

# Cultivate Connect:

Fraser Valley Farmer to Market Supply Research

Final Report Submitted to University of the Fraser Valley  
Food and Agriculture Institute, March 2021

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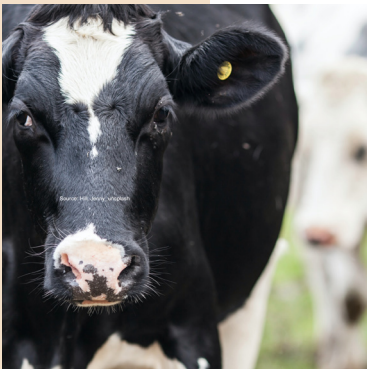
## List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Description
BCFHN	BC Ministry of Agriculture’s Food Hub Network
FAI	Food and Agriculture Institute
UFV	University of the Fraser Valley

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## Executive Summary

The Cultivate Connect project arose in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting concerns about regional food security in the Lower Mainland. This research is crucial, as the Fraser Valley is the largest agricultural producer in Canada; thus, the effects of COVID-19 on the local food system are extremely relevant to regional and national food security.

This project piloted a survey to collect data from Fraser Valley farmers gauging and assessing critical challenges and gaps in local food system infrastructure with insights as to the impacts of COVID-19 on food resiliency. At the end of 2020, almost four dozen farmers producing food for human consumption in Abbotsford and Chilliwack responded to the Cultivate Connect survey.

This report highlights selected findings from the survey with recommendations pertaining to next steps and further research.

