



MAKING INFORMED FOOD CHOICES

ACTION CANADA 2018/2019
TASK FORCE REPORT

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DISCLAIMER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The decisions Canadians make every day about food have wide-reaching implications. Food is a major factor in our health, a big part of what Canadians spend their money on, a significant part of our social and cultural practices and something that has major impact on the environment. Yet, a lack of information about these aspects of food makes it difficult for Canadians to make informed food choices.

Our Task Force set out to address this by considering what policy decisions could improve Canadians' ability to make informed food choices. We explored this topic during our study tours in Saskatchewan, Montreal, Toronto, Guelph and Ottawa and through additional consultations and research. We spoke with experts in farming, agriculture, water, nutrition, health, food security and public policy. We were struck by the wealth of information that exists about certain aspects of food, but also the major gaps in accessible information. We found that health and safety information is the focus of many of the existing food education initiatives and identified socio-cultural and environmental dimensions of food as two major areas for which more information is needed. We also recognized that overarching factors such as affordability, availability and values shape food choices.

Our Task Force envisions a future in which Canadians continue to make varied food choices, but one in which the implications of those decisions are better understood. To this end, we recommend:

- 1** *Government and industry develop a standardized, interactive label and associated online platform;*
- 2** *Governments support research aiming to identify and assess the environmental and socio-cultural dimensions of food; and*
- 3** *Governments create food forums in which representatives of civil society and food experts and practitioners can talk about food issues, with a view to more inclusive policy development.*





***First we eat,
then we do
everything else.***

M.F.K Fisher, American food writer

INTRODUCTION

From sitting at the kitchen table browsing grocery store flyers or picking through produce at a market to standing in line at a cafeteria or scrolling through options on food-delivery apps, Canadians make choices about food every day. These daily choices affect not only our economy, but also our health, socio-cultural fabric and environment.

Despite the importance of food choices, Canadians' knowledge about food is limited. A full 93 percent of Canadians know little or nothing about farming¹ and Canadians' knowledge about how to safely handle and prepare food is decreasing.² These limitations impede Canadians' ability to make informed food choices.

Our Task Force set out to address this information deficit by asking ourselves what it would look like for Canadians to be better informed in making food choices. Through our research and consultations,

we learned from existing food-literacy initiatives that have traditionally been focused on providing nutritional information and food preparation skills and identified ways to better address the socio-cultural and environmental dimensions of food. In so doing, we envision a future in which Canadians continue to make varied choices, but one in which they better understand the implications of those choices.

¹ Canadian Centre for Food Integrity. 2016. [2016 Canadian Public Trust Research](#), p.14.
² Health Canada. 2018. [Survey of Canadian's Knowledge and Behaviours Related to Food Safety](#). p. 2.

CONSIDERATIONS

Food consumption as a choice is not a given for all. Those being fed by institutions, such as shelters, hospitals and prisons are limited by what is on offer. For them, the food choices institutions make will define their diet. More generally, even those who make their own choices are limited by several factors, including:

Income: As of 2014, one in eight households in Canada, more than four million people, experienced food insecurity, ranging from worrying about running out of food to going whole days without eating, due to financial constraints.³ This insecurity is even more prevalent in northern and remote communities. Nunavut has the highest levels of household food insecurity at 46.8 percent.⁴ Furthermore, in 2018, food prices in Canada were expected to rise between one percent to three percent⁵ while wage growth in the country was a meager one percent in the same year.⁶

Availability: Canadians are limited in their food choices by what is available from vendors, such as grocery stores, corner stores, restaurants and markets. For example, a person can decide which local grocery store to frequent, but the average customer will have little to no direct say on what the store stocks. This is true in northern and remote communities or in food deserts⁷ in urban settings where affordable, accessible choices are limited.⁸

Values: Personal ethics, religion, philosophy and politics all influence our food choices and those things are themselves shaped by experience, education, knowledge and socio-cultural environment. For example, those who follow a particular religion may see it as important to ensure their food choices align with the teachings of their faith.

Though it is not the focus of our project, we recognize that taste is a consideration permeating food choices. This can inform people's decisions to opt for fresh, high-quality produce as much as it can inform their decision to reach for highly processed options.

3 Tarasuk, V. Mitchell, A. and Dachner, N. 2014. [Household food insecurity in Canada - 2012](#). PROOF.

4 Tarasuk, V. Mitchell, A. and Dachner, N. 2016. [Household Food Insecurity in Canada - 2014](#). PROOF.

5 Dalhousie University and Guelph University. 2018. [Canada's Food Price Report - 2019](#).

6 Statistics Canada. 2019. [Average usual hours and wages by selected characteristics, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality \(x 1,000\)](#).

7 A food desert is an area characterized by poor access to healthy and affordable food – Beaulac, J. et al. 2009. A [Systematic Review of Food Deserts, 1966-2007](#). In Preventing Chronic Disease.

