



SOUTH OKANAGAN | SIMILKAMEEN'S

VitalSigns®

2025 Spotlight on Food Security

Our Thoughts



Welcome to the South Okanagan Similkameen’s 2025 Vital Signs: Spotlight on Food Security Report!

Let’s be honest. In a country like Canada, and a region like the South Okanagan Similkameen, there should be no excuse for people going hungry. We are a wealthy nation and region, with abundant food production. The fact that people from all walks of life are experiencing food insecurity is inexcusable.

In recent years, we’ve seen a sharp increase in grant requests tied to food access. The demand for community food programs is steadily growing and rapidly outstripping their capacity. New individuals are arriving at their doors every day, many needing support for the first time in their lives. They include seniors, families, and working folks who simply can’t make ends meet.

After years of making small grants to these programs, the Community Foundation decided to make food security our three year “impact focus.” The idea was to direct more attention and resources to understanding the problem at a local level, and then try to pull some systems-level levers to create lasting change. This report is part of that work.

The Community Foundation’s Strategic Plan will guide this report’s impact:

As Brokers, we will make it available to those working in food security, as a tool to support their work;

As Catalysts, we will use it to continue to place food security at the forefront of our own work, and to promote its importance to other stakeholders in our community;

As Facilitators, we will continue to convene the many groups engaged in food security work to increase their effectiveness and realize the benefits of collaboration;

As Advocates, we will make the case for ongoing food security work in our communities at local, regional, and provincial tables.

We thank Kristi Tatebe and the team at Kwantlen Polytechnic University’s [Institute for Sustainable Food Systems](#) for compiling the research for this report. We are also grateful to Lisa Deargle for bringing the data to life through the report’s design.

Thanks for reading. We welcome you to join us in charting a path toward a more food-secure future.

Kevin Ronaghan

Community Investments Manager
Community Foundation of the South
Okanagan Similkameen (CFSOS)

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Ntámłqan Community Garden

The Community Foundation of the South Okanagan Similkameen recognizes that we live and work on the unceded homelands of the nsyilxcən-speaking Syilx people.

We honour their deep and enduring relationship with these Lands and Waters, and are grateful for their stewardship since time immemorial. As we support sustainable, connected communities, we commit to listening, learning, and working in ways that respect and uphold Indigenous knowledge, rights, and leadership.

2025 Vital Signs: Spotlight on Food Security

The Community Foundation's Vital Signs reports have traditionally provided a broad snapshot of our region's well-being. Over the years, one theme has consistently surfaced across the data and in community conversations: food security.

That is why this year's Vital Signs report takes a different approach. Rather than examining many issue areas, we are devoting this full report to food security. This focus allows us to look deeply at how interconnected issues— income, housing, environment, and health—shape people's ability to feed themselves and their families well. By doing so, we hope to highlight both the challenges and the opportunities for building a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable food system in our region.

Geography

In keeping with the CFSOS's granting and community work, the South Okanagan Similkameen is defined as the **City of Penticton, District of Summerland, Towns of Oliver, Osoyoos, and Princeton, Village of Keremeos, Regional District South Okanagan Similkameen's Electoral Areas A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and I, and reserves of the snpink'tn, Osoyoos, and Upper and Lower Similkameen bands.**

All efforts have been made to focus on data from this geographic area, but occasionally narrower or broader geographies are measured. For example, the Okanagan Health Service Delivery Area includes, but is not limited to, the South Okanagan Similkameen.

What is food security?

According to the World Food Programme, food security exists when people have access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development, and an active and healthy life.¹

In the South Okanagan Similkameen, food security means ensuring that all residents, whether in urban centres, rural communities, or on agricultural lands, have consistent access to affordable, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food that is produced and shared within our region.



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Vital Signs is a community check-up conducted by community foundations across Canada that measures the vitality of our communities and identifies significant trends in a range of areas critical to quality of life.

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Food Availability

Food Production & Imports

To be food secure, we need enough food produced locally to meet our needs. In 2021, farms in the Regional District of Okanagan Similkameen (RDOS) supplied only 9% of what residents eat.²

We have 161,894 acres of farmland and produce over 107,000 tonnes of food annually, but most of this is tree fruit grown for export rather than local consumption. This means we rely heavily on imports to fill our grocery shelves and provide variety for a healthy diet, making us vulnerable to global supply chain disruptions.

With changes to how we use farmland and value local food, our region could potentially meet up to 70% of our own food needs.³

To feed ourselves, we import 41,000 tonnes of food from across BC, Canada, and the world.²

Farm Viability

Local farms are at the heart of our food system, and keeping them viable is becoming more challenging. While productivity and gross revenues may be up, many farmers are struggling due to rising costs and low returns.⁴ Many farms today depend on off-farm income, government support, or other employment to make ends meet.

