Executive Summary of the Final Report on Projects and Evaluation

Produce Availability in Remote Communities Initiative

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DECEMBER 22, 2012
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The full PDF report of Produce Availability in Remote Communities Initiative: Final Report on Projects and Evaluation is available by email request from healthyfamiliesbc@gov.bc.ca.

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1.0 Executive Summary

In British Columbia’s remote communities, fresh vegetables and fruit can be hard to find. Geographical barriers to having fresh, good quality produce in these isolated communities include distance from a commercial center, poor transportation routes, inadequate freight handling and poor gardening conditions. Community barriers include a lack of retailers, minimal capacity and skills for gardening and food preservation, and low community engagement.

In 2008, the B.C. government committed to addressing the challenges of making produce more available in these remote communities, and the Produce Availability in Remote Communities Initiative (PAI) was initiated. The B.C. Ministry of Health, as lead, partnered with the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture and the Heart and Stroke Foundation with a goal to:

*Improve the year-round availability and quality of fruits and vegetables, including B.C. produce when available, in remote B.C. communities.*

Through focusing on action in seven component areas across 24 remote B.C. communities, the PAI delivered on three key objectives:

- To increase consumer demand for produce in remote communities
- To enhance the distribution of produce in remote communities
- To create community capacity for remote communities to grow and store their own produce.

This report showcases the PAI component areas delivered in Phases 2 and 3 (2011–2012), and brings together the learnings from a comprehensive program evaluation implemented over the course of the PAI. The evaluation of each component area is presented as a separate chapter within this report. Highlights of the components and their evaluation reports are provided in this executive summary.

Between 2009 and 2012, the PAI implemented a range of solutions to make produce more available in 24 of B.C.’s most vulnerable and hard to reach communities. The first of its kind, this initiative was a pioneering effort with great learning potential. At the outset, it was clear that there was no magic bullet intervention that could address the complicated, multi-system changes needed. Every aspect of the produce system — from acquisition to distribution to education — needed attention.

The initial concept for the initiative of “getting produce into remote communities” was quickly reworked into a concept of community-driven solutions. The communities wanted the support to become more self-sufficient, to have the capacity to grow, supply, store, distribute and preserve their own produce.

During the PAI’s Phase 1, the infrastructure for 17 First Nations community gardens and five community projects was established. As the PAI team became familiar with the communities and their needs, more project ideas were implemented. Eventually, the PAI grew into a three year, three million dollar initiative. However, it could not be planned or evaluated as a multiyear intervention because funding was awarded annually with no guarantee of future funding. Thus, the PAI operated as a continuous trial, building upon the results from each season to evolve and progress the projects, the communities, and the initiative.
as a whole. In the end, the PAI resembled other successful public health interventions in which multiple strategies are delivered at multiple levels, resulting in a cumulative effect over several years.

The PAI made a strong commitment to continuous evaluation, allocating 10% of each project budget to this function. This report describes the comprehensive program evaluation, focusing on learnings accumulated in the seven PAI component areas delivered in Phases 2 and 3 (2011–2012) of the initiative.

The diverse PAI component areas delivered in Phases 2 and 3 included:

- **First Nations Community Gardens**: A program that provided 17 remote First Nations communities with continued support for their community gardens, including funding for garden supplies, infrastructure, and garden coordinators, and ongoing training and advice.

- **Sustainability of Community Projects**: This component provided further funding to the five PAI Phase 1 remote community projects to overcome their identified barriers to project sustainability. This included augmentation and expansion of community gardens and greenhouses in Tahsis, Zeballos and Telegraph Creek and Dease Lake, further development of the community supported agriculture program in Bella Coola, and creation of a produce hub around the new produce storage facility in Haida Gwaii.

- **Stimulating Demand for Produce**: A produce merchandising program that promoted produce and provided seasonal cooking demonstrations, and involved retailers, retail locations and community events.

- **Farm to Community**: A program that linked local foods and farms with schools and institutions in Tahsis and Haida Gwaii, to make local produce more available.

- **Produce Preservation Program**: A program that provided hands-on training, curriculum, resources and coaching to teach participants from 24 remote communities how to harvest, can, dry and freeze fruits and vegetables, and how to pass on the knowledge.

- **Incentives and Supports for Transporting Produce**: This component developed an educational awareness campaign regarding best practices for handling produce, and delivered it to produce carriers for remote communities.