8 De Sousa, R.J. and al. 2018. [Environmental health assessment of communities across Canada: contextual factors study of the Canadian Alliance for Healthy Hearts and Minds](#). In Cities & Health.

CONTEXT

1

CANADIANS SPEND A LOT OF MONEY ON FOOD AND IT IS A LARGE PART OF THE ECONOMY.

Canadians currently spend about 14 percent of their expendable (after-tax) income on food. This is their third-highest expense after shelter and transport. On average, a household spends \$8,000 on food annually, two thirds in grocery stores and the remainder in restaurants. The lowest income quintile of Canadians spends roughly \$4,700 per year on food whereas the highest quintile spends \$13,700.⁹ These figures mean Canadians are roughly the world's 23rd-biggest food-spenders, spending more than Spain and the U.K., but less than the U.S. and France.¹⁰

Food, including consumption, production, distribution and sale, is a large piece of Canada's economy. The Canadian agri-food and agriculture industry is responsible for \$110 billion, or just less than seven percent, of Canada's GDP and employs 2.3 million people.¹¹ This industry trades a slim majority of its production outside the country,¹² but a considerable proportion is domestic consumption, with food and beverage sales alone topping \$60 billion annually.¹³

2

CANADIANS HAVE A VARIETY OF CONCERN WHEN IT COMES TO FOOD

A 2018 study by the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity found myriad concerns inform Canadians' food decisions.¹⁴ The rising cost of food was Canadians' top concern, at 67 percent, while concerns about keeping healthy food affordable, rising energy costs and rising healthcare costs tied for second place at 63 percent. A number of other concerns emerged

as significant: 54 percent of respondents indicated concerns about food safety, 50 percent indicated concerns about climate change, 49 percent indicated concerns about the human treatment of farm animals and 49 percent indicated concerns about food loss and waste.¹⁵

3

CANADIANS' LEVEL OF TRUST IN FOOD INFORMATION VARIES DEPENDING ON THE SOURCE

Levels of trust in food information depend on the nature of information, such as whether it has been scientifically and independently verified or if it includes social and environmental justice considerations. When government, industry or advocate groups present information to the public, it is not always clear how they've verified that information, what assumptions and considerations

were involved and whether the information was part of a marketing effort or material being used to champion a cause. Levels of trust also depend on the source. Some readers place greater trust in information from public institutions while others trust information disseminated by media influencers and still others trust information from well-known brands.¹⁶

9 Statistics Canada. 2017. [Survey of Household Spending](#).

10 Knoema. 2016. [Expenditures on food per capita](#).

11 Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. 2017. [An Overview of the Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food System for 2016](#).

12 *Ibid.*

13 Government of Canada. 2018. [Food Services and Drinking Places](#). In Canadian Industry Statistics - Summary.

14 We were unable to find comparable data for Canada collected by any other organization.

15 Canadian Centre for Food Integrity. [2018_2018 Public Trust Report](#). p.6.

16 Canadian Centre for Food Integrity. 2017. [2017 Public Trust Report](#). p.15-19.

METHODOLOGY

Our Task Force used several approaches to research, collect, analyze and synthesize relevant information. Though having a wide array of available information poses challenges (and a similar challenge affects food choices for Canadians, as discussed in this report), it was an opportunity for us to bring together different perspectives in forming recommendations.

Most data and information collected for this report came through primary sources. We conducted interviews (see Appendix I), a literature review and an analysis of case studies. We then turned to secondary sources such as news reports, magazine articles and commentaries. Additionally, we met with experts across Canada as a part of the Action Canada fellowship year. These experts were specialists in farming, agriculture, water, nutrition, health, food security and more.

We then analyzed the data for suitability, relevance and appropriateness for this report and as a means to formulate recommendations. Through this, the Task Force identified dimensions important in making informed food choices (Figure 1). We then consulted

additional secondary sources and conducted literature reviews and synthesized our findings into an informed food choice model. We workshopped this model, alongside final recommendations, with several experts and practitioners, and refined our report based on that feedback.

We assume that published scholarly research used was without bias and that Canadian media present stories which had been fact-checked. In the same vein, we also assumed all interview subjects answered questions honestly.



DISCUSSION

In investigating informed food choices for this project, we looked at existing information about food, what Canadians are concerned about on the topic and what major areas Canadian food choices impact. We also considered a number of existing definitions and models of food literacy and food choices, including the definition of sustainable and healthy eating patterns from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO),¹⁷ the concept of food sovereignty by the Forum for Food Sovereignty¹⁸ and the Government of Canada's four themes from its Food Policy for Canada.¹⁹

The FAO describes sustainable diets as “protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources”.

The Forum for Food Sovereignty describes food sovereignty as: “[T]he right of peoples, communities and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies, which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances (...”).

The Food Policy for Canada consultations explored four themes:

- Food Security;
- Health and Food Safety;
- Environment; and
- Economic Growth.

