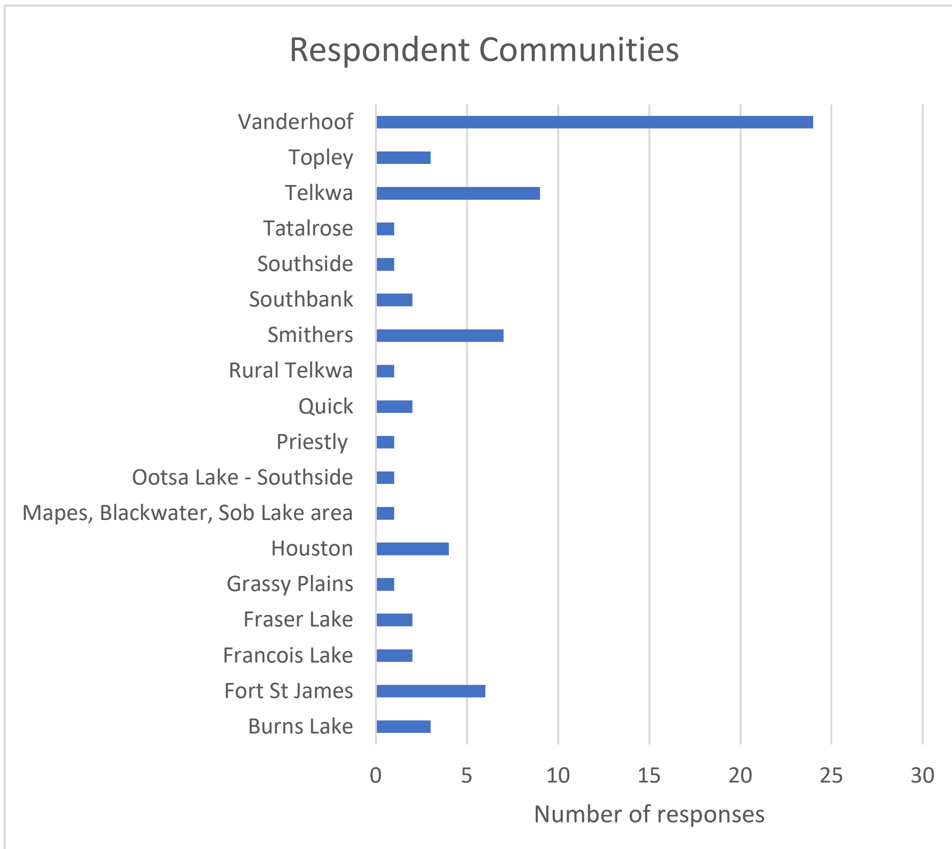
Survey Findings Highlights

Why we did this survey

At the suggestion of the Food and Agriculture Working Group, the project team developed a survey tool for members to collect information with and distribute through their respective networks. The survey was also promoted through the RDBN database of food and agriculture networks and contacts. The purpose of this survey is to determine the level of interest and readiness in terms of spaces, equipment, and services to launch initial phases of a food hub in 2021 and potentially a regional food hub network. The survey was online (www.rdbn.bc.ca/departments/agriculture) from October 15 to November 20, 2020.

Many people responded

A total of 72 people responded to the survey. People from across the region participated, although 40% of total responses were from Vanderhoof/Fort St. James area.



The largest group of respondents are primarily livestock farmers

A range of food producers, raisers, harvesters, and makers responded to the survey. Consistent with census information on farm-type in the RDBN, livestock farmers comprise nearly half 49% of responses. Fruit and vegetable producers (18%), grass and grain producers (13%), as well as farmers markets, food processors and makers and community programs (10%) made up the rest of respondents.

The majority of respondents are small to medium scale producers.

Sixty-one percent of respondents are from the small-scale agriculture sector with gross farm revenue under $30,000 per year. A further 28% are medium scale ($30,000-100,00/yr).