Farmers are also aging, land is expensive, and succession plans are often missing. All of this puts our local food production at risk, making it harder for the next generation to step in.

Farm Income (BC-wide):

The average farm income in BC was \$106,000⁵ in 2021, but the median income was just \$19,000.⁶ That means half of all farms earned less than \$19,000. A few high-earning farms raise the average, but most farms make far less.

Average Farm Income (BC): \$106,000

Median Farm Income (BC): \$19,000

Farmland Costs:⁷

The prohibitive cost of farmland is one reason that approximately 50% of BC's land protected in the Agricultural Land Reserve is not used for farming⁸

Okanagan average: \$40,500/acre

- Range in Okanagan: \$29,600–\$120,000/acre

Southern Alberta (by comparison): \$5,000/acre

- Our new farmers face high prices for agricultural land: 8 times those faced by farmers in Southern Alberta.⁷

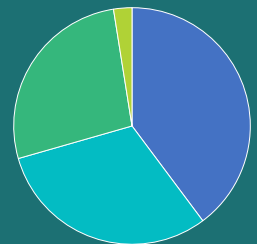


The Agricultural Landscape in the RDOS:

- ▶ 1,231 farms⁹
- ▶ 161,894 acres of farmland⁹
- ▶ 240,508 acres in the ALR¹⁰
- ▶ 26,064 acres in active crop production¹¹
- ▶ 527,452 sq. ft. of greenhouse space¹¹

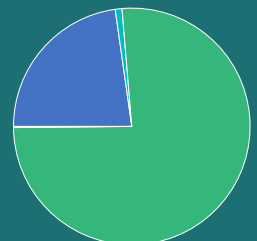
Land in Production (acres)

- vegetables: 629
- hay: 6,754
- fruit: 7,717
- grapes: 9,980



Food Production (thousands of tonnes)

- dairy, eggs, honey: 0.17
- root vegetables: 0.75
- edible vegetables: 24.5
- edible fruit: 82



Average age of farmers in the RDOS: 58.2 years¹²

Total Farmers: 1,750

55 and over: 1,155

35-54 years: 545

under 35 years: 50

Of 1,231 farms, 851 (69%) do not have a succession plan.¹³

- High land costs and low incomes make it difficult for young farmers to get started, and harder to keep farmland in food production.

Food Availability Farm Labour

In the South Okanagan Similkameen, agriculture relies on a mix of domestic and migrant labour. In 2021, farms employed 643 full-time, 348 part-time year-round, and 2,984 seasonal or temporary workers.¹⁴ Many of the seasonal positions are filled through the Federal Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program by workers from countries like Mexico, Guatemala, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic.

While their employers take on extra costs, such as flights, housing, and transportation, these workers are essential. They consistently perform physically demanding roles that are tough to fill locally, especially on farms where the land makes mechanization difficult.

Despite their critical contributions, migrant workers often face social isolation and barriers to fair treatment. Some live and work under challenging conditions, with limited ability to advocate for themselves due to the precarious nature of their employment.

Support & advocacy groups working for change:

- [RAMA – Radical Action with Migrants in Agriculture](#)
- [Dignidad Migrante Society](#)
- [Migrant Workers Centre \(MWC\)](#)
- [SOICS - South Okanagan Immigrant and Community Services](#)

Backyard Gardens

While we don't have hard numbers, it's clear that many residents grow their own food at home. Backyard gardens can yield a surprising amount of fresh produce through the summer months. To support this, the City of Penticton has updated its Zoning Bylaw to allow urban agriculture (growing food for sale) in all city zones, making it easier for small-scale growers to operate.¹⁵

Community Gardens

Community gardens offer more than just fresh veggies; they build community, encourage sharing of food knowledge, and make growing food more accessible. We discovered 8 community gardens across our region through our research; there are likely many more.

Community Gardens, by community:

Cawston/Keremeos

- Inclusive Community Gardens Society (Keremeos)

Penticton

- Penticton Community Garden (Vancouver Ave.)
- Incredible Edible Penticton (Hastings St.)
- Parkland Community Garden (Baskin St.)

Princeton

- Princeton and District Community Services Society Community Garden

Summerland

- Summerland Alliance Church

Oliver/Osoyoos

- Oliver Community Garden
- Osoyoos Community Garden (Sonora Community Centre)

Take Action:

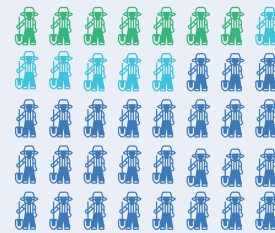
How can we help support our local farmers and keep them farming?