We then grouped these topics into categories, recognizing that they all naturally overlap. Figure 1 differentiates realities that frame food choices (affordability, availability and values) and categories of information that interest Canadians (health and safety, socio-cultural and environmental) while visualizing our understanding of what informed food choice is.

While the focus of our project is centered around exploring the three inner categories, it is important for those producing and disseminating food information to keep the forces shaping and constrain food choices (three outer categories) in mind.

FIGURE 1



17 FAO. 2010. [Sustainable Diets and Biodiversity](#).

18 La Via Campesina. 2002. [Declaration NGO Forum FAO Summit Rome+5](#).

19 Government of Canada. 2018. [What we heard: Consultations on A Food Policy for Canada](#). p.3.

HEALTH AND SAFETY DIMENSION

DEFINITION

This dimension includes general food knowledge (understanding what food that is available), nutrition knowledge (understanding how nutrients affect health and well-being) and food skills (being able to cook nutritious meals that are safe to eat).²⁰

CURRENT SITUATION

Health and safety considerations are the focus of existing consumer-oriented food information and food literacy programs.

Federally, Health Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Public Health Agency of Canada and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada are key players in ensuring that federal policy recognizes food as a key determinant of health — from creating the *Canada Food Guide* to regulating nutrition labels. The government first introduced a standardized “Nutrition Facts” label in 2003 and it became mandatory for pre-packaged food products in 2007.²¹ This intervention turned out to be successful given that more than two thirds of Canadians use food labels to help them choose what to purchase and consume.²²

Health Canada created its *Canada Food Guide* as an educational and policy tool to define and promote healthy eating among Canadians.²³ The guide has evolved since its creation in 1942 (then called *Canada's Official Food Rules*) and has been updated eight times, with the latest iteration being released in January 2019.²⁴ The content reflects the latest scientific research and convincing evidence on food, nutrients and health, often with multiple research papers or reports to support one point.²⁵ These consist of peer-

reviewed publications by academic researchers, expert panels and guidelines by international agencies, such as the World Health Organization.²⁶ The strong evidence base allows for the *Food Guide* to be considered a credible resource among health professionals and dieticians and maintain public confidence. In fact, it is the fourth most frequent resource consulted for information about healthy eating, and most Canadians have heard or seen the food guide.²⁷

20 Howard, A. and Brichta, J. 2013. [What's to Eat? Improving Food Literacy in Canada](#). p.2. (for the Conference Board of Canada); Vidgen, H. A., & Gallegos, D. 2012. “Defining food literacy and its components.” *Appetite*, 76. p. 50-59; Desjardins, E., & Azevedo, E. 2013. [“Making something out of nothing”: Food literacy Among youth, young pregnant women and young parents who are at risk for poor health](#). (A Locally Driven Collaborative Project of Public Health Ontario).

21 Health Canada. 2015. [Nutrition Labelling](#).

22 Dietitians of Canada. 2018. [Food Regulation and Labelling](#).

23 Health Canada. 2015. [Evidence review for dietary guidance](#). p.2.

24 Health Canada. 2019. [History of Food Guide](#).

25 Health Canada. 2018. [Food, nutrients and health: interim evidence update](#). p.1.

26 *Ibid.* p.4-8.

27 Health Canada. 2015. [Evidence review for dietary guidance](#). p.5.

Provincially, ministries of health and agriculture have helped ensure schools are teaching healthy eating and Canadians can access information from health practitioners to inform their eating habits.

The provinces regulate the professions of most of these health practitioners, including dieticians, nurses and physicians.

Municipally, some provinces have health units that are responsible for overseeing the health and safety of food. In Ontario, for example, these health units work with local agencies, inspecting restaurants and food stores to ensure local food complaints are resolved efficiently. Many municipalities also play a role in health education.²⁸ The City of Hamilton, for example, has a food literacy month during which it hosts events that promote healthy eating.²⁹ Similar collaborations with schools, school boards, health clinics and public libraries exist across the country.

With respect to food safety, the new *Safe Food for Canadians Regulations* and most provisions of the *Safe Food for Canadians Act* came into effect January 2019, will increase Canadians' confidence in the food they eat. The new rules say businesses must be able to trace the source of each food supplied to them (one step back) and its next destination (one step forward). At present this does not apply to restaurants and does not give customers information at the point of purchase. The core purpose of is the effectiveness and timeliness of food safety investigations and recalls,³⁰ but this data could be used to better understand other dimensions of food, such as the environmental impact of production and transportation.