Over half of respondents process products

Fifty-four percent of respondents produce processed products while the remainder do not. Of those that do process, 79% of them indicated they use abattoirs, 33% do on-farm processing, 20% do out of region processing, 8% do off-farm processing, and 8% process in a health certified commercial kitchen space. Many respondents indicated that they use more than one category of processing.

Most producers use directs sales as their primary marketing channel

Many respondents use multiple sales methods although, 48% of them sell through direct to customer/ farm gate sales.

Many businesses want to expand

Sixty-one percent of respondents are interested in expanding their business, while 39% are currently satisfied with their existing level of sales. Of those who are interested in expanding their business, they are interested:

- Increasing meat production and processing (primary and secondary)
- Broadening their customer base geographically to include regional customers and beyond
- Improving marketing and product development
- Expanding processing and storage capacity
- Supporting businesses to conform to regulatory requirements

A local food store is the most desired function for the hub

Consistent with findings from the RDBN Food and Agriculture plan, a local food store was selected as the most popular service that a food hub could provide. Online sales and storage, aggregation, and commercial kitchens were also selected frequently. Seventeen percent of respondents indicated they are not interested in food hub services.

Producers are hungry for knowledge

The most popular topics are business planning, soil and nutrient testing, webinars, and how to grow/raise/process particular products. Other education training ideas from survey respondents include: rotational grazing practices and diversifying markets, butcher, cut/wrap, curing, sausage making, meat processing, slaughter-safe and related, cattle management (e.g. health and nutrition), land management (i.e. how to get the best out of your land with the materials we produce, such as manure to fertilize instead of chemicals), how to freeze dry food, permaculture, on-farm energy production, and bee keeping.

Most producers are likely to use a food hub but not quite ready to do so

The majority (87%) of respondents are somewhat to very likely to use a food hub, with 29% indicating they are very likely. Thirteen percent of respondents are not likely to use a food hub. When asked if they were ready to use a food hub, the largest segment (45%) of respondents indicated that they are not ready or are doing fine now in regards to using/joining a food hub. One respondent noted, that while they see value on a food hub for new entrants, “most of us have had to make do without this kind of [food hub] help and have already made arrangements to own or share the equipment necessary for our operations.” Although this indicates a lack of likeliness or readiness, if considered together, 54% of respondents indicated they were almost ready, ready now, or ready yesterday, potentially indicating a good level of readiness in certain producers.

As the most likely and ready the 38 respondents, who are a lot more likely to use a food hub in the near future, are of specific interest. Below is a summary of their key responses to identify who they are and what their needs are:

- 88% of them are small and medium sized producers with annual revenues less than $100,000.
- 70% of them are livestock farmers and/or fruit and vegetable growers.
- 88% of them sell direct to customers/farm gate sales.
- 78% of them are interested in expanding their business.
- 48% of them are from the Vanderhoof/Fort St. James area.
- They would mainly like the food hub to provide the following services:
  - Retail outlet (73% of “food hub ready” respondents)
  - Online store (65%)
  - Food storage (48%)
  - Business planning courses (48%)

Based on the responses from the “food hub ready” respondents, implementing a retail outlet in Vanderhoof with an online store, mainly for livestock and produce growers, could be a key recommendation.

Reaching new markets is the main value that a food hub can give to producers

Respondents were asked, specifically, "what would make it worthwhile for you to become a member of a food hub?" Most comments centred around the value of the food hub being to reach new markets and customers (regionally and beyond). Themes in open-ended responses to what would make it worthwhile to participate in a food hub include:

- Access to local/regional markets/marketing and connection to customers
- Address regional meat processing gaps and support existing abattoirs to expand
- Linking to community programs and community trade networks
- Help with regulations and funding sources
- Building business confidence
- More information on the hub as well as education and training
- Specific services, facilities and equipment.

There is strong interest in meeting in small, on-line groups

About half of respondents (51%) are interested in meeting as a small group to further discuss opportunities. The project team will be in contact to set these sessions up in 2021.

For more information on this process and food and agriculture in the RDBN please visit:
https://www.rdbn.bc.ca/departments/agriculture