A Full Circle Farm Initiative: Powell River, British Columbia

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Executive Summary

The Full Circle Farm (FCF) proposed for Powell River, British Columbia, is an initiative by the Society for the Advancement of Local Sustainable Agriculture (SALSA), an organization that emerged from the Powell River Farmers Institute, to grow the region’s agricultural industry and to encourage local organic consumption. Though the FCF has the potential to provide the community with many benefits, it is not without resistance, especially from several local farmers as well as the Powell River Agricultural Association. Thus it has been deemed prudent for this report to investigate strategies to promote public support for the project, and to encourage participation with its various initiatives and programs.

Through a comprehensive literature and case study review, focused around four key research questions, this report presents a set of recommendations. These are divided between those directed at local farmers and those directed at the general public, however there are many commonalities:

- Consumer education and inclusion
- Sustainable norm creation through extensive branding and marketing
- Addressing the positive income effect for organic consumption by creating greater accessibility to the FCF’s products and programs
- Transparency and accountability

Introduction

Throughout the past several months, the Society for the Advancement of Local Sustainable Agriculture has advanced their plans for an ambitious ‘Full Circle Farm’ project in Powell River, British Columbia. In partnership with the Powell River Farmers Institute, this farm has been designed to include an agricultural education program, to showcase principles of organic sustainable agriculture (Powell River Society for the Advancement of Local Sustainable Agriculture, 2013). In addition to this program, the FCF will have various other features, shown below.
As is evident in Figure 1, there is an important distinction between the two sides of the FCF. SALSA will run the educational program as a not-for-profit charitable organization, while the farming and retail aspects of the project will operate as a social enterprise, and thus must be profitable to remain viable.

Though both SALSA and the Powell River Farmers Institute (PRFI) hold clout in the Powell River community, the FCF is not without resistance. The Powell River Agricultural Association has been reluctant to endorse the project for fear of unfair advantage and competition for local farmers. There is also indirect resistance to the farm, created by a market that is potentially restricted by limited financial resources for perceived high-end organic products. Approximately one quarter of Powell River’s citizens live below the Canadian poverty line (Powell River Community Foundation, 2011), and organic local products are often more expensive than those offered by the large grocery chains in the region. These grocery outlets (Quality Foods,
Safeway and Save-On-Foods) offer a source of competition, as do local and import organic businesses Ecosentials and Sunshine Organics.

As is evident in this brief introduction, public support and engagement are critical to the FCF’s success, which leads to the research focus of this report. This report will determine macro-level strategies and programs that will foster public support for the FCF, and will ensure its viability in Powell River.

Methods

The research presented in this report is primarily a product of a comprehensive literature review and case study analysis. Though the work consulted was predominantly academic, newspaper articles and independent farm reports were utilized in examining several case studies. There was no new data gathered in support of this report as it was deemed inappropriate to consult the Powell River community due to unavoidable circumstances, which will be discussed in greater detail below. However, a visit to Powell River was made possible through the financial support of the Community Learning Initiative, which yielded invaluable interaction with the SALSA board of directors, as well as experience with the Powell River Community.

Literature Review and Results

This literature review can be separated into several distinct sections, but is generally focused on encouraging sustainable behavior, fostering community engagement with sustainable initiatives, and marketing organic products successfully. This literature review, and the case study analysis that follows, attempt to address the four key questions that drove the research included in this report:

1. Determining contentious aspects of the FCF
2. Identifying sources of resistance and competition
3. Determining successful strategies for public support utilized in other projects, and
4. Examining the unique locational context of Powell River.
The Powell River Context: A Market limited by Poverty and Convenience

As Smith et al. ascertain, there is a positive income effect in organic consumption (2009), meaning that those with lower incomes in their study consumed fewer organic products than those with higher incomes. It is important to note that some debate exists in the academic community around this conclusion; however Smith et al. provide strong statistical evidence to support their assertions. As previously noted, because one quarter of the Powell River community lives below the poverty line, this income effect is very important to the recommendations to garner public support that will conclude this report.

Along with cost, convenience may limit support for the FCF’s products and programs in Powell River. As Peattie & Peattie explain, the consumption-type lifestyle that is facilitated by shopping at large chain grocery stores is both cheaper and more convenient to a certain set of demands than is local consumption (2009). These demands include fresh produce of any variety all year round, as well as availability of goods from around the world supplied at a cheaper price than those that are locally sourced. In order to change these demands, and foster support for local agriculture, certain expectations must be managed downward in terms of product quality, consistency and availability (Peattie & Peattie, 2009).