In Ontario, the Community Food Advisor (CFA) program aims to improve the health and well-being of Ontarians through easy access learning opportunities provided by well-trained volunteers across the province. These community volunteers are coordinated and supervised by registered dieticians and volunteer managers at Public Health Units, community health and resource centres. Through this program, people with a love of food and some knowledge and skills in food handling, are provided with technical and leadership training. Upon successful completion of training, volunteer peer educators become certified Community Food Advisors. They then work in their community to improve and promote reliable information that advocates for safe and healthy food selection, preparation and storage practises. The CFA program was developed in 1991 by the Government of Ontario and from 2001 has been coordinated by the Ontario Public Health Association. In 2014, there were over 210 Community Food Advisors reaching 25,260 Ontarians.

28 Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. 2016. [Government Roles and Responsibilities for Food Safety in Ontario](#).

29 City of Hamilton. 2018. [Food Literacy Month](#).

30 Canadian Food Inspection Agency. 2018. [Fact Sheet: Traceability - Safe Food for Canadians Regulations](#).

FEELING UNDER-REPRESENTED

In November 2018, we spoke with Sureya Ibrahim, founder of Regent Park Catering Collective, which helps food entrepreneurs formalize and grow their businesses by providing, among other things, Food Handling Certification Training, affordable commercial kitchen space and access to market opportunities. Most members are new Canadians and stay-at-home mothers. During our conversations,³¹ Ibrahim explained that many women with whom she works first learned about Canadian food habits through their children's experiences at school, where they see different diets and learn about the *Canadian Food Guide*. She told us about how some went home wanting to limit their consumption of traditional food, because they no longer thought it was healthy or tasty. This caused some of women to question their food, even though it is, in some cases, healthier and more sustainable than the food their children learned about in school.

A similar concern emerged during public consultations on Food Policy for Canada as some Indigenous people called for greater recognition of traditional foods in the Canada Food Guide and for food literacy efforts in Indigenous and northern communities to consider their cultural preferences and practices.³²

These examples show how recognizing a greater diversity of food traditions and practices is important for multiculturalism and Reconciliation.

SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION

DEFINITION

This dimension is diverse and, above all, subjective, making it difficult to define. The process by which a food practice³³ or a food becomes socially or culturally appropriate is based on a person or a group's set of values, which can, amongst other things, be related to human dignity, means of production and preparation and consumption.³⁴ Thus, information about the socio-cultural dimension of food can take many forms. It may be a curriculum that explores the food traditions and practices of a particular group or a food packaging logo certifying it has been produced in accordance with certain religious beliefs (e.g. halal or kosher certification) or dietary choices (e.g. vegan or vegetarian).

In this report, we focus on the ethno-cultural aspect of this dimension, which is one of the many forms the socio-cultural dimension of food can take, because of Canada's undeniable ethno-cultural diversity³⁵ and the theme that emerged during our consultations that different groups feel under-represented when it comes to culturally appropriate food information.

CURRENT SITUATION

While there is no doubt good nutrition plays an important role in reducing the risk of chronic diseases and improving the health of Canadians, there is more to food than its nutritional value. As the new *Canada Food Guide* has begun to recognize, there is also a socio-cultural dimension.

Access to and dissemination of ethno-cultural food knowledge is often limited to interactions between members of a same community or group. When grocery shopping, Canadians can turn to specialized ethnic markets to buy culturally appropriate foods.

31 We first met with Sureya Ibrahim during Resetting the Table: Food Secure Canada's 10th Assembly that was held in Montreal on Nov. 1 to 4, 2018. We had a follow-up phone conversation with her after the assembly.

32 Government of Canada. 2018. [What we heard: Consultations on a Food Policy for Canada](#). p.18.

33 Food practices are here defined as any activity in which food is involved, ranging from food preparation, gifting food, sharing meals, or cleaning up – Neely, E. and al. 2014. [Young people's food practices and social relationships](#). A thematic synthesis. p.51. In *Appetite*. (82).

34 Hammelman, C. and Hayes-Conroy, 2014. [Understanding Cultural Acceptability for Urban Food Policy](#). p.41. In *Journal of Planning Literature*. 30(1).