- Buying locally-grown products whenever possible
- Reading labels and asking about product origins
- Shopping at farm stands, fruit stands, and farmers' markets

This helps direct more funds to our local farmers and build the local food economy. Stocking up on fresh local produce in season, and learning to preserve the harvest, makes us less reliant on imported food.

Labour Snapshot

In 2021, farmers in the Okanagan Similkameen employed over 3,900 people.



➤ 643 full-time year-round employees

➤ 348 part-time year-round employees

➤ 2,984 seasonal or temporary workers

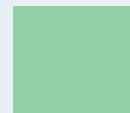
The Lower Similkameen

Community Services Society's Seasonal Worker Program serves 100-150 foreign workers annually in Keremeos, Olalla, and Cawston.

Many other foreign workers are employed in communities throughout the region.



The Lower Similkameen Community Services Society provides services to foreign workers in the Similkameen including welcome packages, outreach visits, transportation, bicycle loans, social events, and health and wellness days. **Temporary foreign workers (TFW) in the Similkameen are viewed as an integral part of their communities**, as evidenced by the standing ovation received every year by the migrant workers in the Keremeos Rodeo parade.



78 hrs/week

Average weekly hours worked by TFW¹⁶



35.08 hrs/week

Average weekly hours worked by BC resident¹⁷

\$17.85 /hr

Minimum wage paid to TFW in BC for harvest work (2025)¹⁸

Food Access

Stores, Markets & Costs

Access to food isn't just about what's on the shelves; it's also about whether people can afford it. In the South Okanagan Similkameen region, many residents face tough choices between paying rent, filling their gas tank, or putting fresh food on the table. Even though enough food is produced or imported, too many households experience food insecurity because incomes don't stretch far enough to cover rising living costs.¹⁹

Fixed costs like housing and transportation in the Okanagan are high, and that puts extra pressure on food budgets. For some, even getting to a grocery store is a challenge, especially in rural communities or for those without access to a vehicle. Farmers' markets and community supports may provide valuable options, although they aren't accessible to everyone.

Addressing food insecurity means looking beyond food and tackling the root causes: housing affordability, wage stagnation, and systemic barriers to access.

Grocery Stores

Most communities in the region have at least one full-service grocery store, but places like Olalla and Hedley do not. This creates extra challenges, especially for residents with limited mobility. In Penticton, most full grocery stores are centrally located, leaving the outer areas served mainly by convenience or specialty shops, which often have fewer options at higher prices.

Farmers' Markets

Farmers' markets connect small and medium-scale growers directly with customers, boosting farm incomes and building relationships between producers and the community. While prices are often higher than grocery stores, reflecting the true costs of local production, markets play a vital role in supporting the regional food economy. Our region hosts four markets; the Penticton Farmers' Market is the oldest, having operated since 1991. It participates in the [BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program](#), which helps lower-income families, pregnant people, and seniors access fresh local food.

Farmers' Market

Impact at a Glance

- **4** farmers' markets in the region; Penticton, Naramata, Osoyoos, Summerland
- **\$50.6M** Annual economic impact of Thompson-Okanagan farmers' markets (2023)²⁴
 - **\$33.7M** Annual direct sales at all markets²⁵
 - **1M+** visits and **771,000** shoppers annually²⁵



Housing & Food Costs²⁰

Depending on income and family size, BC residents spend **32-81% of household income on housing**. Households may then spend **17-39% of their income on food**. That leaves little room for anything else.

Living Wage

- **Living wage in Penticton (2024): \$24.93/hour²¹**
- **Annual income at living wage (35hr/week): \$41,882**
- **Median household income (2021): \$71,000²²**

Median represents the midpoint—half of households earn more than this amount, and half earn less.

Cost of Eating Well

Canada's National Nutritious Food Basket is a tool that tracks the cost of a basic healthy diet. For a family of four in the Interior Health region, that means spending **\$1,264 every month just on food.**²⁰

In 2023, **21.8% of Canadian households were food insecure.**²³

Penticton Market Spotlight²⁶

- **\$2M+** Annual sales at Penticton Farmers' Market alone
- **1991** Year Penticton market began operations
- **90** vendors at Penticton Farmers' Market
- **350,000** annual visitors at Penticton Farmers' Market
- **\$74,097** in BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon transactions at Penticton market in 2024; \$110,000 projected for 2025

Food Access

Emergency Food Access

When the cost of living makes it difficult to afford groceries, emergency food access organizations play a vital role in filling the gap. While these programs do not address the root causes of food insecurity, they are essential in ensuring local residents don't go hungry.

Across the region, food access programs are seeing rising demand at the same time as food costs increase and donations decline. More seniors, families, and working households are turning to these supports than ever before.¹⁹ Recognizing these challenges, the Community Foundation is convening local organizations to explore shared solutions, including joint procurement, warehousing, and distribution in Penticton.