A New Norm: Promoting the FCF’s sustainable initiatives

Pearson & Henryks stress that in order to manage these expectations, and in order to foster support for organic initiatives, marketing is crucial. Marketing campaigns should be focused on communicating the value that local organic products provide for their extra cost, in terms of environmental, social and health benefits (Pearson & Henryks, 2008). In attempting to reach Powell River’s local farmers, marketing should focus on the benefits that the FCF will have in terms of growing the region’s local agricultural industry, and should attempt to actively identify and address their various concerns.

The question then becomes, how exactly should these marketing campaigns be formulated in order to ensure they adequately convey the benefits of local sustainable agriculture? Hall stresses that branding is critical to the success of marketing, and to ensuring that all demographics in Powell River immediately recognize the benefits associated with the FCF and its products
(2008). He describes a brand that contains both function and meaning (Hall, 2008), so therefore the FCF should market the functional benefits of consuming organics locally (no pesticides), but also the symbolic benefits (a ‘green’ lifestyle).

Though these authors present the best ways to market tangible organic products and services, public support for the Powell River FCF also depends on support for the essential values that it embodies. The FCF promotes norms of sustainability, local consumption, and local economic and agricultural development. As Smith & Paladino assert, acceptance of these subjective norms influences sustainable behavior (2010), and will inevitably encourage or hinder public support for the FCF.

The best way to encourage the adoption of these norms is through public inclusion into the decision making and planning of the FCF. As Matson et al. suggest, in order to market a FCF successfully, all stakeholders must be engaged early in the process, and be able to define their interests and areas of expertise while contributing (2001). Though this will also be discussed in the case study analysis below, it is crucial to convey the importance that public inclusion will have in the fate of the FCF. Not only will it begin to address the concerns of local farmers, but it will also allow for greater access to the Powell River community as a market for the FCF’s products and programs.

Case Study Analysis

UC Davis

Parr & Van Horn, professors at UC Davis, provide a very relevant analysis of the community based agricultural projects and educational programs at the University. They note that throughout the evolution of UC Davis’s organic agricultural projects, public inclusion has been the primary priority (Parr & Van Horn, 2006). This inclusion is facilitated by public interaction via town hall meetings and information sessions, to publicize reports and to solicit feedback from external and internal stakeholders (2006). This creates transparency that is crucial to gaining support, and in the Powell River context, for addressing concerns over the unfair advantage of a farm that is associated with a charitable entity. It would also allow for an outlet for those with
concerns to voice them directly to those who are associated with the FCF, which in itself fosters a network of connectedness that will be invaluable for creating and maintaining support.

_Providence Farm: A Therapeutic Community_

Some would argue that to use Providence Farm as a case study resource for the FCF project in Powell River would be a mistake, due to the very different mission statements and objectives of the two projects, (Providence Farm primarily seeks to accommodate and provide therapy for those with mental health issues, brain injuries and developmental disabilities). However, Providence Farm has a very intriguing aspect that will inform the recommendations of this report, which is its cooperation with the other local agricultural retailers in the region. Providence Farm both stocks its products at its own ‘food hub’, as well as at other local farmers markets (Providence Farm, 2012). In Powell River, there is currently an outdoor farmers market held on both days of the weekend during the summer, and indoors on Saturdays throughout the winter. By framing the FCF as a collaborative entity with these local farmers, rather than a competitive one, it could address some of the concerns over competition. This cooperation with existing local agricultural infrastructure would also include collaboration with Ecossentials and Sunshine Organics, and perhaps even eventually with local grocery chains (through the inclusion of a section for FCF and local produce).

_Burlinton-Intervale Community-Based Agriculture_

Macias provides valuable research that addresses the positive income effect for organic consumption that was introduced above. He argues that in order to overcome this effect, “local food projects should consider promoting programs designed for broader social inclusion” (Macias, 2008). An example of such a program would be the FCF becoming a community owned co-op, like the Intervale Farm. This type of co-op would provide cheaper products and programs to members, as well as offer products and services in exchange for volunteer opportunities. The co-op members would also elect the FCF’s board of directors, (though not the directors of the agricultural education program). Although this would mean less control for SALSA, it would foster entrenched public participation and inclusion, and could address the concerns over the viability of a market limited by poverty. It could also promote even greater transparency, a
concern for those that think the FCF will benefit unjustly from its association with a charitable entity.