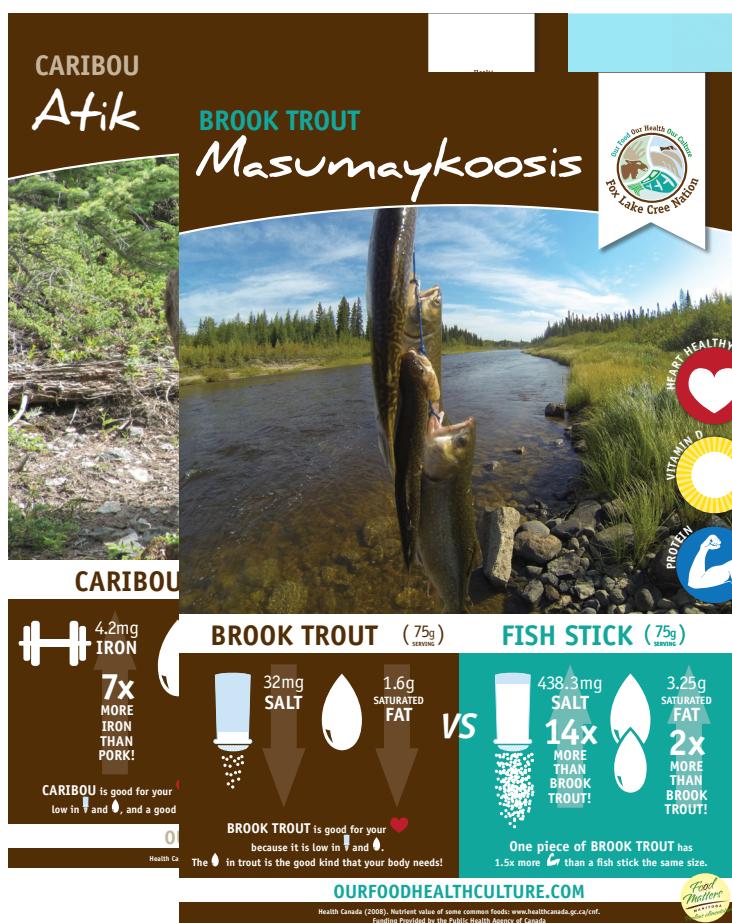
35 More than one in five Canadians are foreign-born (21.9 percent) (Statistics Canada. 2017. *Immigration and ethnocultural diversity: Key results from the 2016 Census*) while the Indigenous population has been the fastest-growing population in the country over the last decade (Statistics Canada. 2017. [Aboriginal peoples in Canada: Key results from the 2016 Census](#)).

However, due to limited economic means, geographic proximity and lack of alternatives, most Canadians shop at supermarket chains. Inside these stores, information relating to ethno-cultural values is limited.

Often, this information is limited to certain religious beliefs. Similar limitations also exist at fast-food vendors and restaurants.

The 2007 *Canada Food Guide* and related food-education initiatives were a limited source of socio-cultural food information. Health Canada translated the guide into 12 different languages, and the *My Food Guide* tool allowed Canadians to personalize the national dietary guidelines. Yet, these did not address the socio-cultural diversity of food in Canada.³⁶

The latest *Canada Food Guide*³⁷ is a marked improvement as it explicitly acknowledges the socio-cultural aspect of food, but what it presents in this respect is quite ambiguous. The only reference to the socio-cultural aspect of food in the main document is an explanation that culture and food traditions can be a part of healthy eating.³⁸ As in the previous iteration of the guide, the focus on nutrients comes at the expense of, or at least divorced from, a recognition of cultural significance. For example, wild-food access, gathering and consumption are fundamental to Inuit diets. While the guide does include a generic suggestion to “grow, harvest, fish, hunt and prepare food in traditional ways,” it does not recognize its significance as more than a performance of



We spoke with members of Food Matters Manitoba who collaborated with the Fox Lake Cree Nation in 2014 to create a series of posters to promote traditional food consumption. The foods, such as caribou or goose, that are features on the posters are among the most common country foods available through the Fox Lake community freezer program, and the campaign team chose them based on their availability, cultural significance and nutritional value. Using Health Canada data, the posters demonstrate that country foods are often healthier than store-bought alternatives, making them a powerful way to illustrate the nutritional and cultural value of wild foods. Food Matters Manitoba has started working on a follow-up series highlighting the nutritional and cultural value of wild foods with harvesters from different communities.

36 Amend, E. 2017. [My Food Guide, Their Food Guide: diversity and personalization in Canada's national dietary guidelines In Cuizine.](#) (8):1.

37 Consulting, researching and drafting recommendations for this report took place before the new *Canada Food Guide* was published. While the report has been updated to address the new version, it should be noted that the opinions of stakeholders whom we consulted were informed by the previous version of the *Canada Food Guide*.

³⁸ Government of Canada. 2019. Cultures, food traditions and healthy eating. In the Food Guide.

cultural tradition. This ignores the way in which, for example, Inuit believe that eating wild food such as seal meat is not only part of their community's identity, but also integral to their physical, mental, social and spiritual health.³⁹ By sidestepping this complexity and adopting a singular notion of nutrition that promotes plant-based proteins, the *Canada Food Guide* risks stigmatizing the cultural practices it purports to celebrate.

This guide and its related educational initiatives are not the only way that government policy plays a role in promoting the socio-cultural dimension of food. There are also government funding programs that, while not specifically targeted at the socio-cultural aspect of food, support initiatives that provide more inclusive and concrete information. For example, in 2014, the Public Health Agency of Canada, through its Innovation Strategy program, funded a successful posters initiative from the Fox Lake Cree Nation that promoted traditional food consumption. There are also initiatives internationally, such as Brazil's approach to its food guide, that demonstrate ways in which government can meaningfully seek input from the public to inform more inclusive food education.