In addition to dedicated food access programs, many organizations offer food supports as part of their broader services. These include:

Penticton Access Centre – publishes the “Little Red Book” directory of resources and administers the BC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Coupon Program.

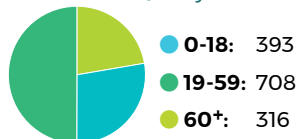
OneSky Community Resources – offers a seniors’ meal program in partnership with the Penticton Elks Club.

Penticton and District Society for Community Living – provides housing with integrated meal programs.

Lower Similkameen Community Services Society – runs the Similkameen Starfish Pack program and Meals on Wheels.

Princeton Family Services Society – offers The Belly Project, a weekly meal program that also provides opportunities for social connection and access to social supports.

Food Bank Users Age Breakdown, May 2025



Data for Penticton, Oliver & Princeton Foodbanks



1 in 5 food insecure households use food banks²⁷

As organizations vary in how they track usage, this data is a conservative estimate at best.

RDOS Food Access Organizations served:²⁸

- **13,000+** people in 2024
- **110,000+** interactions in 2024

Local Food Bank Data for Penticton, Oliver & Princeton:

- **Food insecurity spans all ages:**
50% adults, **28%** children, **22%** seniors
- **Food bank users span all income types:**
20% are employed, **5%** have no income, and the rest rely on pensions, disability, or other assistance.
- **Housing of food bank users:**
79% renters, **10%** homeowners, **2%** unhoused



Soupateria volunteers

Equity and Food Security

Food insecurity affects some communities more deeply, especially those facing long-standing barriers such as racialized groups, Indigenous nations, LGBTQ2+ people, people with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, and people involved in the justice system.⁴⁵ These inequities are systemic and ongoing, limiting opportunities for many.

Addressing these barriers is essential to achieving equity in food access. At the same time, food bank data shows food insecurity extends well beyond these groups, impacting people from all across the region.

18+ food access programs in the Region:

Penticton (7)

Salvation Army Food Bank*
Bethel Food Pantry
Oasis Food Cupboard
Penticton Community Fridge and Pantry (the Purple Pantry)
St. Vincent de Paul Hamper program
Penticton Soupateria Society
School District 67 food programming (also Summerland)

Oliver/Osoyoos (4)

Oliver Food Bank*
Desert Sun Counselling & Resource Centre
Osoyoos Community Food Bank*
School District 53 food programming

Summerland (2)

Summerland Food Bank and Resource Centre*
Summerland Seed to Feed program

Cawston/Keremeos (1)

Cawston/Keremeos Food Bank (Salvation Army Penticton)*

Princeton (3)

Princeton Community Services Society
Princeton Baptist Food Bank*
School District 58 food programming

Multiple communities (1)

Starfish Program (Penticton, Cawston)

***In May 2025, these Food Banks BC members in the region served 1,935 individuals in over 2,600 visits, including 76 first-time users. This is a 12% increase in people served compared to May 2024.²⁸**

“Since Covid ended, inflation has been the main driver, increasing visits by 40%. We mostly had clients who were living on fixed incomes, but now we are seeing more homeowners and people who got out of poverty that have slid back into it.”

Salvation Army Food Bank, Penticton

(from the 2024 Food Banks BC Hunger Report)



Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Indigenous people continue to face higher levels of food insecurity than the general population. Research shows that about one in three Indigenous people living off-reserve, and more than half living on-reserve, experience food insecurity.²⁹

Before colonization, First Nations were food sovereign, relying on traditional harvesting, stewardship, and knowledge systems that ensured healthy and sustainable foodways. Colonial practices, including residential schools and forced assimilation, disrupted these systems and continue to cause ongoing harm.

Reclaiming Indigenous food sovereignty is an important pathway to food security. It is rooted in “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”³⁰

Key Principles of Indigenous Food Sovereignty³¹

1. **Sacred or Divine Right to Food** – Upholding responsibility to care for interdependent relationships with the land, plants, and animals.
2. **Cultural Harvesting** – Continuing traditional harvesting practices at all levels.
3. **Self-Determination** – Choosing what and how to hunt, fish, gather, grow, and eat; reducing reliance on corporate food systems.
4. **Policy Alignment** – Reconciling Indigenous food values with colonial laws and economic systems.



Syilx Perspectives: The Four Food Chiefs

The Syilx creation story “How Food Was Given” shares the teachings of the Four Food Chiefs;

- Skəmxist (Black Bear),
- N’tyxtix (Spring Salmon),
- Sp’iłam (Bitterroot),
- and, Siya? (Saskatoon Berry), who collectively provided for humanity’s needs.