*Sunnyvale Full Circle Farm*

The Sunnyvale FCF, located in California, has been incredibly successful in partnering with local schools to create ‘educational gardens’ to teach children the benefits of local sustainable agriculture (Newmann, 2011). This further validates the Powell River FCF’s desired educational partnerships, and provides a very positive example of how to use these partnerships beneficially. The Sunnyvale FCF also fosters a ‘box program’, in which members of the community receive a box of fresh produce weekly for a monthly fee of $300. Although Sunshine Organics, a partner company of Ecossentials, currently runs a very small-scale program in Powell River, partnership with the FCF will allow for its expansion and greater market access.

**Original Research**

As mentioned previously, the original research component of this report has been limited by the FCF’s development timeline. The project’s business plan is yet to be finalized and has not been made public, nor have the formal community and educational partnerships been established. Therefore it would have been too early to reach out to the public via surveys or questionnaires, and could have made the project vulnerable to preemptive criticism. Instead of conducting detailed original research, this report is a macro-scale theoretical attempt to provide SALSA with direction in establishing public support for the FCF.

**Recommendations**

The recommendations included in this report are divided into those directed at local farmers, and those directed at the general community. This is due to the resistance voiced by local farmers and the PR Agricultural Association, which requires specific and separate strategies to foster support. However, all of these recommendations, whether for local farmers or for the larger community, primarily focus on consumer education and inclusion, branding, sustainable norm
creation, addressing the positive income effect for organic consumption, and addressing concerns over the FCF.

*Powell River Farmers*

Because of the presence of a strong and vocal local farming community, this report proposes that the FCF adopt strategies for inclusion of these farmers into the planning process for the farm, as well as into its everyday functioning. This could be accomplished through a ‘design charrette’ process, but could also be through volunteer opportunities or mentorship in the agricultural education program. Providing the farming community with an opportunity to feel as though they are stakeholders in the farm will encourage them to become stakeholders, and to value the FCF for both the intrinsic principles it promotes, and the functional benefits it will have for the farming community. This in turn, will serve to inform these farmers as to the good intentions of the farm, which is attempting to grow and stabilize the local agricultural industry in Powell River.

*General Public*

For many of the general public, it is not convenient to buy produce locally and seasonably, nor is it realistic to ask consumers to spend more time and money to do so. Thus this report recommends that the FCF, in partnership with Sunshine Organics, expand the current ‘box program’ to reach more of the Powell River community, and offer the service at a reasonable price that will encourage consumption.

Powell River’s general public need to be educated about the benefits that the FCF offers their community. This report recommends doing so through the production of educational tools that advertise farm activities and products. In order to distribute these tools, and ensure they are visible, the FCF needs to pursue very ambitious branding and marketing strategies. These strategies should be highly visible, and should convey the environmental and social benefits that the FCF will have for Powell River. To achieve this, this report recommends, along with traditional advertising, a strategy similar to that used by Saanich Organics on Vancouver Island. Although this farm was not included in my case study examination (due to limited available
information), it has a very innovative e-commerce business model that offers online ordering and product information.

Finally, the common thread throughout my literature and case study review has been that public inclusion is crucial to the success of community-based agriculture. The public in Powell River, like the local farmers, need to be included in decision making and need to be given a stake in the FCF. This report recommends doing this through meetings, surveys, open houses, planning sessions, and any other means possible. As briefly mentioned in previously, it appears as though agricultural co-ops have greater success in fostering public inclusion, simply due to their structural nature. However, because SALSA would like to retain a degree of control over the FCF, this may not be a viable alternative at this time.

Directions for Future Research

Limitations of this Report

Because this research report included very limited original research, it is recommended that the FCF pursue extensive public consultation via surveys and questionnaires in the future. Determining what exactly the public would like to see in the FCF’s programs and products would be extremely helpful in garnering support and fostering participation, and would establish whether the values of the community and the farm are aligned.

A further limitation of this report is the necessarily brief discussion of local politics as a factor that will have a very influential role in determining the fate of the FCF. It appears as though Powell River’s local political atmosphere is fairly volatile, and this report made no attempt to factor this into its recommendations directly, beyond the concerns of local farmers.

Future Research

Moving forward with the FCF, there are several directions that SALSA should investigate further. The first is the notion of the FCF’s for-profit social enterprise initiatives becoming a co-op, which would have a very positive influence on gaining community support and encouraging participation, though this would necessarily mean less direct control for SALSA.
The next is the adoption of extensive e-commerce and other Internet resources for the FCF, which would include scheduling of the farms programs, and also ordering farm products. Although the viability of a strategy such as this remains untested in Powell River, it would inevitably lead to greater access to the FCF, and would increase the convenience of consuming locally, seasonally, and organically.
References


