

LET'S GET GROWING

Decolonizing Canada's northern food systems

TOPIC BRIEF | August 18, 2025



Sayisi Dene First Nation (Tadoule Lake)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Let's Get Growing explores the urgent need to transform food systems in northern Canada to advance Indigenous food security and sovereignty.

The topic brief examines the complex barriers facing local food production in the North – from harsh climates, short growing seasons, and limited infrastructure to the entrenched legacy of colonialism that severed Indigenous Peoples' connections to their lands and traditional food practices. These challenges have created a heavy reliance on expensive, inefficient south-to-north supply chains that deliver less nutritious food at much higher prices, deepening poverty and health disparities in Indigenous communities.

The brief also highlights how climate change is compounding these inequities by disrupting ecosystems, threatening traditional food

sources, and making food even more costly and inaccessible.

Despite these obstacles, Indigenous Peoples are leading innovative, culturally grounded solutions – such as food forests, cold-climate greenhouses, indoor growing systems, and the revitalization of traditional food harvesting practices – that reduce reliance on southern supply chains, strengthen local economies, and reclaim food sovereignty.

The topic brief concludes with a call to action for individuals, corporations, foundations, and civil society to join in a transformational food movement that centres Indigenous knowledge, governance, and stewardship and decolonizes Canada's food systems so that Indigenous Peoples can reclaim control over their food, health, and futures.

THE BACKGROUND

Food systems exist within a broader set of societal challenges

Growing food in Canada's three territories and in the northern parts of most provinces is uniquely challenging. Harsh climates, short growing seasons, poor soil quality, and limited transportation infrastructure all make agriculture difficult. But these environmental constraints are only part of the picture. The difficulty of producing food locally in the North intersects with deep social, political, and economic inequalities to produce disproportionately high rates of food insecurity, along with elevated health risks, among Indigenous Peoples in these regions.

Canada's food distribution system adds insult to injury. Rooted in colonialism, it relies heavily on expensive, inefficient, south-to-north supply chains that deliver lower-quality, less nutritious food at much higher prices. This burden falls hardest on Indigenous Peoples who face much higher levels of poverty – and therefore food insecurity – throughout Canada, but especially in northern, more remote, or underserved areas.

The burden is compounded further because Indigenous Peoples have lost access to many traditional food practices due to land dispossession, forced relocation, environmental degradation, and the loss of Indigenous knowledge and culture as a legacy of Residential Institutions (schools). Climate change is further disrupting ecosystems, threatening traditional food sources, and driving prices even higher.

The result is a cycle of chronic poverty, food insecurity, and poor health for many Indigenous Peoples in northern Canada.

Despite these challenges, there is reason for cautious optimism. Across the North, Indigenous Peoples are advancing innovative solutions – from food forests, to cold-climate greenhouses and other indoor growing technologies, to a revival of food harvesting practices based on Indigenous traditions – that make it possible to produce fresh, culturally-appropriate, and more nutritious food closer to home year-round.

These innovations hold the promise of reducing reliance on southern supply chains, building local economies, revitalizing Indigenous food systems, and furthering Indigenous food and cultural sovereignty.

To accelerate and sustain this transformation, holistic support is needed alongside strong advocacy for the structural changes required to decolonize food systems across Canada.

The following sections explore these interrelated dynamics in greater depth beginning with the environmental and structural barriers to growing food in northern regions of Canada.

THE ENVIRONMENT

The difficulty of growing food in northern Canada

An Unfriendly Environment to Grow Food

The most obvious difficulty to tackle at the outset is the reality of Canada's geography and climate. The soil in Canada's North often lacks essential plant nutrients and is commonly saturated with water, making it difficult for crops to grow. Rocky terrain and short growing seasons also present challenges for crop growth. Additional factors, such as limited all-season access to arable land and a sparse and widely dispersed population with inefficient transportation networks or markets, also make cold-climate agricultural initiatives challenging.¹