- **Municipal Toolkit**: Based on the learnings from the PAI, this component team developed a toolkit of resources, tools and tips to help local government staff improve the year-round availability and quality of fruits and vegetables in their remote communities.

“The CSA is so important because we have the ability to grow this food, and we have the ability to be independent, and we can prepare ourselves for crises; it’s really important to self-reliance. There’s many challenges to produce availability — cost of shipping, rock slides, floods, forest fires, snow conditions — the road is often closed, so we can often be cut off from our supplies. This is a really economically depressed area, and it’s important to keep the local money local. People can eat better, we can support our farmers.”

[BELLA COOLA CSA COORDINATOR]
The evaluation team’s goals were to learn about how the PAI projects were implemented in the remote communities, and to learn about what changed in the communities as a consequence of taking action. The evaluation team was guided by a set of principles: stay true to the project objectives; be part of the project team; be creative; be flexible; and listen to the communities’ voices. The learnings around the process and the impacts of these projects, as well as the evaluation methods that were most successful in remote communities, were significant, numerous and varied.

1.1 Key Learnings Across PAI Components

The PAI explored and documented what might work to improve produce availability in remote communities. In retrospect, it’s evident there were some common factors that facilitated the process, regardless of the type of activity or intervention.

Community Engagement

Key to advancing all projects, community engagement was especially important for the success of Stimulating Demand, Farm to Community, First Nations Community Gardens, and Community Projects components. The actual agenda of making produce more available advanced quickly when community and stakeholder engagement was planned and prioritized by the component team and the community project team. Varying degrees of engagement across communities affected timelines for project implementation at the community level, which sometimes conflicted with the inherent timelines of the initiative.

Community engagement was critical in creating relevant, meaningful projects and solutions with communities. The best plans emerged when multiple levels of the
community (including municipal or band council staff and leadership from key community organizations and schools) participated in the project design and implementation. The engagement of key individuals in leadership positions within the community helped integrate PAI projects with existing community plans and visions. Just one example of this comes from the Village of New Aiyansh, where the director of finance for the Village Government oversaw PAI funding dispersal and planning for the community garden. In her influential position, she merged the community garden plans with a larger vision for the community to become a local food hub for the region. The community of Tahsis is another example of diverse and successful community engagement: over time, PAI involvement included the leads from a key non-profit group, the school staff and principal, community health, the local chef, a few small business owners, many parents and children, and eventually, the new mayor.

In future efforts, it will be important to start with an assessment of community engagement. Where communities are less engaged and less ready for change, the emphasis is best placed on engaging the community — and all the relationship-building this involves — prior to initiating any other efforts.

Infrastructure and Capacity

The existing infrastructure and capacity in a community were important factors to consider. Existing infrastructure or capacity could be utilized, capitalized on, and integrated into new activities and interventions; whereas low capacity and resources needed be bolstered.

The Stimulating Demand and community garden projects successfully used existing community capacity and infrastructure. The Stimulating Demand team capitalized on existing, well-attended seasonal events and drew on local residents to do food demonstrations. In the communities that had sufficient community capacity and knowledge of gardening, garden projects tended to be constructed and executed successfully. This was especially evident in Telegraph Creek, where one family had significant gardening experience, and in a few of the First Nations communities, where community members drew upon the gardening skills of the elders.

In several communities, the demand of seasonal employment reduced the availability of a ready labour force to work on the community projects, and was a major barrier to progress. This lack of workers reinforced the need to engage the community at the outset or to give priority to the project to allocate any available workers, paid or volunteer. Some of the Farm to Community programs were challenged by a lack of capacity, and thus, capacity development became the focal point in implementing and sustaining programs. In the Produce Preservation Program, the component team recognized that trainees needed to have preserving equipment and resources to deliver workshops in their home communities; sending the appropriate equipment out to the remote communities was essential to the program’s success.

Thus, for future efforts, working with the communities to measure their existing capacity, inventory their infrastructure, and define their state of readiness should be a precursor to awarding project funding.

Multi-Year Funding

We learned through all components that interventions and activities aiming to change food systems and/or the food supply for a community are long term projects, requiring long term support. Throughout the PAI, expectations of change were continually adjusted as the reality of the change process was observed. It was quickly apparent that a community garden could not be set-up and become fully productive in one season. However, working groups and decision-making processes could be established within that first season. Similarly, Farm to Community school programs could not initiate and have all students involved within the course of a single school year. However, they could develop relationships with farmers; determine their local produce acquisition processes and trial some produce-filled lunches to students. Retailers who had been in business in their communities for decades could not completely change their produce marketing practices in a few months. They could, however, develop the community relationships that elevated the visibility of produce they had in their store.

