

# Growing the Food System within the Headwaters Region

## SUMMARY BRIEF



headwaters food  
& farming alliance

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## WHAT WE DID

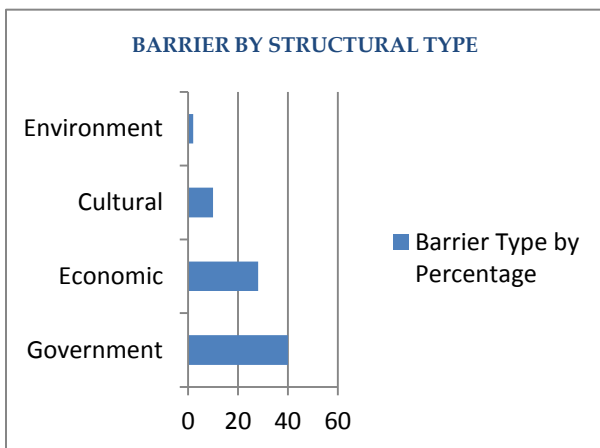
The following report identifies the barriers and challenges faced by those working in the local food system in order to find solutions that will help the Headwaters Region establish a local, viable food system, enhance local food security, and develop local economies. As we learned throughout the course of our research, the interest and determination in strengthening the food network, in terms of a desire to eat locally grown food, supporting local producers, economies and the environment, and improving food security is highly valued by residents within the Headwaters Region.

The study involved 53 respondents representing various agricultural businesses and participants throughout the food system. Participants within the food system were categorized as *Producers* (farmers), *Processors* (processing food), *Distributors* (selling food), and *Food Advocates* (food safety and accessibility). What was striking about many of the producers in the study was how many of them were engaged in multiple aspects of the food system. Many farmers we spoke with not only produced food, but were also engaged in processing their own food and selling their own food through markets, CSAs and farm gate sales. The multiple roles that small and midsize farmers undertake spoke to their innovation and resilience, and their ongoing struggle to make a decent living.

*“It’s a struggle... if we didn’t have the store we wouldn’t be able to manage.”*

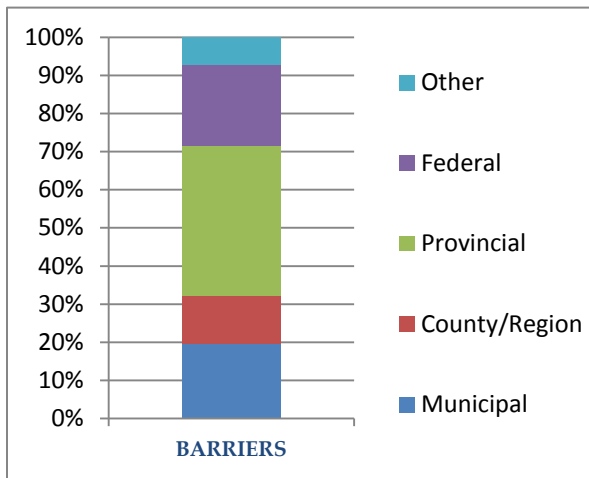
## WHAT WE FOUND

All of the participants in the study expressed concerns about the local food system and identified numerous barriers and challenges that they experienced. Altogether, the respondents identified a total of 47 barriers, ranging from local abattoir closures and labour issues, to tax assessments and dealing with local grocery stores. The barriers cited range from formal policies and regulations, to informal cultural



practices and relationships. From the 47 barriers identified by respondents, larger categories were identified and clustered around the following 13 themes: 1) *High Cost of Farming*; 2) *Economic Issues*, 3) *Labour Issues*; 4) *Finance and Equipment Issues*; 5) *Weather Issues*; 6) *Lack of Support and Resources*; 7) *Land, Land Use and Land Use Policies*; 8) *Regulations*; 9) *Animal Care and Processing*; 10) *Food Costs and Availability*; 11) *Relationships within the Food System*; 12) *Cultural Attitudes towards Food*; 13) *Food Security*. Barriers were also identified in terms of whether they existed at the environment, culture,

economic, or government levels. The largest number of barriers cited by respondents was either directly related to government policies and regulations, such as municipal permits and abattoirs, or indirectly related to government policies and practices, such as food security and fluctuations in the economy.



Many of the barriers we identified at the government level also spanned across multiple levels of government. For example, issues around public transit involve municipal and provincial governments, while the regulation of abattoirs involves both provincial and federal governments. Not surprising, the provincial government contained the highest percentage of identified barriers as a result of the role they play in regulatory functions (see Appendix 1).

Running a small farm is extremely costly. There are many factors that contribute to the high cost of farming, such as

equipment, labour, insurance, hydro, taxes, feed, to name a few. The economic barriers in farming are complex, resulting from global, national and local factors. Nonetheless, farmers in Ontario have been in a financial crisis for several decades. As with many small businesses, labour is a serious issue both in terms of costs, and recruitment and training. At several stages throughout the food system, producers, processors and distributors are finding it difficult to find suitable labour. As well, many small producers are having a hard time accessing financing to purchase farm equipment.

There are various regulations that local processors and distributors are subject to. For small, local operators many of these regulations can be demanding in terms of knowledge, logistics, resources, cost, and time. Much of the regulations and policies regarding food seem geared towards large corporations specializing in food processing, which creates additional challenges for smaller, independent processors. In addition, increased regulation around food handling, nutrient management, and abattoirs, for instance, has made it difficult for many small operators to make a living. Many small scale processors and distributors felt that in some instances areas within the food system were over regulated.

