

# Balancing Act: Regional Needs, Aspirational Goals, and the Business of Running a Food Hub

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# Presentation Overview

- **Introduction**
  - What is a Food Hub?
  - Research Questions
- **Food Hubs: Looking Inward, Looking Ahead**
  - BC's Food Hub Landscape
  - What are BC's Food Hubs doing now?
  - What do Food Hub's want to be doing?
  - What do communities need?
  - What are the tensions and challenges?
- **Discussion**



# What is a Food Hub?

- “A business or organization that actively manages the **aggregation, distribution, and marketing** of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers...” – *National Food Hub Collaboration*
- “Grassroots, community-based organizations and individuals that work together to build increasingly **socially just, economically robust and ecologically sound** food systems that **connect farmers with consumers**” – *Blay-Palmer*
- “**Meeting the needs of small and “ag-of-the-middle” farmers who lack the capacity** to meet the specific volume, quality, and consistency requirements of larger scale buyers” – *USDA*
- “Entities that sit between people who produce food and people who use it, gathering food from growers and distributing it either to commercial customers or directly to consumers – often working with an **explicit set of ethical priorities**” – *Guzman & Reynolds*

# What is a Food Hub in BC?

- In 2018/19 the BC Government began advancing the BC Food Hub Network
- “Shared-use food and beverage processing facilities that offer food and agriculture businesses access to **commercial processing space**, equipment, expertise and resources to **support business development and growth.**” - *BC Min of Ag & Food*
- Unknowns about the emerging network of Food Hubs in BC
  - Role of hubs in regional food systems
  - Role of place in shaping hubs
  - Role of hubs in increasing resilience



# Research Project Purpose



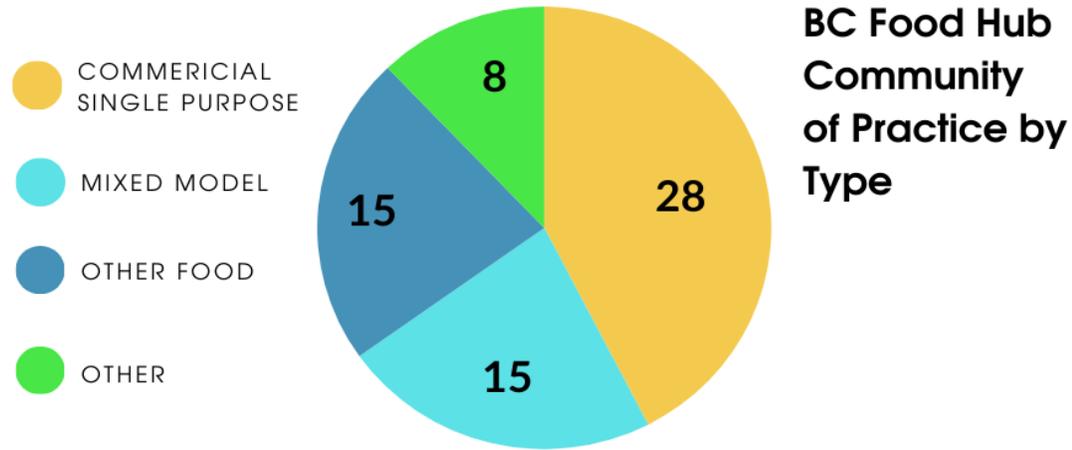
- Studying emergence of Alternative Agrifood and Seafood Networks
- What roles do Food Hubs play within regional food systems?
- How do region specific conditions impact the ability of Food Hubs to be sustainable?
- What impact have major disturbances had?

# Research Approach

- 1. Participate in and track the evolution of the British Columbia Food Hub Community of Practice**
- 2. Complete a detailed exploration of the role of two Food Hubs through interviews and document review**
3. Explore regional food systems through food supply chain modelling
4. Compile and compare the results of 1-3



