the Agricultural and Local Food Sector in Northern Ontario" will be developed that identifies best practices in support of a northern community food network. This toolkit will look to other successful networks, such as the North East Community Network and opportunities for rural northern municipalities to work with urban and peri-urban areas.