An Overarching Concern: Climate Change

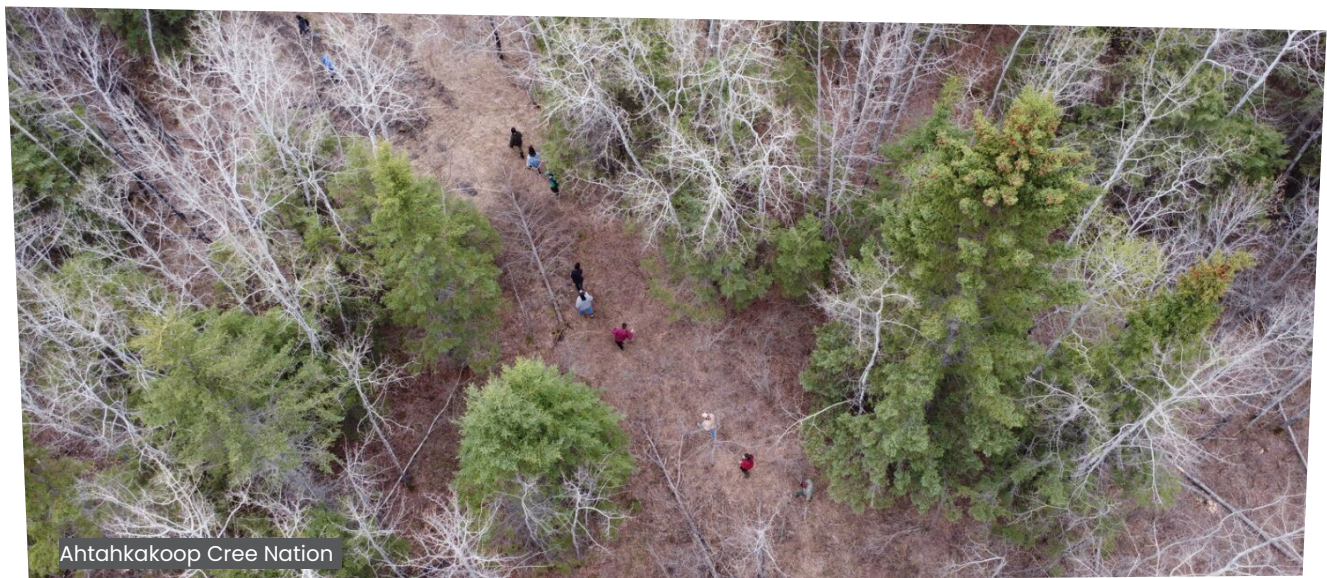
Food availability and affordability in northern Canada are further affected by climate change. Climate change is pushing the cost of food and other consumer goods ever higher, as it affects

transportation methods and costs and disrupts Indigenous Peoples' ability to engage in hunting, fishing, and agriculture in their traditional territories.²

Indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by severe and increasingly frequent climate events such as heat waves, droughts, floods, and wildfires. Because of their remoteness, difficult logistics, and poor infrastructure, they are also less equipped to respond to them.³

Climate change is altering ecosystems, causing habitat loss, changing migration patterns, and putting many species at risk. These factors, taken together, threaten traditional land-based practices and sources of healthy, culturally appropriate food, and erode community resilience.

These environmental realities intersect with the deeper colonial roots of food insecurity, explored next.



Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation

THE CONSEQUENCES

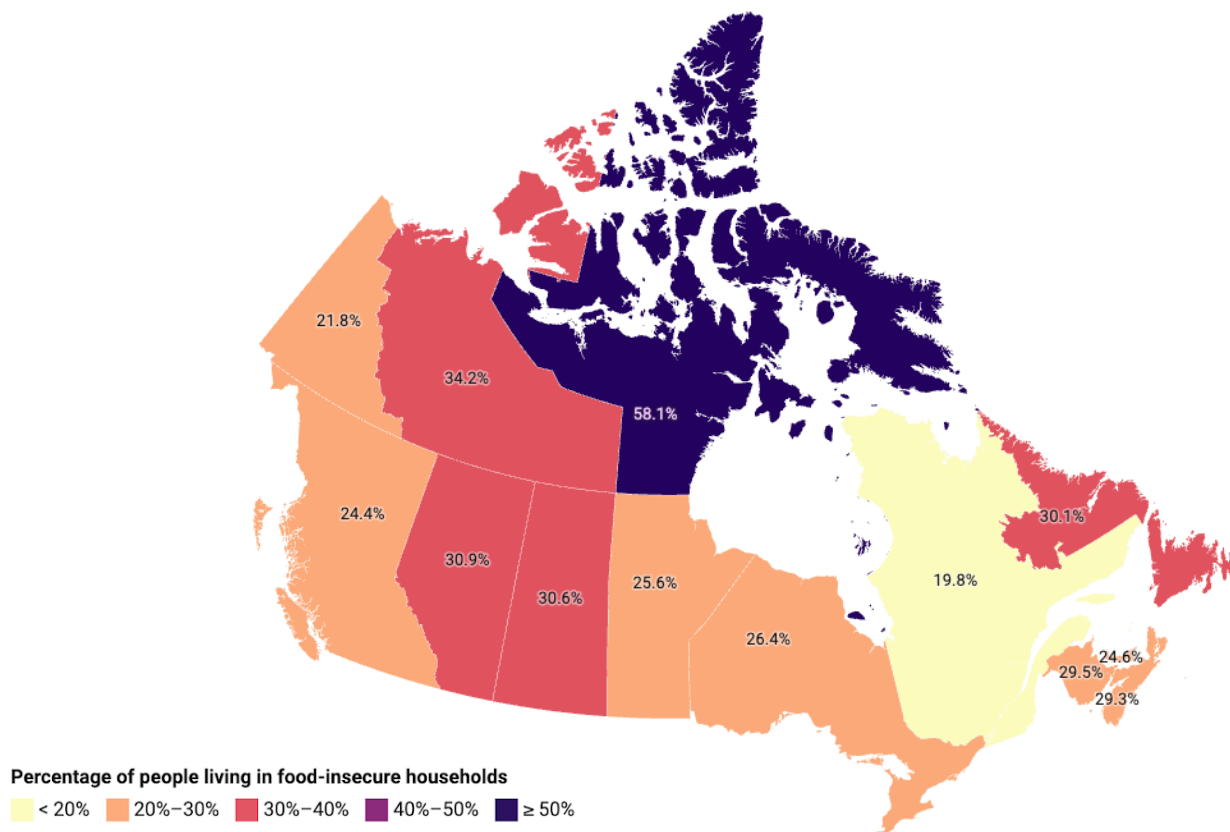
Indigenous food insecurity is high and rising

According to Statistics Canada's 2022 *Canadian Income Survey*, 37.4% of households in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut experienced food insecurity. Nunavut (58.1%) had the highest rate, followed by the Northwest Territories (34.2%) and Yukon (21.8%).⁴ Across the whole of Canada, approximately one in three (33.4%) of Indigenous Peoples living off-reserve experienced food insecurity.⁵

In 2024, updated data from Statistics Canada indicate that 25.5% of people (more than

10 million) across Canada's 10 provinces experienced food insecurity, an increase of almost 1.3 million people from the previous year and the third consecutive annual increase.⁶ **The percentage of people living in food-insecure households rose and established new record highs in every province** except Prince Edward Island and Manitoba. Similar updates were not conducted in the territories or in First Nations on-reserve populations where food insecurity is known to run consistently higher, however it is reasonable to assume these same trends apply.

People Living in Food Insecure Households in Canada, 2024⁷



The Legacy of Colonization on Indigenous Food Systems

The racist roots of Indigenous Peoples' food insecurity run deep. Forced relocation and the legacy of Residential Institutions (schools) disrupted many Indigenous People's connections to their ancestral land, waters, and food systems, and interrupted the intergenerational transfer of skills and knowledge related to hunting, trapping, fishing, and food growing and gathering.

Agriculture, and more broadly food, is a source of deep trauma for many Indigenous People, who have experienced a history of brutal land dispossession, assimilation, and starvation.⁸ The Residential Institutions (school) system forced children to eat an inadequate settler diet, conducted inhumane dietary experimentation,⁹ and also forced many to labour in school gardens and on local farms.¹⁰

The denial of healthy food and disruption of Indigenous food systems and traditions were instruments of settler colonialism intended to assimilate – and even eliminate – Indigenous Peoples.

Lack of Access to Indigenous Food Traditions and the Impacts on Health

A significant factor driving the high levels of food insecurity among Indigenous Peoples is the loss of Indigenous cultural and food traditions because of colonization.