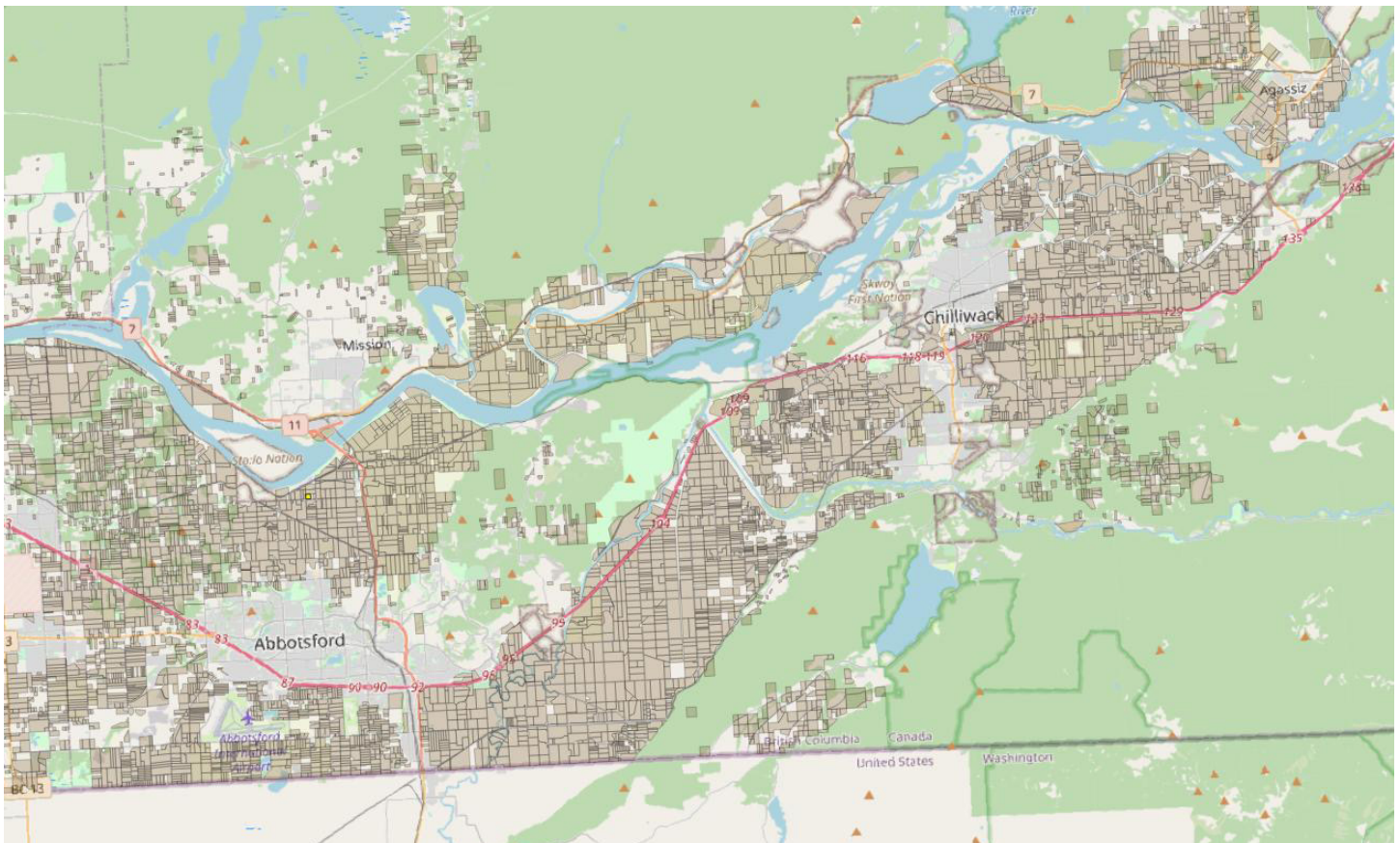


Figure 1, Aerial map of farms within Abbotsford (along the lower left) and Chilliwack (along the upper right). Source: UFV FAI

## Introduction

The Cultivate Connect project arose in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting concerns about regional food security in the Lower Mainland. The project was launched in May 2020 when Josh Vanderheide, founder of Field House Brewing, East Abby Hospitality Group, and UFV sessional instructor, approached the UFV practicum program coordinator offering to be the community host for a survey project collecting data about the impacts of COVID-19 on local food systems. Dr. Michelle Superle was the faculty supervisor for the subsequent course (ARTS 380), and Meagan Pitcher was the practicum student who drafted the original web copy and survey questions.

The project further expanded with Dr. Cherie Enns, who was instrumental in moving matters forward alongside student contributions (through her Geography 464 course) and community involvement with local stakeholders.

The focus of this report is to highlight key findings related to the role of the university, including the Food and Agriculture Institute (FAI), in further contributing to building a more secure local food system moving forward.

## Project Approach

In September 2020, Drs. Michelle Superle and Cherie Enns received a grant from the UFV Research Office to conduct this study; they formed a research team consisting of one UFV undergraduate student (Hayley Katan; Web Developer) and two recently graduated UFV students with exceptionally extensive knowledge of food systems (Gemma Bridgefoot and Sharon Alamwala; Research Assistants). The research team collaborated to refine the survey questions, obtain approval from the Human Ethics Research Board, and launch the survey. Farms producing food for human consumption in Abbotsford and Chilliwack were contacted through email, social media, and distribution affiliations with the request to complete a ten-question SurveyMonkey survey about product output, distribution channels, food waste repurposing strategies, and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In November 2020, the research team contacted 110 farmers producing food for human consumption in Abbotsford and Chilliwack and 22 local agricultural associations with invitations to complete the Cultivate Connect survey online. Further publicity for the project was generated by one press release from the UFV Communications office, which resulted in coverage in three online newspaper articles—all containing invitations to readers to complete the survey with a link to the Cultivate Connect website hosting the survey. Potential respondents were offered

the incentive of the chance to win a \$150 gift card to the restaurant of their choice for participating in the survey.

This outreach resulted in 42 respondents participating in the survey, ten of whom forwarded links to those in their social network.

## Results

Despite the response rate of 42 survey participants, only 22 surveys contained complete, useable data. This small sample makes it difficult to generalize about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on local food production and systems.