Brazil's approach to a food guide was a major inspiration for Canada's revised *Canada Food Guide*. In November 2018, we met with Elisabetta Recine, president of the *Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional* (CONSEA).⁴⁰ Her joint forum facilitates regular dialogues at the state and federal level on food issues. It includes representatives from government and civil society, including Indigenous and Afro-Brazilians. Amongst other achievements, CONSEA helped develop Brazil's food guide, which has become a model internationally. The innovative visual guide represents Brazil's socio-cultural diversity through examples of different "balanced plates," according to the regional and cultural diversity of Brazil. While the social aspect of food was picked up Canada's new *Food Guide*, Canada has not yet adopted the CONSEA model or introduced variations on balanced meals tailored to regional and cultural diversity.⁴¹

39 Organ, J. et al. 2014. *Contemporary programs in support of traditional ways: Inuit perspectives on community freezers as a mechanism to alleviate pressures of wild food access in Nain, Nunatsiavut*. p. 251. In *Health and Place*. (30).

40 This description comes from our interaction with Professor Recine at the Food Secure Canada conference, held in Montreal on Nov. 1 to 4, 2018.

41 On Jan. 1, 2019, CONSEA was abolished on the same day that President Jair Bolsonaro took office. It still needs to be approved by Congress, and, as of the time of writing this — Jan. 30, 2019 — it is still in place.

ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION

DEFINITION

This dimension refers to the environmental impact and sustainability of food choices, including the way we grow, process and deliver food to consumers. Factors such as land and water use, carbon footprints and greenhouse gas emissions, transport, packaging and impact on biodiversity are all part of this dimension and will differ depending on geographic location.

CURRENT SITUATION

Environmental considerations are gaining traction in Canada as concerns about climate change grow. Half of Canadians are concerned about climate change in making food choices.⁴² Globally, 50 percent of consumers will pay more for products from companies

that are committed to positive environmental impact⁴³ and one in three purchase from brands they think are doing environmental or social good, representing an approximately \$1.5 trillion opportunity.⁴⁴

Despite this interest and market opportunity, food sold in Canada currently displays limited information on its environmental impact. This is partly because there is no universal agreement on what environmental impact truly means, but also because there is a severe lack of data about environmental impacts of food production, transportation and consumption. In the absence of a regulated or comprehensive information about the environmental impact of food choices, Canadians rely on a variety of sources to make sense of the environmental impact of food, including media,



First and, to our knowledge, the only country to ever discuss a concerted effort for food labels to enable customers to pick environmentally friendly products is Denmark. Denmark's parliament discussed and supported this proposal in October 2018.⁴⁵ Now the Danish Agriculture and Food Council is leading this initiative and working with food manufacturers and supermarkets to encourage them "to rate their products' impact on the climate and environment, to help shoppers make more environmentally educated decisions."⁴⁶ This effort is situated within Denmark's larger goal of becoming carbon-neutral country by 2050.⁴⁷

42 Canadian Centre for Food Integrity. 2018. [2018 Public Trust Report](#). p.6

43 Nielsen, 2015. [The Sustainability Imperative](#)

44 Unilever, 2017. [Report shows a third of consumers prefer sustainable brands](#)

45 Clarke, H. 2018. [Denmark discusses labeling food for climate impact](#). CNN.

46 Ras Riva, B. 2018. [Denmark Wants to Add Environmental Impact to Food Labels](#). The GoodNet.

47 W, C. 2018. [Danish Government launches huge climate proposal](#). The Copenhagen Post.

online searches and information shared by family and friends.⁴⁸ The researchers we spoke with said we need more targeted research into the environmental impact of food production before environmental labelling and education campaigns can be truly informative and effective. The challenge often comes from a difficulty to weigh the factors that contribute to the environmental impact. For example, is it better to eat food grown locally in a greenhouse or food grown in season, but transported from afar? The answer is not always clear.

Debates on environmental considerations that have historically been limited to advocacy groups and segments of the population are starting to gain traction in industries where the sustainability question has gained visibility amongst consumers, such as seafood⁴⁹ and beef industries.⁵⁰ Certain industry-specific labels, such as Ocean Wise for seafood, launched in 2005, provide information on sustainability and environmental impact of a food product. Producers' associations (e.g. Food and Farm Care), international agencies (e.g. UN Food and Agriculture), and even fast-food companies (e.g. A&W⁵¹ and McDonald's⁵²) have all made certain environmental factors part of the information they provide. Some companies have made their corporate

social responsibility plans public, with information about their environmental commitments.⁵³

Canadian governments have not traditionally played a significant role in creating, regulating and disseminating information about the environmental impact of food. There are, however, some ongoing efforts that relate to this dimension.

Federally, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada is responsible for scientific research that supports the sustainable development of Canadian agriculture by helping farmers improve yields and reduce environmental impact. Canada also plans to meet its emissions reduction targets through the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change, which implicates the agricultural sector.⁵⁴ Canada's latest dietary guidelines, released together with the *Canada Food Guide*, recognize that environmental impact is one of the considerations around nutritious and healthy eating.⁵⁵ Provincially and municipally, the policies, regulation and standards set for food vendors, including restaurants, food trucks, farmers' markets and grocery stores, impact the availability of produce, including local produce, which are often — though not always — more environmentally friendly food choice.