For a variety of reasons, most northern Indigenous communities are now reliant on food shipped from the south – a marked departure from the diets and food practices that sustained them for millennia.



The south-to-north supply chain has created economic dependence, takes profit from northern economies and keeps it in southern (settler) economies, and erodes innovation and food sovereignty for Indigenous communities.

Not only does this supply chain make the price of food much higher, it also means the availability, quality, cultural appropriateness, and nutritional value of food is lower.¹¹

As in all food deserts, Indigenous Peoples in Canada's territories, in the northern parts of many provinces, and in other underserved areas are forced to rely on more affordable but less nutritious packaged, shelf-stable, and highly processed food. This leads to significant diet-related health and wellness challenges, including higher rates of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity.¹²

The nutritional quality of an Indigenous diet is significantly better for those who are able to include some traditional food in their diet compared to those who only eat store-bought food.¹³ A recent study found that two-thirds of First Nations households were actively engaged in harvesting traditional food, however, 47 percent of adults reported experiencing shortages and 43 percent worried they would not be able to replenish traditional food supplies in a timely manner.¹⁴ Much of this anxiety stems from rising costs and financial hardship that puts many of the means for traditional food harvesting out of reach.

It should also be noted that, even if consuming traditional foods isn't possible, there are holistic

benefits to health when food traditions are included in other ways, for example through stories and land-based learning.

What we have found is a food system that is utterly failing First Nations in this country. ...It is urgent to promote systemic change in the food environment and foster food sovereignty if we want to address the great health inequalities suffered by First Nations, particularly in this case, the nutrition-related health problems.¹⁵

DR. MALEK BATAL, UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL



THE POSSIBILITIES

Transforming northern food systems

Local Food Systems Still Key

The revival of local food systems, including agriculture and community-level food trading and marketing, can be an important part of the solution to the issue of food insecurity in northern Canada but is fraught with climactic, geographic, economic, political, and social challenges, as we have noted.

It is becoming increasingly urgent that we find new approaches. The rising rates of food insecurity, especially in Canada's three territories and most at-risk provinces, are alarming – and point to long-term health and social costs and consequences. Ongoing inflation and escalating economic uncertainty with the additional threat of U.S. tariffs will continue to take its greatest toll on those already experiencing Canada's highest levels of poverty. And, as was made abundantly clear during the pandemic, south-to-north supply chains are fundamentally inefficient and vulnerable to disruption.

There is much food production occurring in Canada's North, including commercial fisheries in the eastern Arctic, and agricultural, aquaculture, and poultry production in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. But most foods produced in northern Canada are exported internationally instead of feeding people locally.¹⁶

Policy, legislative, and logistical barriers make inter-territorial and inter-provincial trade, along with traditional food procuring, sharing, and marketing among communities in the North, more difficult than necessary. Reorienting

food production and distribution chains from predominantly south-to-north to regional will require sustained advocacy for political and legislative change.

In responding to calls from northern communities, farmers, and governments for increased agriculture development in the North, [we need] a model that addresses the coloniality of agriculture in Canada, prioritizes larger ecosystem relationships, and supports the food and land sovereignty of northern Indigenous Peoples.¹⁷

MINDY JEWELL PRICE, ALEX LATTA,
ANDREW SPRING, ET. AL.



Interest in Homegrown Food Surges

In 2025, facing mounting pressure stemming from the new U.S. administration's tariffs, a groundswell of interest in removing inter-provincial trade barriers and stimulating homegrown food production has emerged.

According to research from the University of British Columbia, about 50 percent of vegetables (aside from potatoes), and 75 percent of fruits eaten in Canada are imported. Of these imports, the U.S. supplies 67 percent of Canada's vegetable imports and 36 percent of its fruit imports.¹⁸

While not all production can be relocated to Canada, innovative new growing systems and support for local producers can make up some of the gap. Already in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia, greenhouse fruit and vegetable production has increased roughly five-fold since 2000. But there is still some way to go to ramp up production to meet domestic demand: vegetable production would need to double and fruit production would need to grow to five times its current level.¹⁹

This growth, should it happen, will still largely be based in southern and more populated parts of Canada.

To address the problem of ongoing northern food insecurity, it is imperative to stimulate local food production and transform food systems in Canada's North.