Q6 How have the recent events pertaining to Covid-19 impacted your business? Select all that apply

	ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
—	1.2 Financial issues	45.00%	9
—	1.3 Labour issues	45.00%	9
—	1.5 Regulation issues	40.00%	8
—	1. Negatively	35.00%	7
—	1.4 Processing issues	35.00%	7
+	2. Positively	30.00%	6
+	2.4 Increased product inquiries	30.00%	6
+	2.2 Increased local sourcing	25.00%	5
+	2.5 Increased retail sales	20.00%	4
—	1.1 Distribution issues	15.00%	3
+	2.1 Increased business collaboration	15.00%	3
+	2.3 Increased online sales	5.00%	1
	Total Respondents: 20		

Figure 2, Table of question 6: How have the recent events pertaining to Covid-19 impacted your business? Select all that apply. Answers are ordered from greatest number of responses to least. Red minus icons (left) depict negative impacts, and green plus icons (right) depict positive impacts.

Q7 What is your approximate gross production volume?

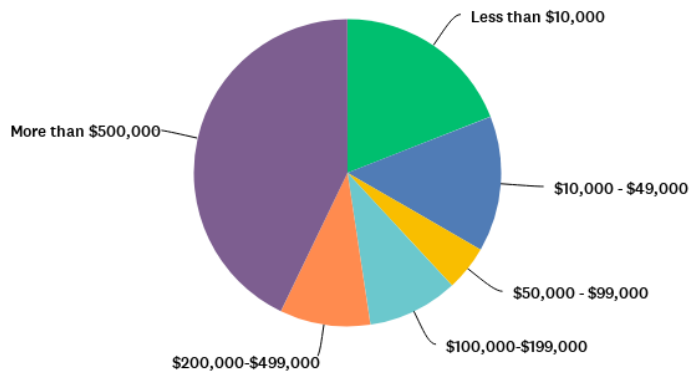


Figure 3, Pie graph of question 7: What is your approximate gross production volume? Data from 21 respondents.

Further adding to the difficulty with generalization, most farmers indicated that they have either small (less than \$49,000 gross product annually—seven respondents) or very large (more than \$500,000 gross product annually—nine respondents) farm businesses, with an additional divergence being that most small farm respondents run organic operations, while most very large farm respondents run conventional operations. Not surprisingly, their responses demonstrate how incomparably varied the challenges these farmers manage are, as well as how different their beliefs and values are in relation to how the challenges should be managed.

The Cultivate Connect project shows the resilience and flexibility of many local farmers. Participants from this study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic had both adverse and positive impacts on local farmers in 2020. For example, nine respondents experienced labour shortages and financial issues, eight experienced regulation issues, while six had increased product inquiries. One respondent expressed that the pandemic had eliminated sales to restaurants but simultaneously increased on-farm market sales. Overall, 36% of respondents expressed interest in participating in a new Fraser Valley food to purchaser direct initiative.

Despite this, the data did not indicate that farmers consider food waste to be a top concern, nor was there an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response from farmers for support dealing with excess product or repurposing waste; of the participants who responded, many reported they already had waste management solutions in place. Nevertheless, 64% of respondents indicated they would be open to further repurposing options for excess product.

## Implications on Food Resiliency

Today, Canada is the only G7 country that does not have a national food program (UNICEF, 2019). Although the right to food has been recognized at a governance level, it has yet to be established within the constitution and Canadian domestic law. Food security has been recognized by the BC and federal governments as a public health issue, with the understanding that health is a complex condition determined by environmental, economic, political, and social factors, as well as individual behaviours (BC Ministry of Health, 2013). Social factors can have enormous impacts on household food security (such as unaffordable housing, lack of living wage, unaffordable daycare, and inaccessible healthy and affordable food).

With this in mind, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (UNFAO) acknowledges four dimensions necessary to achieve food security: (A) Physical availability of food (i.e., the supply of food from food production, trade, and levels of stock), (B) Economic and physical access to food (i.e., food availability alone does not ensure food security; understanding accessibility of food is possible through analyzing income, expenditure, markets and prices), (C) Food utilization (i.e., nutritious food that produces sufficient energy and maintains health), (D) Stability (i.e., ensuring the latter three dimensions are maintained despite environmental changes, political instability, economic factors, etc) (2008).