For all communities and projects, the engagement and relationship-development processes were rate-limiting factors. Beyond these hurdles, it is a physically difficult thing to change the structure of food production and acquisition in a remote community. It takes time, connections, continuous training and some luck (to avoid the floods, fire, bears, deer, poor weather) to make the changes happen.

At the final advisory committee meeting for the PAI — the celebration — it was agreed that system change projects such as these should be viewed as three to five year
endeavours, best served with a commitment of multi-year funding. The PAI efforts between 2010 and 2012 provided a strong start and should be viewed as foundational to the building of long term platforms to increase produce availability in remote communities.

1.2 Key Impacts Across PAI Components

The key impact of the PAI, increased availability of produce, was assessed repeatedly by asking communities: did produce availability change?

We found that before people could answer the question of whether produce was more available to them, they generally prefaced with sentiments relating to their observations of changes in community relationships, augmented strength, pride and resiliency in their community, and their hopes for a better future. These powerful, qualitative changes in the communities were not originally the focus of the evaluation and became the successes celebrated at the community level. People in remote communities gained skills and became inspired, hopeful and connected because of participation in a PAI project. Importantly, these changes came before achieving the tangible impact of more produce in the hands of more people. When we examined this desirable, tangible impact, we saw that there was great value in the three million dollar PAI investment:

Across 24 remote communities touched by the PAI activities, more fresh vegetables and fruit were enjoyed by an estimated 1200 people.

What’s more, the investment in the Produce Availability in Remote Communities Initiative resulted in:

- 19 community gardens and 16 greenhouses,
- a 42-family community supported agriculture program,
- two new produce storage facilities,
- 43 produce preservation trainers trained,
- 17 produce preservation community workshops delivered to 150 community members,
- lunch programs incorporating fresh, local produce delivered to 256 students and staff at five schools,
- 12 seasonal cooking demonstrations,
- augmented awareness of best handling practices for produce among carriers.
Much changed in the communities over the life of the PAI. Some changes worked directly to make more produce available to community members. Some changes needed to happen upstream and were critical for a long-term change and sustainability. Within some component areas, achieving community buy-in for the concept of making more produce available was the major accomplishment. Engaging hundreds of community members was essential to building a future where more produce was available in these communities. Definitive changes in produce availability were shown in:

1. **Farm to Community** lunches at Captain Meares Elementary and Secondary School in Tahsis and Port Clements Elementary School in Port Clements. Between April 2011 and spring 2012, a greater quantity and diversity of produce was consistently available at school lunches twice a week for students. At the other three participating schools, significant changes in the food environment promise future significant changes in the amount of produce available.

2. **Bella Coola**, where there were substantial changes in local produce availability for the 42 families participating in the Bella Coola Community Supported Agriculture program. The program made produce readily accessible by bringing the produce directly to the families’ homes. Further, the program stimulated local farmers to grow more produce, and attracted at least one new farming family to the Bella Coola Valley.

3. **Hugely increased harvests** at the Tahsis Community Garden and the Telegraph Creek Community Garden in the 2011 growing season. More produce was made directly available to many residents in these two communities.

4. Nine remote First Nations communities that firmly established and expanded community gardens in their communities and widely shared the harvests.

5. The availability of fresh produce at traditional, seasonal community fairs in Tahsis, Masset and Bella Coola. Before 2011, fresh produce had never before been made available at these community events. In total, 755 fresh fruit smoothies, 230 veggie cups and 400 fruit kebabs were available and consumed.

6. Remote locations where produce preservation workshops occurred. Through the Produce Preservation Program, 43 people acquired the tools, resources and techniques to preserve vegetables and fruits. In turn, 32 trainers taught local community members through 16 community information sessions and 17 local preservation workshops, and from this, the availability of fruit and vegetables increased for hundreds of remote community members.

### 1.3 The Final Point

The Produce Availability in Remote Communities Initiative achieved its goal of improving the year-round availability and quality of vegetables and fruits in remote B.C. communities. This was accomplished through pioneering efforts that created synergies across several component areas. The bulk of these efforts directly supported community members in planning and implementing actions that would increase their community’s capacity to grow, store, distribute, and market produce, while simultaneously increasing their community’s awareness of, and demand for, fresh vegetables and fruit.