Reducing Reliance on Imports

Traditional food and locally-grown food represent two of the three components of food systems in Canada's North (the third being marketed or imported foods from southern Canada or international locations).²⁰ The cultural and nutritional importance of traditional foods to Indigenous communities – which includes harvesting and sharing wild-caught foods – must be recognized and incorporated in any



northern food systems strategy, coupled with an emerging system of locally-grown foods from community greenhouses, small-scale farms, and farmers' markets.

The good news is that innovative solutions are already available and, most importantly, they are being implemented and led by Indigenous Peoples themselves.

Indigenous Peoples have adopted new technologies such as greenhouses specifically designed for cold climates, hydroponics, and other indoor growing systems to boost the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables. Food forests, usually based on permaculture techniques, and community gardens – both of which align well with Indigenous methods of food growing and sharing – are thriving. Careful selection of crops that can thrive in colder climates and shorter growing seasons, such as root vegetables and berries, also help improve dietary diversity and lower costs for residents of Canada's northern territories and provinces.

**Join us to champion strong, equitable
northern food systems rooted in
Indigenous food sovereignty and self-
determination.**

THE BEST PRACTICES

Supporting northern food systems led by Indigenous Peoples

Kinvia's work is conducted in partnership with and by following the lead of Indigenous Peoples and their communities. All development, including agricultural systems development, must be community-led, culturally-sensitive, and in the case of food systems in northern Canada, avoid the application of conventional, commercial farming models from the South.

Supporting northern food systems requires approaches that are led by, and accountable to, Indigenous Peoples, grounded in their food sovereignty and land stewardship, and responsive to the complex climatic, social, and historical context of Canada's North.

The following best practices are drawn from existing evidence, on-the-ground experience, and principles of Indigenous self-determination, food traditions, and food sovereignty.



1. Centre Indigenous food sovereignty and governance

- Respect Indigenous Peoples' right to define, develop, and govern their own food systems.
- Support Indigenous-led policy, planning, research, program design, and implementation.
- Recognize and uphold Indigenous laws, protocols, and relationships to land and water as central to food system governance.

2. Support place-based, culturally appropriate solutions

- Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches; work with communities to co-develop solutions tailored to local geographies, cultures, economies, and priorities.
- Prioritize Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and ancestral and intergenerational knowledge transfer involving Elders, Knowledge-keepers, and youth.

3. Advance land and water stewardship, not extraction

- Reject models of large-scale, market-driven agriculture that treat the North as a new agricultural frontier.
- Promote food production approaches grounded in reciprocal, respectful relationships with the land, water, and larger ecosystems.
- Integrate traditional land and water stewardship practices with new

innovations, valuing Indigenous knowledge systems equally with Western science.

4. Strengthen local food production and distribution

- Invest in local food production infrastructure and technologies that reduce dependency on expensive southern supply chains and are adapted to northern climates and community needs, such as cold-climate greenhouses, hydroponics, and indoor growing systems.
- Take a holistic view of Indigenous food systems, encompassing fishing, hunting, trapping, food gathering and growing, small-scale livestock production, food processing, preservation, and storage, and food sharing, distribution, and marketing.
- Support community and household-scale food production (e.g., gardens, food forests) and encourage small-scale, diversified, ecologically grounded food production systems that increase the availability of fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate food, reduce the incidence of food-related chronic disease, and help build local economies.

5. Advocate for food systems decolonization in alliance with Indigenous Peoples

- Recognize and address the colonial roots of food insecurity in the North, including land dispossession, Residential Institutions (schools), forced relocations, and the loss of traditional food and knowledge systems.
- Challenge the colonial structures of Canada's south-to-north food distribution systems that create dependence and undermine local economies.

- Advocate for the dismantling of policy, logistical, and regulatory barriers that limit inter-community and inter-regional trade and traditional food sharing networks.
- Support systemic change that reorients food systems to empower Indigenous Peoples and respect their sovereignty.