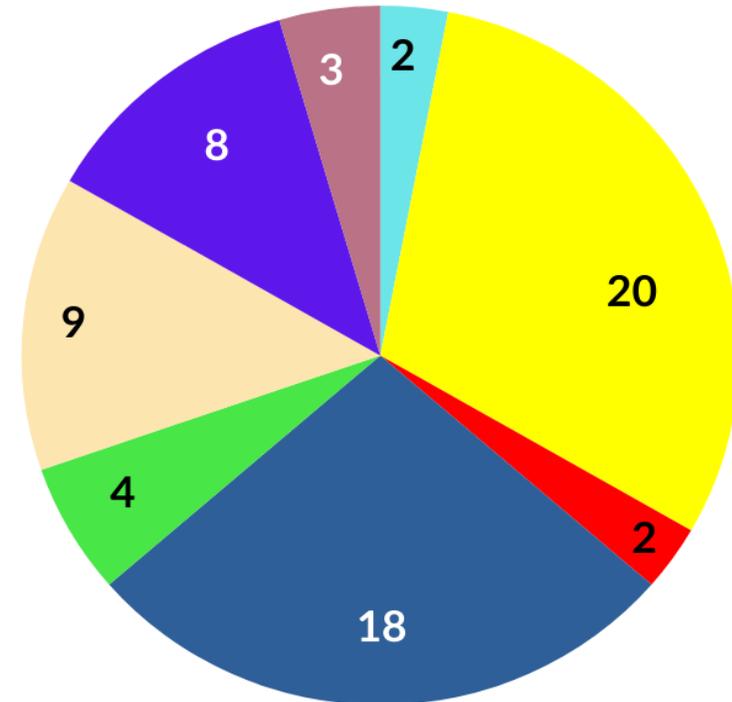
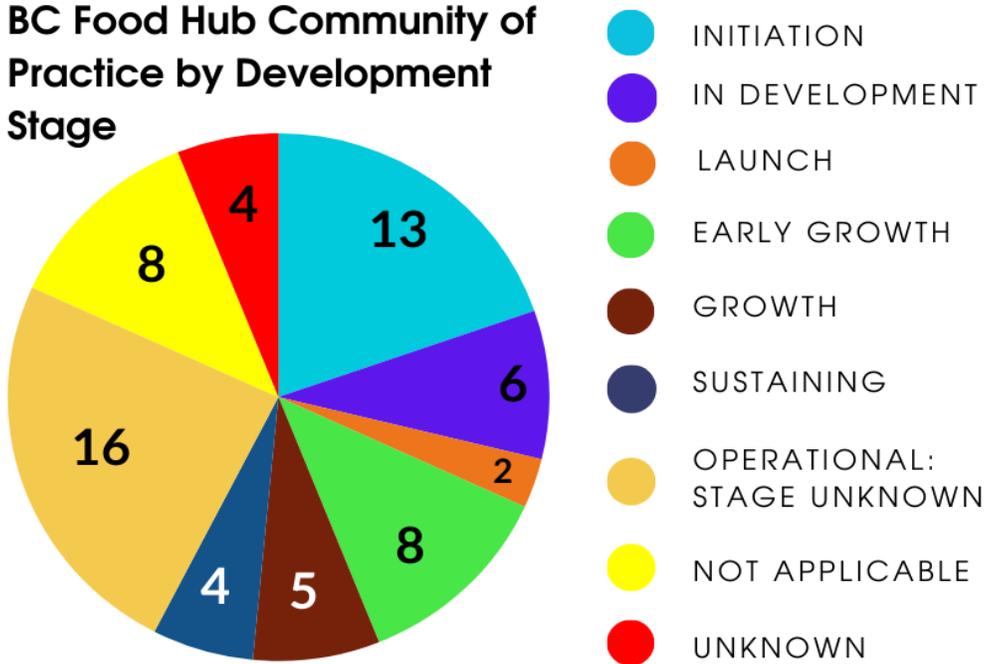
# British Columbia's Food Hub Landscape - 2023



### BC Food Hub Community of Practice by Region



### BC Food Hub Community of Practice by Development Stage



# What are Food Hubs doing now?

- Providing shared infrastructure, space, equipment
- Primary & secondary processing
- Reduced barriers to entry and upfront business startup costs
- Creating economies of scale
- Office space, space for events
- Product testing & research
- Aggregation & distribution
- Retail
- Business development, incubation, & scale up
- Community development
- Platform for relationship building and collaboration
- Sharing knowledge amongst entrepreneurs
- Business mentorship - formal and informal
- Increasing access to local foods
- Enabling institutional buying
- Economic stimulus