Beyond describing traditional food sources, the story guides governance, wellness, and community practices, emphasizing care for the land and the interconnectedness of all life.

To read the story of the four Food Chiefs and to learn more about building community, food security, and Indigenous food sovereignty, go here:

www.ntamtqencommunity.garden/the-four-food-chiefs

Ooknakane Friendship Centre, snpink’tn

The Ooknakane Friendship Centre supports the health, wellness, and prosperity of Indigenous people living off-reserve in snpink’tn (Penticton). Programming is diverse, and includes mental health services, language and signage programs, health and wellness supports, social service navigation, and food programming.

“Food is therapy,” says Shauna Fox, the Centre’s Executive Director. When visitors walk in the front door, they are greeted by a variety of food and drink options in the reception area. The Centre also hosts regular family dinners: w building community, supporting healing, and nurturing culture through food.

Food plays a significant role in the Centre’s Kwu Xast program. Kwu Xast means *We Are Kind/Good/Well*; the program supports Indigenous youth facing barriers by bringing them out on the land, where they connect with elders and knowledge keepers, cultural practices, and land-based healing.

Youth in the program participate weekly in a range of traditional and non-traditional land-based activities. Seasonal traditions include berry picking, hunting, fishing, drying, butchering, smoking, canning, and tanning hides, while winter months feature moccasin making and sewing. Non-traditional activities like paintball and cycling are also offered, providing balance, fun, and connection.

Ooknakane’s programming is supported through a grant from the Community Foundation. The Friendship Centre directs the funding to where it is most needed, with an emphasis on growing the Kwu Xast program.

Learn more about Ooknakane Friendship Centre here: www.friendshipcentre.ca



Staff and volunteers at Ntámłqən Community Garden

Ntámłqən Community Garden, Smelqmix (Similkameen) valley of Syilx territory

The Ntámłqən Community Garden & Food Hub is rooted on 7.5 acres of traditional gathering place and reserve lands of the Lower Similkameen Indian Band of the Syilx people, near Cawston. Farmer Dixon Terbasket is driven by a desire to rebuild community and well-being by preserving the legacy of Indigenous food production and independence, and as a response to the systemic oppression and discrimination of First Nations people.

"I was tired of being angry about all the things we had been through and fought against," Dixon reflects. "The garden gives me an outlet, something to do, that makes a difference through tangible results."

The word Ntámłqən means "putting more than one house together," the gathering place of the people. The program builds connections by bringing together members from different reserves and Nations, settler allies, and local communities. It grows and shares fresh, nutritious food with both Syilx Okanagan Nation and settler communities, while also providing shared infrastructure for storage and processing, employment and training in sustainable food practices, and traditional teachings on the land and in the band school. The goal is a resilient, self-sufficient community that values environmental stewardship, cultural continuity, and healthy living.

Since 2024, the Community Foundation has proudly supported Ntámłqən's work with funding for community gatherings, capacity building, and infrastructure, including a grant for a new seedling greenhouse.

As it grows, Ntámłqən is restoring food sovereignty and security for the Smelqmix (Similkameen) and Syilx (Okanagan) people and local communities.



Planting season at Ntámłqən

Ntámłqən welcomes volunteers; go here to get involved: www.ntamtqencommunity.garden

Food Systems Stability, Vulnerability & Resilience

Food security isn't just about what grows in our fields. It's also about how reliably that food can make it to our tables.

In the Okanagan Similkameen, our food system faces real challenges, from climate change, supply chain disruptions, and our relative remoteness from major distribution centres. Events like the 2021 heat dome,³² the Fraser Valley floods,³³ and more recent highway closures³⁴ have shown just how vulnerable we are to interruptions.

At the same time, our region has incredible strengths: productive farmland, innovative local growers, and community-driven projects that build resilience. By looking at where we're vulnerable and where we're strong, we can better prepare for a future where local food continues to nourish our communities, even in the face of disruptions.

Post-Production: The Missing Link

Growing food is only the first step. Much of what we eat — milk, grains, meat, fruit, and vegetables — needs processing before it reaches consumers. Today, most processing happens in the Lower Mainland, meaning food often leaves the Okanagan for processing before coming back. This adds cost, increases travel, and makes us more vulnerable to disruptions in transportation and supply chains.

Local solutions are emerging: The Okanagan Food and Innovation Hub in Summerland will be expanding processing, warehousing, and storage capacity so more food can be prepared and kept right here at home. The Community Foundation is a key supporter of this project as an impact investor.

Strengthening local processing is a critical step in building a resilient regional food system.

Emergency Planning and Resilience

The RDOS is partnering with four First Nations and its six municipalities to undertake a Hazard, Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (HRVA) for each community.