Within this framework, the concept of food resiliency is understood as the ability to anticipate, endure and recover from economic, political, environmental or other social disruption that impact the food system (Tendall, et al. 2015) . Furthermore, a food resilient system is also able to ensure a consistent supply and accessibility to nutritious food for all. The work of building food resilient systems is critical, as communities large and small are impacted by changes in the global food system that arise due to consumption patterns, supply and demand shocks, long terms strains, and other shifts that can leave households vulnerable (Ivanic and Martin, 2008) .

On the level of household food security, the need to understand food systems efficacy is an urgent issue. Before the pandemic, one in eight households in Canada—4.4 million Canadians, including 1.2 million children—struggled to put food on the table (Tarasuk and Mitchell, 2020). Since COVID-19, the number of food insecure households has increased to one in seven, according to a recent survey from Statistics Canada (2020). Further, regional food insecurity has been exacerbated by labour shortages, challenges related to mandated business closures and isolation policies, and corresponding shifts in food supply chains. The current pandemic highlights critical gaps in knowledge necessary to better understand our local food systems (Holland, 2020).

A centralized and integrated “food hub” would bolster the resilience of the local food system. Abbotsford and Chilliwack currently lack a centralized, integrated food hub to support regional food security in these and surrounding communities; however, several multi-stakeholder initiatives are exploring regional food eco-system integration. Food hubs come in many forms, and the very definition of food hubs is evolving. In one view, they can house a variety of different resources, such as communal kitchens that can become a connection place for community members to learn, work, and enjoy food together. On the other hand, food hubs can also be places that provide education about food justice, food sovereignty, decolonization, poverty reduction, anti-oppression, and can promote community leadership development through participant-led projects (such as community kitchens, urban gardens). In this view, food hubs are not only spaces that supply food, but also those that equip individuals with the skills they need to be empowered in their food choices—which can ultimately encourage community members to support and participate in local food systems. Overall, such facilities offer holistic, dignified approaches to connecting community members with food that supports local farmers—all of which strengthens regional food security.

Various small local food hubs, local food supply, and community kitchens do exist in the Fraser Valley: these function separately from one another and are largely focused on food supply chains and ameliorating household food insecurity. Data from the Cultivate Connect survey suggests that the Fraser Valley would benefit from a centralized, integrated food hub to support regional food security.

A food hub such as this would relate to Abbotsford’s Official City Plan, which includes “7 Big Ideas” with follow-up policies: one of these aims to “enhance agricultural integrity” (Official City Plan, 2016). This policy aims to promote the health of Abbotsford’s land, water, and air through public education and advocacy. Additionally, Abbotsford’s city “Plan for 200K” includes community development strategies that will expand provision of community gardens to complement local food production and relationships (Parks, Recreation & Culture Master Plan, 2005). Some existing initiatives are already serving these goals.

For example, in partnership with the Small Scale Food Processor Association, the Mission Community Skills Centre has recently implemented an agricultural entrepreneur and supervisor training program to support those who are interested in establishing business or upgrading their skills in agriculture (SSFPA). In February 2021, the Mission Community Skills Centre and District of Mission received funding from the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Municipal Affairs for the Fraser Valley Artisans Food Hub programs. Another small Fraser Valley food hub, Plenty & Grace, is a food processing facility that

provides education about food safety standards, as well as services like product development, branding, marketing, and distribution; this food hub encourages collaboration and connection among business owners.

On the provincial level, the BC Ministry of Agriculture's Food Hub Network (BCFHN) is expanding with the opening of a new Commisary Connect centre in Mission (adding to the existing centres in Vancouver and Surrey). These initiatives were implemented to support BC grown and sourced agriculture and seafood by strengthening local economies while creating new markets and employment opportunities. A survey was conducted through the BCFHN in 2019, with 204 food affiliated respondents across BC providing information about their perceptions of the key needs of the food and beverage processing industry (BC Ministry of Agriculture, 2019). The findings showed participants were almost unanimously interested in new resources and services, which included: "Training and education related to processing, technology or food, health and safety, business development services, product or production consultation services, R&D services and facilities." Based on the results of this survey, as well as our own, the Fraser Valley should consider investing in a central food hub to support innovation and collaboration across agriculture and processing services.