SmartLabel™ is an innovative way that manufacturers are able to provide detailed, accessible, and standardized product information to their consumers. This program was launched by the US Grocery Manufacturing Association in late 2015 with voluntary enrollment from the manufacturers. An interested consumer can access the information in three ways (i) scan a Quick Response (QR) code that is placed on the packaging with their phone (ii) find the same information on SmartLabel website or (iii) call a toll-free line to

inquire about product(s) of interest. The information currently provided includes nutritional information, ingredients, allergens, third-party certifications, social compliance programs, usage instructions, advisories & safe handling instructions, as well as company information. According to company research, consumers were mostly interested in getting addition information on ingredient details, allergens and sustainability and sourcing practices.

48 Canadian Centre for Food Integrity. 2016. [Public Trust Research Report](#). p.15

49 [OceanWise](#)

50 [Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef](#)

51 A&W. 2018. [Environment](#).

52 McDonald's Canada. 2019. [Reducing our Impact](#).

53 Loblaw. 2017. [Corporate Social Responsibility Report](#)

54 Environment and Climate Change Canada. 2016. [Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change](#). p. 22.

55 Health Canada. 2019. [Canada's Dietary Guidelines](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Canadians should have enough information to make informed choices about purchasing foods that align their needs and values. This was a common theme during the national *Food Policy for Canada* consultations,⁵⁶ during which participants repeatedly sought clarity and transparency in the information about food available in Canada.⁵⁷ This sentiment was confirmed during our consultations for this report. Furthermore, we heard that the nature of information should better reflect concerns of Canadians. At the moment, for example, half of Canadian consumers are concerned about the food industry's impact on climate change,⁵⁸ yet food sold in supermarkets and grocery stores provide limited information of this sort. In our view, we need transparent, accessible and relevant information to address this information gap.

1

Government and industry should develop a standardized, interactive label and associated online platform.

We recommend that the federal government and industry work together to develop a standardized, interactive label and associated online platform, akin to SmartLabel™ (see page 16) that would present information on nutritional value, point of origin, traceability, environmental impact, and safe preparation of food products. The federal government should maintain the platform, determine relevant categories and how information should be displayed, as well as monitor the platform usage and receive feedback from consumers. Industry would then, on a voluntary basis, provide information about its food products and add the interactive label to its packaging. This could be done by developing

an in-house system or adopting the U.S.'s existing SmartLabel™ platform.

We recognize that this approach favours digitally literate consumers and those who have access to a smartphone or the internet. According to Statistics Canada, 76 percent of Canadians owned a smartphone in 2016 and approximately 90 percent used the internet.⁵⁹ This means relatively few consumers would be excluded from accessing the information using this model. Despite this limitation, we believe this model is an easy and efficient way for most consumers to access information.

⁵⁶ Food Policy for Canada is the Government of Canada's commitment to set a long-term vision for the health, environmental, social and economic goals related to food, as well as identifying actions can be taken in the short-term. As a part of this policy development, the federal government has conducted an in-person and online consultation and heard from 45,000 Canadians.

⁵⁷ Government of Canada. 2018. [What we heard: Consultations on a Food policy for Canada](#). p.18.

⁵⁸ Canadian Centre for Food Integrity. 2018. [2018 Public Trust Report](#). p.6

⁵⁹ Statistics Canada. 2017. [Life in the fast lane: How are Canadians managing?](#) — 2016.

Another limitation of this model is its resource-intensive nature for food manufacturers. In the U.S., the SmartLabel™ program is voluntary for manufacturers. So far, participants have included big food manufacturers such as Unilever, Campbell's, Tyson and Kellogg's.⁶⁰ Similarly, in Canada, smaller companies may be reluctant to participate until they are certain that resources they invest will pay off and allow them to remain competitive in the long run.

We recommend that the labelling program have robust monitoring and evaluation requirements that determine:

- (i) what information consumers want to know (so only relevant information is being shared) and
- (ii) what additional value do participating food manufacturers get (this could motivate food producers to participate in the program).

We also recommend that the federal government consider providing matching funding or short-term grants to small- and medium-sized food manufacturers to facilitate their joining this program and enabling consumers to make informed food choices.

Finally, we recommend that the federal government monitor food labelling projects that go beyond nutrition and safety, such as those in Denmark and the U.S., to learn from the successes and setbacks.



⁶⁰ SmartLabelTM. 2019. [Participating Brands](#).

2

Governments should support research aiming to identify and assess the environmental and socio-cultural dimensions of food.