The Ministry of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness (EMCR) outlines 57 hazards to be assessed, ranging from climate and weather events to diseases, to cybersecurity threats, and transportation incidents.³⁵ Food source interruption is one of the identified hazards, and local governments are exploring how to source food from the surrounding region for staff and first responders during crises.

This type of forward planning, along with strengthening local post-production, storage, and distribution, is key to building resilience, so that no matter what disruptions arise, food remains available, accessible, and affordable in the region.

Food security is now part of emergency planning in the RDOS.



Plot Twist Farms, Naramata Bench (Penticton)

Transportation and Remoteness

Being located far from major grocery distribution hubs means the South Okanagan Similkameen depends on a small number of highways to bring food in and move local products out. Landslides, floods, and wildfires have all caused closures in recent years, highlighting the importance of both local food self-reliance and redundant transportation routes.

Getting Here Isn't Easy

Our region relies on two key highways:

- Highway 97 north to the Coquihalla and Trans-Canada
- Highway 3 east-west through Keremeos

When these routes close, our food supply is at risk. In 2023, landslides on both Highway 3 and Highway 97³⁶ cut off major connections, while wildfires and floods added further disruptions. With the nearest major grocery distribution centres hundreds of kilometres away, even short-term closures have big impacts on food security.

Did you know? Penticton is located 419 kms by road from Vancouver, 666 kms from Calgary, and 956 kms from Edmonton. These are the nearest major grocery distribution centres.²

Moving Food: Transportation & Logistics

Getting food to where it's needed, especially in rural and outlying communities, remains one of the biggest challenges for food security in our region.

For example, while there is often ample local produce in season, transporting it to food access organizations and households in need is still a major barrier.



Transporting produce along Highway 3A

Climate Change Impacts

Climate change is already reshaping agriculture in the Okanagan Similkameen. Farmers are facing more extreme weather — heat waves, droughts, floods, and wildfires — that directly threaten crops and livelihoods.

By the 2050s, average temperatures will be warmer year-round, with summers especially hot and dry, and winters milder with less snowfall. The hottest summer days, which historically reached around 36°C, are projected to climb by **4–5°C by the 2050s** and up to **7°C by the 2080s**, pushing valley bottom highs well above 43°C. What was once considered an extreme “1-in-20 year” heat event will soon be a normal summer occurrence.³⁷

Growing seasons are also changing. In the past, farmers could expect about **243 frost-free days each year**. By the 2050s, that season could be extended by more than a month, and by the 2080s by almost two months. In some areas, that will mean more than **10 months of growing time each year**.³⁷ It’s an opportunity, but also a challenge if water and crop resilience cannot keep pace.

Winters will also warm, with average temperatures projected to **rise by 6°C by the 2050s** and **10°C by the 2080s**. Warmer winters may sound beneficial, but climate change brings volatility: unexpected frosts, sudden cold snaps, and freeze-thaw cycles that can severely damage sensitive crops like tree fruits and wine grapes. The frost events of 2023 and 2024 were stark reminders of these risks.³⁸

Overall, the region’s climate is shifting toward longer, hotter, and more variable seasons. While some of these changes could extend opportunities for growing, they also increase uncertainty and risk for producers and the food system as a whole.



Climate Change Indicators

RDOS Region <i>Valley Bottoms</i>	Past/ Current	2050’s	2080’s
Hottest Summer Days	35.8°	40.2°	42.8°
Summer Days above 30°	28	61	82
Growing season length	243	287	316
Spring precipitation (mm)	82	94	99
Summer precipitation (mm)	96	82	74
Autumn precipitation (mm)	74	83	90
Winter precipitation (mm)	76	83	90

Water: The Limiting Factor

Water is at the heart of our food system. In a semi-arid region like the Okanagan, it’s also our biggest constraint.

Agriculture accounts for 70% of the Okanagan’s water use.³⁹ In hot, dry years, that demand can climb by as much as 40% — just as supply drops.³

The challenge is that peak water demand comes in the summer, when rainfall and stream flows are lowest. Farmers rely on early-season storage in reservoirs to carry them through, but climate change is expected to both increase demand and reduce supply, creating the real possibility of future shortages.

What we grow also matters: alfalfa is the thirstiest crop, while grapes use the least water, followed by most vegetables.³ With warmer, longer growing seasons on the horizon, coordinated and forward-looking water management will be essential to keep our food system sustainable.

Despite what seems like an abundance of water around us, the Okanagan Basin has the lowest per person water supply in Canada.⁴⁰ **The impacts of a growing population and climate change point to a real risk of water shortages in future growing seasons.**

Food security depends on both local resilience & strong planning for future risks.