The University of the Fraser Valley, local Indigenous communities, the Fraser Valley Regional District, and the cities of Abbotsford and Chilliwack would benefit from collaborating to support local farmers by working with stakeholders to invest in resiliency strategies and recovery plans that will protect community members in the event of local, national, or global disturbances such as natural disasters, pandemics, and economic volatility. Such strategies might include developing community-based food security systems, ensuring key food players are better prepared, and moving from models of charity to food sovereignty where communities are the drivers of their own food systems—all of which would be supported by a centralized, integrated food hub.

## Connection

The Cultivate Connect project shows the resilience of many local farmers. Many participants identified the desire to be better connected with other farmers in the Fraser Valley, as well as hoping for additional local distribution and sales channels throughout greater BC and Alberta. Further, 36% of respondents expressed interest in participating in a new Fraser Valley food to purchaser direct initiative. As well, small farmers expressed the lack of formal resources that act as a connecting point between other farmers of similar scale.

Connecting farmers with other farmers can benefit our local food systems through exchanging land knowledge and agricultural practices

that improve strategic planning. Such networking can result in linking up new opportunities and markets, creating new relationships with stakeholders, and strengthening ties of advocacy, all of which can lead to reform of public policy and industry standards.

The importance of connectedness and advocacy has recently been demonstrated on a mass scale through India's farming crisis, which was incited in September 2020. Since the 1960 Green Revolution that modernized India's agricultural production, farmers have been struggling to keep up with global demands for staple foods like rice, wheat, and pulses that have homogenized much of India's agriculture (Deutsche Welle). Increasing demands on agricultural productivity have left a negative impact on the environment, with consequences including agrobiodiversity loss, depletion in soil nutrition, and water scarcity, which are further aggravated by ongoing climate changes (Deutsche Welle). The recent crisis is a result of pre-existing pressures on India's agriculture sector, with the addition of new deregulation legislations that demand farmers—who make up 60 percent of India's population— increase output on already strained practices (Statistica Research Department). The new reforms subject small scale farmers (82 percent of the farming population) to price fluctuations (Deutsche Welle). The Indian government had previously ensured a minimum support price (MSP) in which a unit of crop is sold; with the MSP revoked, farmers are vulnerable to whatever the free market chooses in competition with multinational corporations.

In the Canadian context, 1.2 million Indians call Canada home, with one in ten BC citizen being of Indian ancestry; over half live in Surrey, and many are farmers (Statistics Canada, 2016). Therefore, the Indian farming crisis is felt on familial and cultural levels. This has spurred on a number of rallies and protests across Canada and the Fraser Valley in solidarity with farmers in India.

Following established best practices, the FAI could help facilitate better connections among BC farmers using a successful model like WeFarm, which is an online sharing network developed in Africa; farmers can ask questions and offer solutions and ideas through text message format. Creating such an online tool could provide a place for farmers to collaborate with other farmers by sharing their ideas and innovations.

The FAI should therefore help to facilitate liaisons between farmers and the community stakeholders that have already responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by mobilizing the development of a centralized food hub, along with virtual sales platforms, and an initiative related to mapping the Abbotsford "food ecosystem" that involves a wide variety of community groups (including entrepreneurs and municipal government).

## Local Distribution

Participants in the Cultivate Connect study expressed a desire to access reliable markets for selling their products, since partners and organizations can be volatile due to competition with cheaper US imports, or demands for “table ready” products. Additionally, participants expressed a need to improve regional processing systems, for example by adding smaller regional processors and involving more members of the local community in food production.

Some Fraser Valley farmers have already pivoted their retail sales online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic so that customers can pre-order and pick up their produce or have it delivered. However, these initiatives are fragmented and extremely labour-intensive for individual farmers to manage. While the online sales approach is an effective adaptation to accessibility issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not viable for all farmers due to financial and time costs. The Cultivate Connect pilot confirms the need to develop locally relevant and applicable strategies that match supply with demand, supporting a more equitable, inclusive, just, and sustainable local food system to help support household and regional food security.

