

Research Brief - Agricultural Supports & Challenges: Exploring the Role of Regional Districts across British Columbia (BC), Canada

By Colin C. Dring, Royal Roads University and Aaren Topley, Public Health Association of BC

Recommendations

There is a role for Regional Districts (RD) in contributing towards regional resilient food systems, and that expanding the scope of food system governance to coordinate between different local governments could be more effective than individual local governments operating in isolation.

Recommendations to Provincial Government and Funders:

1. Through UBCM, fund RDs to establish multi-stakeholder food policy councils/advisory bodies. As an interim approach, until the [Declaration Act Action Plan](#) is enacted, provide funding to Treaty First Nations to participate in RD food policy councils or advisory bodies.
 - Develop a provincial task force to learn from RD food policy council/advisory bodies and make recommendations to coordinate between them and proliferate them.
2. Establish a novel method to calculate RD funding for food security, resilient food systems, and agricultural development and implementation activities.
3. Direct the BC Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (BCMAFF) and the BC Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills to work with post-secondary institutions to develop degree/diploma programs and planning accreditation for agricultural and food system planning.
4. Funders to provide funding to develop cross regional convening opportunities for local government and NGO's to learn from each other's models and strategic plans.

Recommendations to Non-Government Organizations (non-profits, farmers, businesses):

1. Work with local government elected officials to advance the above policy recommendations at UBCM.
2. Continue to advocate through formal and informal channels to RD Board of Directors to politically support agriculture and food. This can include direct funding for pilot projects, staff, and contractors; collaborative convening of food and agricultural stakeholders; development of regional food strategies; and communications to different levels of government.

Recommendations to Regional Districts

1. Create multi-stakeholder food policy councils/advisory bodies to guide and support regional agricultural development and implementation.
2. Scope establishing an RD service for food and agriculture.
3. Work with local governments within the RD to identify and implement activities that support regional food security and resilient food systems (i.e., farmland trusts, food hubs, water services, community farms)

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About the Study:

BC is experiencing the impacts of climate change on food security. This has culminated in food system impacts from COVID-19 disrupting supply chains and labour availability, wildfires throughout BC, and severe flooding in the Fraser Valley. The time is right to develop resilient, regional food systems with Regional Districts (RD) playing a key role in developing resources, people, programs. This study explores the range of RD activities and challenges in supporting agriculture.

The findings from this study demonstrate that RDs across BC are pursuing, where capacity and political will exist, significant agricultural supports. The drivers for these supports come from addressing farming issues expressed by the agricultural sector and from provincially legislated mandates for land use planning. The level and kinds of supports vary greatly across the province.

RD staff and representatives interviewed note varying degrees of effectiveness of RD agricultural and food policies (e.g., Regional Growth Strategies, Agricultural plans, Food strategies). This is due to key RD challenges in supporting agriculture such as limited number of staff and staff hour allocation, limited staff capacity/expertise, limited funding, resistance to taking on an agricultural role, and challenges with agricultural governance across different administrative levels (e.g., Levels of government) and agricultural systems (e.g., Different farming practices, Markets, Farm operations).

Study Methodology:

This study assessed the roles of 17 RDs across BC (59% of all RDs in BC) in supporting agricultural systems across their jurisdictions. It also identified key challenges facing RDs in addressing agricultural land use planning, economic development, and governance. To determine these roles and challenges, the study used a qualitative case study approach, analyzing 24 interviews conducted with 23 past and present planning staff and one RD Director.

Current Regional District Agriculture Support Activities

- 1. Land Use Planning and Policy:** RDs are responsible for land use planning for electoral areas, and many electoral areas encompass rural spaces within the ALR and agriculturally zoned lands. Thus, land use planning and land policy is a common role and responsibility of RD. This includes the development of land use bylaws and zones, establishing permitted uses and requirements for development applications and permits (e.g., Buildings) as per the Local Government Act and the Agricultural Land Commission Act.
 - RDs engage in the following activities: Agriculture land use controls (n=6), Compliance & enforcement of land use bylaws (n=3), Edge planning (n=3)
- 2. Funding:** RDs provide funding support for staffing through their respective services (typically planning and development, but some through economic development). All 17 RDs have devoted some staff time, and thus, budget allocation, to fulfilling tasks associated with agriculture. Only one has a full-time planning position devoted to agriculture (Metro Vancouver).
 - Activities that support economic development: Funding for agriculture/economic development (n=7), People/staff funding (n=5).

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- 3. Advocacy and Communications:** Five of the RDs studied identified regular communications and advocacy to the Province, typically BCMAFF and the Agricultural Land Commission.
 - Advocacy and communication of RDs: Public education (n=9), Communication to the Province (n=5).
- 4. Governance:** To establish an agricultural plan requires RDs investing resources (human and funding) and convening agriculture and food system stakeholders to participate in the planning process.
 - Activities that support governance: Agricultural plan (n=22), Regional agricultural policies (n=12), Governance group (n=8) (e.g., Food system; Agricultural development).
- 5. Research:** Across four RDs participants identified research projects (e.g., Feasibility studies, Desk research, Policies, Bylaws) being conducted in support of the agricultural sector and the food system.

Regional District Challenges in Supporting Agriculture

- 1. Governance Challenges:**
 - **Governance & Role Constraints:** Eight RDs identified the challenge of political resistance to having a role in agriculture and food. In some RDs, there is a resistance among member municipalities, generally with limited farmland, of directing RD resources towards agriculture.
 - **Lack of staff capacity and staffing issues:** Two inter-connected challenges are around staffing issues (n=5), staff capacity (n=9), and resources for the regional to implement plans and actions. Across the study there has been a common issue of lack of staff to support agriculture in planning design, implementation, and evaluation.
 - **Lack of Enforcement:** RDs note constraints with enforcement and compliance with legislation. There is a limited ability of RDs to do both long-term planning for agriculture, engage in agricultural and food system planning and development, and compliance with regulations.
- 2. Planning Challenges:** Six broad planning challenges were identified by research participants. Of these a key tension between provincial legislation and local priorities was identified across 11 RDs. This tension typically alludes to two major areas of challenge: i) Regulatory changes and a lack of communication; and ii) Provincial directives being incongruent with local contexts.
- 3. Funding challenges:** It was identified that lack of funding for implementation, personnel and constrained RDs in supporting agriculture. Generally, across the RDs interviewed, there was no RD-wide service specific to agriculture and food. Rather, agriculture and food system supports were typically allocated to an established service (e.g., Planning, Economic development) on an ad hoc basis. Eight RD's staff interviewed stated that establishing a service function for agriculture and food would be beneficial but represents an immense challenge (e.g., Taxpayer and political buy-in).
- 4. Economic Development Challenges:** Eight RDs identified the economic viability of farming as a key challenge. Relatedly, there is no direct role or mandate for RDs to intervene in the economic development of the agricultural sector and broader food systems. These are voluntary roles that an RD can take on as per the Local Government Act.