Irrigation in the Similkameen Valley



Food Systems Sustainability

A sustainable food system is one that meets today's needs without compromising the ability of future generations to feed themselves.⁴¹ In the South Okanagan Similkameen, agriculture is both essential to our economy, and a key factor in the health of our ecosystems. While many farmers are adopting regenerative practices that protect soil, conserve water, and support biodiversity, large-scale monocultures serving global markets remain dominant—placing pressure on land, water, and habitats, and contributing to greenhouse gas emissions.

Since settlement, **11% of BC's Southern Interior grasslands have been converted for farming.** Agriculture has been the primary driver behind the loss of 63% of the Okanagan's black cottonwood ecosystems and 75% of wetlands in the Okanagan Valley and Fraser River Delta.⁴²

Many local producers are adopting practices that help reverse these trends, from organic farming and polyculture to wildlife habitat restoration and nutrient cycling. In 2021, **113 farms in the RDOS listed organic products for sale, representing 22% of all organic farms in BC.**⁴³ These efforts demonstrate that farming and environmental stewardship can go hand in hand.

Our Food Footprint³

- In 2016, the Okanagan Bioregion's food consumption had a total ecological footprint of **470,000 global hectares (gha)**. That's **1.3 gha per person** for food alone.
- The Okanagan Bioregion includes the Okanagan Similkameen, Central Okanagan, and North Okanagan Regional Districts.
- It's estimated that there is only **1.6 gha per person** available to meet all our resource needs (food, housing, clothing, transport, etc.).
- The ecological footprint of the food system is taking up **81%** of our "fair earth share" when it should be closer to **25%**.
- **Takeaway:** We need to shrink the footprint of our food system and reduce overconsumption in other areas.

Agriculture & Climate Impact

- **Agriculture in the region produced 113,000 tonnes of greenhouse gases (CO₂e), which is about 5% of BC's total farm emissions. (2016)**



Nutrient Needs & Recycling

- Crops needed **10,800 tonnes** of nutrients in 2016.
- We had **14,100 tonnes** available, mostly from manure, food waste, and human excreta.
- Using local nutrient sources could cut reliance on synthetic fertilizers and keep excess nutrients out of waterways.



Farmer Tom (left) and Farmer Jeff of Garnett Hollow Farm - LocalMotive

Practicing Regenerative Agriculture: Garnett Hollow Farm

Celina and Thomas Tumbach's Garnett Hollow Farm in Summerland is a model of organic and regenerative farming. Through the **LocalMotive Farmers Network Cooperative**, they supply households, fruit stands, and retailers across the region. On their 12 acres, they invest in soil health using compost, mulching, and diverse cropping, while protecting surrounding natural areas. This approach benefits pollinators and climate resilience. As Thomas explains, this helps safeguard farms themselves. **"Undeveloped natural areas are highly beneficial around farms...the diversity of trees, shrubs, and flowers maintains higher numbers of native pollinators and beneficial insects."**

Wildlife Habitat Capacity

- Agricultural lands scored **72/100** - high for habitat value because many farms include grasslands, woodlands, or riparian areas.
- Properly managed farmland can enhance habitat quality, but poor practices risk damaging some of the region's most sensitive ecosystems, especially riparian areas in valley bottoms.

Carbon Storage

- Non-agricultural perennial woody vegetation in the region stores **3.7 million tonnes** of carbon. *That's like taking 2.9 million cars off the road for a year.*
- Orchards, vineyards, and grasslands store vast amounts of carbon, making their protection vital for both climate and ecosystem health.

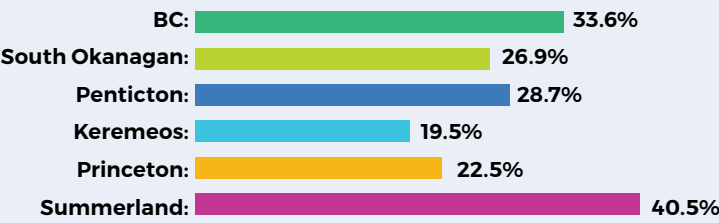
Eating Well

Food Consumption & Nutrition

Good nutrition is about more than just having enough food. It's about having the right variety to meet people's health needs and personal or cultural preferences. It also depends on **having the skills and knowledge to prepare healthy meals, known as food literacy.**

While our region lacks detailed data on nutrition, food safety, and food literacy, we can look at one key measure: the percentage of people who eat five or more servings of fruits or vegetables each day. This is a useful indicator of diet quality when other information isn't available.

Percentage of residents eating 5+ servings of fruit/vegetables per day:⁴⁴



Looking Forward Conclusion

Food security isn't just about food. It's about everything that surrounds it: income, housing, transportation, climate, culture, and community. That's what makes it such a complex challenge. No one organization or individual can solve it on their own.