6. Promote agroecology as a framework for northern food systems

- Promote agroecology, food forests, permaculture, and conservation agriculture as holistic, relational, and transformative approaches that prioritize equity and sustainability.
- Support Indigenous-led knowledge sharing and capacity strengthening efforts to ensure that techniques being introduced or re-introduced are widely understood and practiced, with an emphasis on training, experimentation, and continuous improvement.
- Reduce dependency on external suppliers and strengthen biodiversity through initiatives such as Indigenous-led seed banking and exchange programs for food and medicinal plants.
- Support Indigenous-led species-at-risk programs and mapping and monitoring of climate change impacts on traditional territories and food sources to inform environmental protection and conservation efforts.
- Align northern food systems development with broader goals of climate resilience, biodiversity, and ecosystem health, recognizing that Indigenous food sovereignty and land/water stewardship are essential for sustainable futures.

GETTING INVOLVED

Everyone can play a role in the northern food systems movement

Transforming northern food systems requires collective action. Individuals, corporations and foundations, and civil society organizations each have a role to play in the movement for equitable, resilient, Indigenous-led food systems in Canada's North.

Here are some concrete ways to get involved:

	EDUCATE	ADVOCATE	INVEST
INDIVIDUALS	• Learn about Canada's colonial history and its impact on northern food systems. • Seek out and share Indigenous perspectives on food sovereignty and land stewardship. • Attend workshops, read/listen to Indigenous authors and podcasts, and support cultural education initiatives.	• Speak up for policies that remove barriers to Indigenous food sovereignty; support Indigenous self-determination and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. • Use social media to amplify Indigenous-led initiatives. • Support campaigns calling for decolonized, equitable food systems.	• Donate to Indigenous-led food sovereignty projects like those Kinvia supports such as community gardens and greenhouses, food forests, and land-based education. • Prioritize buying from Indigenous producers and businesses when possible.
BUSINESSES	• Train staff on Indigenous histories, rights, and cultural protocols. • Host learning sessions featuring Indigenous leaders and Knowledge-keepers. • Include truth and reconciliation education in corporate social responsibility priorities.	• Use influence to advocate for policy change that supports northern food systems transformation. • Endorse Indigenous-led policy proposals and calls for funding. • Publicly support Indigenous food sovereignty and reconciliation efforts.	• Fund infrastructure for cold-climate greenhouses, food forests, and other traditional food/food security initiatives. • Support Indigenous-led planning, research, and training programs. • Establish partnerships with Indigenous communities in areas where there are mutual interests and follow their lead.
FOUNDATIONS & CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS	• Build organizational awareness of Indigenous food systems, traditions, and governance. • Develop staff training programs on cultural safety and decolonizing practices. • Include Indigenous-led perspectives in public education and outreach materials.	• Collaborate with Indigenous partners and organizations like Kinvia on policy recommendations. • Mobilize members and networks to support decolonizing food systems. • Join coalitions advocating for structural change and food justice in northern Canada.	• Direct resources to Indigenous-designed and Indigenous-led food systems projects. • Partner with Kinvia and other organizations advancing Indigenous food sovereignty.

Learn more about Kinvia's work with Indigenous Peoples and communities and join us to champion northern food systems transformation.

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION

How three Indigenous communities are transforming food access through year-round greenhouses

Kinvia has launched the Type 2 Diabetes Prevention Challenge with funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) in partnership with Impact Canada. The project is supporting six First Nations, selected because they face high rates of food insecurity along with high rates of food-related illnesses including type 2 diabetes (T2D).

As part of the project launch, a three-day event hosted by Kinvia brought representatives from participating First Nations together to share their knowledge, experiences, and ideas. Delegates brought the group's wisdom back to their home communities to initiate the project, tailoring their approach to suit their Nation's capacity, needs, and traditions.

The main project strategy to tackle the high incidence of T2D in these communities is to increase fresh fruit and vegetable production using 365-day greenhouses. Uniquely suited to northern climates, greenhouses are being custom-built and integrated into each community's food and health programs, including land-based education initiatives, school and community nutrition programs, and community gardens and food forests.

The first three communities to initiate the project are Waywayseecappo First Nation (Treaty 4, Manitoba), Beardy's and Okemasis' Cree Nation (Treaty 6, Saskatchewan), and Elsipogtog First Nation (New Brunswick). As of early 2025, these

communities were completing their greenhouse builds and had begun growing produce, either in provisional locations or, in Waywayseecappo, directly in the greenhouse.