*“I can’t afford an engineer to come in and test all of the time. The legislation doesn’t support small farms.... It’s very prohibitive.”*

For those along the food chain, keeping costs to a minimum is necessary in order to be competitive and to maximize already tight margins. We heard mixed responses to food costs from those within the food system stating that food prices were too high and at the same time, food prices were too low. The issue of food literacy was also cited by various respondents. To be *food literate* is to have an understanding of where food comes from, the effects food has on health, and the health of the environment and the local economy. Food literacy also entails practical skills related to food preparation, and production. A large number of respondents felt that more education about food was necessary and would help to reduce some of the barriers they experienced.

Respondents working in food banks and community kitchens said there is a disconnection between local producers and local food support organizations and agencies. As a result, many residents within the Headwaters Region do not have access to locally grown, fresh produce. Prior to the *Local Food Act*, local

producers did not receive any incentives to donate food to community organizations such as food banks. While the *Local Food Act* represents a first step towards increasing food security and linking local producers and food to local residents and communities, *Bill 36* does still not adequately compensate farmers for their produce.



## WHAT CAN BE DONE

In order to address the barriers faced by local agricultural producers, processors, and distributors, a long-term vision of the agricultural industry as a whole needs to be developed. A lack of infrastructure and resources, contradictions in policies and practices, conflicting interests, and an overall absence of organization, cooperation and networks within the agricultural sector, in general, makes a local, viable food system vulnerable without the implementation of real systemic change. Ongoing policy changes and the continued building of collective networks are necessary in order to develop a local, viable food system within the Headwaters Region.

The research carefully considered the concerns of producers, processors, distributors and food advocates, and conducted a literature review of relevant studies and reports in order to develop specific solutions to the barriers encountered within the local food system. Based on an analysis of the interviews and supporting research, 28 recommendations were made that address initiatives and activities that can be undertaken by Headwaters Food and Farming Alliance, local municipalities and counties, organizations and agencies, stakeholders, and residents.

*“We need branding services like they have in Prince Edward County and the Niagara Peninsula, and links on how to find restaurants to sell to...”*

1. Long-Term Vision for Growth
2. Adopting a Cluster Policy
3. Developing a Local Food Charter
4. Creating Local Food Hubs & Food Centres
5. Developing Agritourism & Rural Tourism
6. Support Aesthetically Pleasing Built Environment
7. Indoor Farmer’s Markets
8. Land Use Policy
9. Customer Focused Development Process
10. Promoting Cottage Industries
11. Postsecondary Partnerships
12. Buy-Local Food Policies
13. Home Garden Credit
14. Edible Landscapes
15. Ongoing Education & Food Literacy
16. Incorporate Local School Programs
17. Local Food Week Activities & Events
18. Developing Local & National Networks
19. Creation of a Resource Site
20. Regional Marketing Network
21. Peer Mentorship Program
22. Grant/Incentive Program
23. Establishment of a Seed Bank
24. Good Food Box Program
25. Community Gardens
26. Gleaning Program
27. Protecting Farmland from Development
28. Staffing Position

Of the 28 recommendations, the overarching recommendation is the necessity to implement a regional cluster policy in order to develop a local agricultural cluster within the Headwaters Region. Clusters are defined as groupings of independent undertakings operating in a particular sector and region that are designed to stimulate innovative activity by promoting intensive interactions, sharing of facilities, and the exchange of knowledge and expertise through an established network within the cluster. A collective, long-

term vision involving all stakeholders is necessary to implement and create the necessary policies and infrastructure needed to enable a regional cluster policy, which is the most viable course of action for regional development.

**Appendix 1**

TYPE OF BARRIER	LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT			
	MUNICIPAL	COUNTY	PROVINCIAL	FEDERAL
Abattoir Closers			X	X
Availability of Farmland			X	
Believe Farming Requires Two Careers			X	X
Cost of Feed			X	
Cost of Farmland			X	
Cost of Local Food			X	X
Crop Insurance			X	
Developers and Land Use Issues	X	X	X	
Education and Food Literacy	X	X	X	X
Farmers Markets' Inaccessible	X			
Future of Farming	X	X	X	X
Financing			X	X
Fluctuations in the Economy			X	X
Health Regulations			X	X
Hydro Bills			X	
Labelling			X	X
Labour Costs			X	
Labour Transportation	X	X	X	
Lack of Government Support and Resources	X	X	X	X
Marketing Boards			X	
Misunderstanding of Small Farms by Municipalities	X			
MPAC			X	
Municipal Permits	X			
Nutrient Management Regulations			X	
Organic Certification Process			X	X
Provincial Regulations			X	
Regulations	X		X	X
Transportation	X	X	X	
Vets for Large Animals			X	
Zoning both Municipal and Provincial	X	X	X	
Government Inspected Kitchens			X	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>12</b>

- This report is funded by the Healthy Communities Fund, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, and made possible with the support of Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, Dufferin.Biz, The Town of Caledon, and Headwaters Communities in Action.

- Cover art: “Hay Bales on Powerline Road,” by Ralph Heather, Ontario, Canada.

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