Further research on the relatively understudied environmental and socio-cultural dimensions of food choice is needed.⁶¹ We repeatedly heard from experts that more research is needed and, from conducting our own research about these dimensions, we saw a wide variety of overlapping environmental concerns about which data is limited and found that information about the socio-cultural dimensions of food was also limited. Research on these dimensions would help populate the interactive, online platform we recommend. It should also inform and educate decision-makers working in food policy and the general public about what these dimension entail.

We recognize there will likely be debates about what methodology should be used to best assess the environmental impact of food and reconcile various factors that might be at odds with one another, such as land use, water use, transportation and whether the food was grown in season or not. There will also likely be debates about whose socio-cultural conceptions are favoured. Also, Canadians could perceive attempts by the government or other outside actors to define what is and is not culturally acceptable as undue interference or an attempt to regularize food practices. It is important that this research involve consulting with communities about their environmental concerns and their own socio-cultural practices.

To ensure research investments actually create a body of knowledge that will help Canadians make informed food choices, we recommend that the federal government and its provincial partners start by determining existing gaps and strategically planning to fill them. We propose that relevant government departments and agencies, such as Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada, Health Canada and Heritage Canada, among

others, jointly commission a blue-ribbon panel to study environmental and socio-cultural dimensions of food and provide recommendations on:

- (i) what research areas should be further developed;
- (ii) how much money should be invested in research in these areas;
- (iii) how many research projects this requires and how long should they run;
- (iv) what funding mechanism to use to deliver funds; and
- (v) how to ensure decision-makers take into account research findings by governments and industry.⁶²

We would then suggest the federal government engage with its provincial and territorial counterparts to implement the panel's research funding recommendations. The resulting findings should further inform food policy and educational initiatives, including the interactive label and future food education initiatives, such as the *Canada Food Guide*. To ensure this, funding agreements could require that the research include policy recommendations and could require a certain level of consideration or implementation of their government counterparts. Civil society should also be consulted, which could be done by requiring that these research findings and policy recommendations be presented to stakeholders participating in the conversations and consultations recommended below.

In addition, to maximize the impact of this investment, governments should make research accessible to the general public. This objective could be achieved by designating a portion of funds for outreach through talks targeting the public, op-eds in mainstream media and blogs. Government should also share research findings with the federally funded Canada Agriculture and Food Museum, given its work to enhance food literacy among Canadians.

⁶¹ We acknowledge that research on Health and Safety dimension of food choice should continue to generate evidence to improve the daily lives of Canadians. This recommendation, however, only targets Environmental and Socio-Cultural dimensions given how little we know about these areas and how uncertain we are about the best way to accurately display relevant information to consumers. In fact, our Task Force has been inspired how advances in Health and Safety research has informed nutritional labelling and guidelines about healthy eating and want other dimensions to reach a similar level of maturity.

⁶² Upon completion of the study, the panel's report should be made available to the public.

3

Governments should create food forums in which representatives of civil society as well as food experts and practitioners can exchange ideas about food issues, with a view to more inclusive policy development.

Those working on food issues in industry, civil society and government must engage more often with each other. Throughout our consultations and research, we heard and witnessed how polarized these issues can be. Those involved in conventional farming generally attend different conferences and push different research and innovation agendas than those engaged in food security advocacy, for example, and policy initiatives often emerging from siloed groups with little engagement from those whose positions may be at odds. As a result, the information available to Canadians, particularly when it comes to environmental and the socio-cultural dimensions of food, is fragmented.

We recommend creating a forum that would engage a wide range of stakeholders from civil society, as well as food experts and practitioners, in regular dialogue. Inspired by the Brazilian CONSEA (see page 14), we propose the federal government create a national food forum and subsequent regional ones, supported by the federal, provincial and territorial governments.

This forum should be designed to reflect Canada's social, cultural and geographic diversity. This is particularly important to address the socio-cultural dimension of food. We recognize that cultural acceptability is highly subjective and attempts by the government or other outside actors to define what is and is not culturally acceptable could be perceived as undue interference or an attempt to regularize food practices. Including participants from Indigenous communities and other underrepresented communities will allow members of those communities to define their food practices for themselves and engage directly with other stakeholders.

We also recommend that the forum be used as a space to pilot food-policy innovations, such as the interactive online platform recommended above and as a space

where researchers, such as those who would benefit from the grants recommended above, could present their findings.

By cutting across professions and perspectives, this forum would allow stakeholders to discuss issues on an ongoing basis, not merely as they arise. It would also allow those who might not otherwise hear from each other to have the opportunity to build relationships of trust. This long-term approach would not preclude governments from conducting targeted consultations for one-off projects, but it would create an alternative mechanism for debating and developing policy, especially food education initiatives, that are reflective and respectful of Canada's different realities.



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APPENDIX I

As part of our study tours and independent research, our task force had the opportunity to meet and interact with a number of stakeholders. From this, the following individuals and groups have been a valuable source of insight and information for writing this report:

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