Leading the Way at Wayway



In Waywayseecappo (known by residents as “Wayway”), the excitement around the new greenhouse is palpable. The greenhouse, now complete, stands just steps from the elementary and high schools. With more than 375 students in the community's K–12 schools, educators are eager to use the dome to feed students and teach them how to grow their own food.

Plans include incorporating the greenhouse into land-based learning, nutrition education, and seed-starting programs. Students will take seedlings home to encourage household gardening. Elders will join students in the dome, providing intergenerational opportunities to share cultural teachings and food knowledge.

Re-introducing Indigenous youth to a land-based educational system [is] a means of re-attaching the severed familial and communal ties. ...Traditional land-based education practices such as hunting and gathering form strong bonds between participants and nature, and lay the foundation for interpersonal community relationships.

PATRICK LOEWEN, EDUCATION DIRECTOR,
WAYWAYSEECAPPO FIRST NATION

Community members are especially excited about the potential to grow berries and medicinal plants locally – foods that are not easily available in local stores. One resident noted that this could significantly reduce dependence on unhealthy processed foods, which have long been the default due to convenience and cost.

Beardy's Builds its Capacity



The Beardy's and Okemasis' community faces many of the same food and health challenges as other Indigenous communities. Approximately 300 of the community's 1,700 members are registered for the Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative, though it is believed many others are undiagnosed or at high risk. While there are barriers such as transportation and childcare issues that sometimes prevent participation in programming, the community is committed to improving health outcomes and strengthening local food systems.

They have a solid foundation for doing so. Beardy's and Okemasis' food forest and community garden, now in their third year, have started to engage people on all things food and health related. While there is a growing connection to the land, members are still in the early stages of re-learning traditional practices of hunting, harvesting, and food processing.

The new greenhouse is hoped to escalate these efforts. Located near the development and training centre and close to the K-8 school, members envision growing traditional medicines, integrating the dome into the school's curriculum, and using it as a space for children to play and get excited about trying the food they help to grow.

The greenhouse is also expected to supplement the food available to schools and to Elders and families in need.

We're not just growing food. We're growing a future where our children know how to care for themselves, their families, and the land.

JENNIFER CAMERON, FOOD SECURITY COORDINATOR,
BEARDY'S AND OKEMASIS' CREE NATION

Cultivating Culture and Community at Elsipogtog



With a well-resourced school and strong land-based learning programs in place, Elsipogtog's school leaders are already integrating the greenhouse into the school's curriculum. The school provides meals for over 300 students daily and incorporates cultural teachings into its programming.

Produce from the greenhouse will be used to supplement school meals – an essential resource for students and the locus for lessons on healthy eating. This will help defray the high cost of food in this rural New Brunswick location, one of Canada's lowest-income communities where the rising cost of food continues to strain residents and schools alike. The school, along with community members, must travel to nearby towns or even to Moncton, an hour away, to access fresh food.

Students and teachers are eager to use the greenhouse to expand food literacy and extend their diabetes awareness activities. The greenhouse will also offer a venue for cooking workshops, plant identification, and

cultural activities like storytelling and seed exchanges. Community members expressed interest in experimenting with crops that are often unavailable in local stores like herbs, leafy greens, and berries.

Ryan Saunders, a Grade 6 teacher, emphasized the value of hands-on growing experiences for nurturing long-term healthy habits, and is excited to get parents and families involved in events like cooking and planting workshops to foster wider community engagement and ownership. He suggests that the benefits can extend even beyond the Elsipogtog community, through communication and collaboration with neighbouring communities to share knowledge and resources.

I'm envisioning [the community's greenhouse] ... as a place that students and teachers can gather and learn about health. So not only is it going to be a space where we can grow our own food, but it's going to be a space where we can come together and talk about those things.

RYAN SAUNDERS, TEACHER, ELSIPOGTOG FIRST NATION

Growing Forward

Looking ahead, communities hope to expand programming through the greenhouses: hosting more canning and preserving workshops, growing traditional medicines, launching home garden support, and even incorporating hydroponic systems to boost yields. These activities reflect the shared aspirations of all three of the communities whose greenhouses are well underway and serve as a model for the others who are in the planning phases.

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