There is **variation** across Food Hubs in current role

- Rural vs. Urban
- Business development vs. Community development
- Commercial kitchen vs. Processing kitchen
- Available equipment differs based on multiple factors
- Different levels of community interface and space type
- Hubs vary in their level of connection & engagement with farmers
- Serving businesses across the spectrum – large, established businesses to small start-ups

What a Food Hub is, and its role is, has **changed over time**

- A necessary function of a Food Hub is trying to maintain its existence
- Responding to emergent business & community needs
- Responding to what is financially viable
- Growing & shifting from how they first defined themselves
- Growing & shifting from how the Ministry of Agriculture defined them

# What do Food Hubs want to do?

- Increase access to local food
- Value chain activities:
  - Agriculture extension, processing, and storage
  - Aggregation and distribution
  - Transportation and logistics
  - Access to retail and institutional markets
- Disaster response activities:
  - Valuable community asset
  - Space that can pivot to meet need
- Create resilient, alternative food systems

## A site of potential

"...the bare bones of it is that it's a shared commercial kitchen. But it's just more expansive than that. It's like an emergent entity that is constantly shifting and evolving to just be positioned to act when we need it to act. To be a resource when we need it to be a resource. To be a community hub, when we need it to be a community hub. It is a complex network of relationships that is a true community resource. It is infrastructure that the community owns. And then it can be whatever we want it to be. "

# What do communities/regions need?

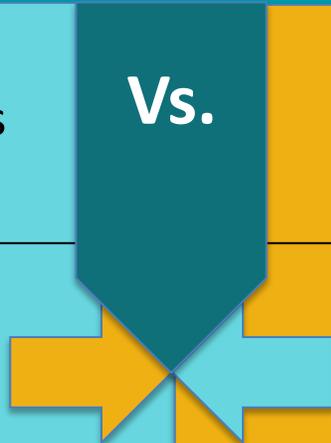
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Primary producers need support getting product to market</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Need for aggregation &amp; distribution related services &amp; roles.</li></ul></li></ul>	 Emerging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Need for value-added processing opportunities</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Farmer-led or hub-led</li></ul></li></ul>	 Emerging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Need for food-sector specific business supports</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Need support navigating existing system of multiple program &amp; service providers</li><li>◦ Early stage supports with low barriers and minimal eligibility restrictions</li></ul></li></ul>	 Evolving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Need for infrastructure</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Current discrepancy between the type of infrastructure offered and what type is needed</li></ul></li></ul>	 Evolving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Need for waste reduction in the food system</b></li></ul>	 Evolving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Need for economic growth &amp; employment opportunities</b></li></ul>	 Evolving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Need for collaboration &amp; coordination, access &amp; equity, and community development</b></li></ul>	 Established

# Roles, Desires, and Needs

**Key Finding:** The potential role of Food Hubs is significantly larger than the current reality.

**Why?**

# Tensions in Reaching Potential

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• External pressures<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Political pressures &amp; expectations</li><li>• Funder desires &amp; limitations</li></ul></li></ul>	<p><b>Vs.</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Internal pressures<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Place-based needs</li><li>• Local priorities</li></ul></li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Appropriate funding<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prioritizing financial sustainability (best business case)</li><li>• The expectation that food hubs will be financially self-sustaining</li><li>• Lack of core/operational funding</li></ul></li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highly desired but non-revenue generating activities</li><li>• Need for investment</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Costs of operating facilities</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Costs that users can sustain</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Competition</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Collaboration</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Traditional Economic Development</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community Economic Development &amp; Food Security</li></ul>

# Challenges in Reaching Potential

- Financial sustainability
- Human capacity at Food Hubs
- Attracting users to Food Hubs
- Current and potential scale of agriculture and value added processing
- Redundancy, replication, and gaps in related programs and actors
- Navigating regulation & legislation

# Group Discussion

- **What are the gaps between what Food Hubs are currently doing and what communities / regions need and want?**
  - Examples: services, infrastructure, equipment, geographic coverage
  - How do we bridge these gaps?
- **How can Food Hubs be sustainable in the long-term?**
  - What is missing?
  - What can be done differently?
  - How are you changing your approach?





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# Thank you!

For more information visit:



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