The PAI showed that to effect change in produce availability in communities, community engagement, development of community capacity and planning and funding for long term change are the keys to success. After the PAI’s three year run, there is more fresh local produce being consumed in 24 remote B.C. communities. Better still, these communities have experienced a renewed sense of hope and increased pride in their ability to be more food self-sufficient and resilient.

### 1.4 The PAI Epilogue and Legacy

Though the funding for the PAI has ended, the story does not end and work continues in the PAI communities. This legacy ranges from continued expansion of remote community gardens and Farm to Community programs, tighter relationships with freight companies for local produce distribution, increased demand for fresh produce at local stores, new community composting programs, new funding partners supporting continued work on produce availability, and new synergies in capacity development.

- Working with the Heart and Stroke Foundation, 14 of the PAI’s remote First Nations communities are now engaged in creating community food systems that will build a platform for long-term vegetable and fruit production and in some cases, small scale agriculture.

- With funding from Gwaii Trust and the efforts of the community nutritionist, the Farm to Community program trialed within the PAI continues to expand on Haida Gwaii. Six communities, a whole school district and five schools, the Farmers’ Institute, three farms, four greenhouses, the Old Masset Village Council’s Culinary Arts Program, and the Northern Haida Gwaii Hospital and Health Centre are now engaged in the program.
• Bella Coola reports that the community supported agriculture program has acquired unlikely allies in local retailers, freight companies, pilots and fisherman who offer to transport the CSA’s local produce free to neighboring communities like Bella Bella and Klemtu when extra space is available.

• After displaying and using the PAI merchandising materials and participating in Masset Harbour Days, Atwell’s Family Foods in Masset saw sufficient demand for produce to increase the amount of fresh produce in store. The flyer program was especially effective: the store sold out of produce featured in their first flyer within a couple of days. In June 2012, the owners reported that fresh produce sales had tripled since the beginning of the PAI.

• The Telegraph Creek community garden established a community composting program with composting units provided through the Stimulating Demand component. The units are used within the substantial community garden and within families’ personal gardens to augment the produce grown and subsequently consumed in the community.

• At the 2012 Fall Fair in Bella Coola, community members visited the cooking demonstration to let the chefs know that they had tried the fresh produce recipes demonstrated in 2011, and that they had continued to use them throughout the year.

• Gwaii Trust matched funding provided by the PAI so that the Graham Island East Coast Farmers’ Institute could build their Farmers’ Market in Tlell and establish a produce ‘hub’ near the PAI produce storage facility site.

• Tahsis Community Garden Society received funding from the Vancouver Island Health Authority Community Food Action Initiative to pay a community garden coordinator, produce an annual garden plan and provide six gardening workshops for the community. This has resulted in the best harvest yet for the community garden.

• The B.C. Food Processors Association received new funding to cross-train experienced food skills facilitators to link the Produce Preservation Program with other established food skills programs in British Columbia.
The following documents and resources share the learnings of the PAI and are available on the Ministry of Health website: www.health.gov.bc.ca/healthyeating/foodsecurity.html.

- Harvesting Change in B.C.’s Remote Communities — The Story of the Produce Availability Initiative as told in flipbook format.
- Produce Availability in Remote Communities Initiative: Executive Summary of the Final Report on Projects and Evaluation — A brief summary of PAI Phase 2 and 3 projects and learnings on the process and impacts of the PAI.
- Produce Availability in Remote Communities Initiative: Final Report on Projects and Evaluation — A comprehensive report on the evaluation of the PAI Phase 2 and 3 components [available via request from healthyfamiliesbc@gov.bc.ca].
- Local Leaders Harvesting Change — A toolkit to help remote communities enjoy fruits and vegetables.
- Farm to Cafeteria: B.C. Communities Share Paths to Success — Highlights of the Farm to Cafeteria programs in the PAI communities of Tahsis and Haida Gwaii.
- Produce Handling Guidelines Poster — A durable, waterproof poster that shows how to maximize the quality and shelf life of produce.
- Produce Preservation Program Guide — Fun, hands on workshops and resources to teach people how to safely preserve home grown and locally available fruits and vegetables for year round enjoyment.