## Education

Other farmers responding to the Cultivate Connect survey highlighted the need for more effectively educating the local general public about sustainable growing practices and the risks of many current agricultural practices. There was also mention of the need for greater education about the importance of a self-reliant regional food system to help consumers understand that external factors can threaten food security due to natural disasters, labour shortages, regulation and taxation, trade agreements, conflict, climate change, and disease.

There appears to be an opportunity to develop curriculum to strengthen food systems understanding within the K to 12 school system. Dr. Superle has developed the Dig for Your Rights! project, which leverages the educational potential of picture books in a school-based literary program to engage children in problem-based learning around food systems and sovereignty. This project is ready to launch but has been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic; when the pilot launches it will investigate how visual and textual representations of agriculture in picture books can help children in elementary schools understand and participate in their local food systems.

## Recommendations

The findings from this pilot project support the role of the FAI collaborating with community stakeholders in the promotion and creation of a centralized, integrated food hub, virtual sales platforms, and an “Abbotsford Fresh” initiative related to mapping the Abbotsford food ecosystem that involves a wide variety of community groups (including entrepreneurs and municipal government). The FAI should therefore facilitate liaisons between local farmers, consumers, and these community stakeholders.

Findings from this pilot should be reflected in the FAI Strategic Plan, with the goal of the data set from this pilot being further research and development in the local food system. By working with community innovators, including the cities of Abbotsford and Chilliwack, local Indigenous groups, Archway Community Services, Fraser Health, as well as local food and hospitality businesses, this project will provide avenues for better understanding of current local supply of food, disruptions in local distribution channels, and potential for collaboration around food waste.

Specifically, this pilot data tool could be extended and used to build on best practices developed elsewhere to develop locally relevant and applicable strategies that match supply with demand, supporting a more equitable, inclusive, just, and sustainable local food system to help support household and regional food security.

## Conclusion

The Cultivate Connect project launched a pilot survey to gauge and assess critical challenges and gaps in local food system infrastructure in the Fraser Valley.

This research is timely because of a myriad of initiatives that are evolving related to food security and resilience within the Fraser Valley. Furthermore, given that Abbotsford is the largest agricultural producer in Canada (generating \$1.8 billion in agricultural products and employing 11,300 people full time in the agricultural sector), and that Chilliwack is Canada’s second largest agricultural municipality (producing half of Abbotsford’s output), there is an urgent need for the FAI to play a role in integrating and coordinating food related initiatives.

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated many challenges, injustices, and inefficiencies at the systematic level—and this is especially true of food systems. On the level of household food security, findings from the Cultivate Connect survey could support funding strategies for better matching of excess food to non-profit sector demands. In regards to regional food security, a centralized, integrated food hub could provide

the education and infrastructure necessary to more effectively support local farmers.

The cities of Abbotsford and Chilliwack would benefit from investing in resiliency strategies and recovery plans that will support farmers in procuring local food security, thereby protecting community members in the event of local, national, or global disturbances — including natural disasters, pandemics, and economic volatility. Such strategies might include developing community-based food security systems, ensuring key food players are better prepared, and moving from models of charity to food sovereignty whereby communities are the drivers of their own food systems.

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## Appendix

### Survey Questions



Page 1

#### Cultivate Connect Survey

#### Fraser Valley Farmer to Market Supply

1. By completing the survey, I agree to participate in this study, the "Cultivate Connect: Fraser Valley Farmer to Market Supply Research".

I have read the information presented in the letter of informed consent about the research being conducted by Drs. Michelle Superle and Cherie Enns at the University of the Fraser Valley. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive any additional details.

I understand that confidentiality and/or anonymity of all results will be preserved.

I understand that I do not need to answer any questions that make me uncomfortable, and that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time up until submission of my survey responses; once I complete and submit the survey, my information becomes part of the data and cannot be withdrawn.

If I have any questions about the study, I should contact Dr. Michelle Superle ([michelle.superle@ufv.ca](mailto:michelle.superle@ufv.ca)) or Dr. Cherie Enns ([cherie.enns@ufv.ca](mailto:cherie.enns@ufv.ca)).