It takes governments, non-profits, farmers, and citizens working together to make sure everyone has reliable access to healthy food. The good news is that our region is full of passionate people rising to this challenge: farmers who grow and innovate, food access organizations that share and support, and community advocates who strive to ensure no one is left behind.

At the end of the day, we are all *eaters*. Each of us can make a difference, whether by buying local, learning more about where our food comes from, sharing knowledge, or even growing our own food.

This report highlights several key areas for continued effort, but collaboration is at the heart of it. Coordination among the many food access groups has already created stronger connections. As one community



Penticton Community Garden

Food Literacy: Skills for a Resilient Future

Our communities once had strong generational knowledge in food preservation skills like canning, dehydrating, and processing seasonal produce. These skills helped families stay nourished year-round, but they are less common today.

Rebuilding this knowledge can help increase our food self-reliance, especially when paired with food rescue programs, emergency food services, and community kitchens. There may be opportunities to grow these skills through partnerships with local schools, food hubs, and culinary training programs.

partner put it, *"We've found that a huge change has taken place within the food giving community — we are all looking out for each other much more now, working together and finding mutual solutions for our challenges."*

Beyond collaboration, it's clear that tackling root causes like housing, poverty, and income insecurity remains essential. Initiatives like **100 More Homes Penticton** and the **City of Penticton's Social Development Framework**, show that progress is possible when we link food to broader social priorities.

Looking ahead, investments in post-production, storage, and distribution infrastructure will strengthen local resilience. Projects like the Okanagan Food and Innovation Hub in Summerland are poised to make a difference, with the Community Foundation and other partners helping to support and convene this work.

By continuing to come together — sharing resources, ideas, and responsibility — we can build a stronger, more resilient food system that serves everyone in our community.

Why Food Security?

The Community Foundation's growing involvement with food security in the South Okanagan Similkameen

In 2023, the Community Foundation of the South Okanagan Similkameen made a pivotal decision: to make food security the impact focus of our strategic plan. This choice was not made lightly. It came from listening to our communities, recognizing the increasing volume of food-related grant requests, and engaging with local organizations who are working tirelessly to respond to growing needs.

We believe that food security is a gateway issue, one that touches every other aspect of community well-being. Access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food directly affects health outcomes, economic stability, environmental resilience, and social equity. By making food security central to our strategy, we are positioning the Foundation to:

- **Catalyze change** by investing in collaborative, innovative approaches to local food systems.
- **Convene partners** across sectors, ensuring food security efforts are coordinated, not fragmented.
- **Champion equity** by supporting solutions that give voice and choice to all residents, particularly those that are most vulnerable.

Food security is not just about meeting immediate needs. It is about shaping a healthier, more caring, and thriving South Okanagan Similkameen for generations to come.



A Word from our Sponsor



A DIVISION OF FIRST WEST CREDIT UNION

Food insecurity is one of the biggest challenges our communities face today. At Valley First, we're proud to partner with the Community Foundation of the South Okanagan Similkameen's Vital Signs report, because behind every number is a real story and real people—*our neighbours, friends, coworkers, and loved ones whose wellbeing is at risk.*

Supporting food security isn't just a part of what we do—it's at the heart of who we are as a financial cooperative. Through fundraising, partnerships and community-led programs, we recognize that it is about more than just meals. It's about dignity, health, and fair access to nutritious food.

That's why we launched Feed the Valley in 2010, an initiative designed to raise food, funds, and awareness

Feed the Valley volunteers & contributors



for local food bank partners. Thanks to the generosity of our members, community, and team members, we've raised over \$3.19 million and collected more than 108,000 pounds of food for 10 food bank partners across the Okanagan, Similkameen and Thompson Valley.

We're also investing in local agriculture—supporting community gardens, workshops, and initiatives that promote food security, economic inclusion, and climate resilience.

Tackling food insecurity is a shared responsibility and a shared opportunity. Together, we can build a future where no one goes hungry.

Simon Mills, President

Valley First, a division of First West Credit Union

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2025 Spotlight on Food Security

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How to Use this Report:

**START CONVERSATIONS.
TAKE ACTION.**

Share It

Pass it on to friends, neighbours, colleagues,
schools, libraries, or even elected officials. The more
people who see it, the richer the conversation.

Talk About It

Use this report to spark conversations about food. Ask:

- How can we strengthen local food access?
- What role can preservation, processing, and storage play?
- Where can organizations work together to reduce gaps?

Sharing ideas helps build awareness and solutions for
a more resilient food system.

Take Action

Small steps add up to big change and make a big difference.

- Volunteer with a local food access organization (even an hour helps!)
- Learn about Indigenous agricultural history in the South Okanagan Similkameen
- Support local food producers and businesses
- Grow a row of food for those in need



For more information on the Community
Foundation's food security work, visit:
www.cfso.net/food-security

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