If I have any concerns regarding my rights or welfare as a participant in this research study, I can contact the UFV Ethics Officer at 604-557-4011 or [Research.Ethics@ufv.ca](mailto:Research.Ethics@ufv.ca).

The ethics of this research project have been reviewed and approved by the UFV Human Research Ethics Board: Protocol #100506, issued on October 1, 2020.

I give my consent

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

2. If yes, please enter the following information:  
Name:  
Date:

**Page 2**

1. Where is your farm business located?

- ☐ Abbotsford
- ☐ Chilliwack
- ☐ Both

Exit the page to quit the survey

2. Which foods does your farm produce for human consumption? (List up to 5)

- Product 1: \_\_\_\_\_
- Product 2: \_\_\_\_\_
- Product 3: \_\_\_\_\_
- Product 4: \_\_\_\_\_
- Product 5: \_\_\_\_\_

Exit the page to quit the survey

3. Which of the following sales channels do you use to sell product?

Select all that apply

- ☐ Direct to consumer (i.e., CSA program, Farmers' market(s), Farm stand/onsite retail, Website/online retail, etc.)
- ☐ Direct to independent or specialty retail
- ☐ Direct to restaurant
- ☐ Direct to manufacturer/processor/packing facility
- ☐ Growers co-op
- ☐ Wholesaler
- ☐ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Exit the page to quit the survey

4. How have the recent events pertaining to Covid-19 impacted your business?

Select all that apply

- ☐ 1. Negatively
  - ☐ 1.1 Distribution issues
  - ☐ 1.2 Financial issues
  - ☐ 1.3 Labour issues
  - ☐ 1.4 Processing issues
  - ☐ 1.5 Regulation issues
  - ☐ 1.6 Other
- ☐ 2. Positively
  - ☐ 2.1 Increased business collaboration
  - ☐ 2.2 Increased local sourcing
  - ☐ 2.3 Increased online sales
  - ☐ 2.4 Increased product inquiries
  - ☐ 2.5 Increased retail sales
  - ☐ 2.6. Other

Exit the page to quit the survey

5. What is your approximate gross production volume?

- ☐ Less than \$10,000
- ☐ \$10,000 - \$49,000
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$99,000
- ☐ \$100,000-\$199,000
- ☐ \$200,000-\$499,000
- ☐ More than \$500,000

Exit the page to quit the survey

6. Which of the following challenges has created excess product on your farm?

Select all that apply

- ☐ Byproduct or scraps
- ☐ Cancellation of purchase deal
- ☐ Delivery/distribution issues
- ☐ Irregular product
- ☐ Farm equipment issues
- ☐ Labour shortage
- ☐ Over supply/ lack of demand
- ☐ Timing issues
- ☐ Weather issues
- ☐ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Exit the page to quit the survey

7. How do you currently handle excess product? Select all that apply

- ☐ Composting
- ☐ Crop to animal recycling
- ☐ Donating to public
- ☐ Gleaning
- ☐ Safe disposal
- ☐ Value added/ repurposing
- ☐ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Exit the page to quit the survey

8. Which options would you like to try if you were given the proper support (please indicate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'strongly not interested in trying' and 5 being 'strongly interested in trying')

Composting	1	2	3	4	5
Crop to animal recycle	1	2	3	4	5
Donating to public	1	2	3	4	5
Gleaning	1	2	3	4	5
Safe disposal	1	2	3	4	5
Value added/ repurposing	1	2	3	4	5
None	1	2	3	4	5
Other (please specify): _____					

Exit the page to quit the survey

9. Share your vision for a better food system... (Optional)

What resources do you need to build local food connections within the Fraser Valley to help improve your business?

Exit the page to quit the survey

10. Would you consider participating in a new Fraser Valley food to purchaser direct initiative?

- ☐ No
- ☐ If yes, then a member of the research team will contact you. What is your preferred email address for this communication?

Exit the page to quit the survey

11. \*Survey participants that share this survey will be entered into a draw to win one of three \$100 gift cards to the restaurant of their choice.

- ☐ Click here to participate...
- ☐ No thank you