

Whatcom Community Food Assessment

2021 Update Report

September 2021

Prepared by the Whatcom County Food System Committee and Staff

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Methodology	2
COVID-19 and the Food System	2
Sector Summaries	4
Land.....	4
Water	8
Labor.....	13
Farming	16
Fishing.....	21
Processing & Distribution	23
Consumption	26
Waste.....	32
Appendix: Questions for Subject Matter Expert Interviews	35

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we must acknowledge that what settlers call Whatcom County is the ancestral homelands of the Coast Salish Peoples, who have lived in the Salish Sea Basin, throughout the San Juan Islands and the North Cascade Watershed, from time immemorial. We, the Whatcom County Food System Committee, as well as all residents in Whatcom County, extend our deepest respect and gratitude for our indigenous neighbors, the Lummi Nation and Nooksack Tribe, for their enduring care and protection of our shared lands and waterways.

People who made this report possible:

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- The Whatcom Food Network.
- All of our subject matter experts and reviewers.

Introduction

A community food assessment (CFA) is a way to understand how a local food system is working from multiple viewpoints within each sector and across all sectors – land, water, labor, farming, fishing, processing and distribution, consumption, and waste. It provides a snapshot of the challenges and opportunities within our local food system.

The first CFA was conducted by Whatcom County's Washington State University Extension beginning in 2007. In 2010, the [Whatcom Food Network](#) (WFN) was formed to increase communication, coordination, and collaboration in our local food system. The WFN conducted the 2013 and 2017 CFAs, identifying a desire for a County-wide food system plan.

A food system plan is a long-range planning document that outlines goals and strategies to sustain and improve our local food system. In order to create a food system plan, we must know what the current landscape is in our food system. Updating this assessment is the first step in creating a food system plan.

This CFA process began in 2019. Most of the interviews conducted happened before March of 2020 and, therefore, do not include much about the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on our local food system. See the COVID-19 section for more on this.

We also recognize that we as a Food System Committee have inherent biases and limited scope. Constrained by time and resources, we were unable to interview and include all voices that represent the varied communities in Whatcom County. This document is a living document and is updated frequently. We hope to gain more insight and perspectives as we move through this process. It is important to acknowledge that we may have unintentionally left groups out of this process. As we strive to make the CFA more inclusive and comprehensive, we will work on building relationships and incorporating feedback with varying perspectives and community groups.

Finally, it is important to note that this CFA Update is organized by sector for the sake of clarity. However, categorizing the complexity of the food system may obscure the significant extent to which the parts of the food system interact and impact one another. The food system, like any system, is largely impacted by the strength of relationships and interdependence of each different part within the whole.

Methodology

This Community Food Assessment is an update to previous CFAs, the most recent of which was produced in [2017 by the Whatcom Food Network](#). For this update, Committee members created a uniform set of questions (Appendix A) and brainstormed a list of sector Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). Each member, past and present, conducted several interviews using the set of questions. There were additional questions for some interviews, which are included in Appendix A. A total of X SMEs were interviewed, including some of the committee members.

Once the interviews were conducted, each committee member reported on their interviews, by sector, at Food System Committee meetings. The interview responses were compiled by committee members and staff and organized by sector. Drafts of each of the sector summaries were sent to all of the SMEs to review for accuracy. The draft was then sent out to the broader community for feedback.

This CFA is divided into nine sector summaries, which serve as a compilation of interviews and data. Each sector summary has Key Challenges, Key Developments, and Current Collaborations. CFAs in the past have had a section for opportunities, but the Food System Committee has decided to use the opportunities identified through interviews as a launching point for the food system plan.

COVID-19 and the Food System

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted our lives. While it created an opportunity for innovation in some parts of our food system, it has exposed and exacerbated numerous vulnerabilities. People across our food system have been heralded as “essential workers,” yet existing structures did little to protect or support anyone in the supply chain. It may be impossible to quantify how this is impacting us locally, but we are still seeing supply chain disruptions and the cascading impact. The perception is that food distribution was relatively uninterrupted, but consumer panic-buying led to shortages of essentials like flour and pasta. Producers, such as dairy and commercial fishing industries, lost significant markets, with the closures of schools, hotels, and restaurants. Some producers were able to donate this excess food to overwhelmed emergency food providers, while others were forced to dump their product. Local sales producers faced new restrictions on how they could sell their food at local stands and farmers markets. Processing facilities and fishing vessels were host to some of the most significant COVID outbreaks. Laborers across the food system worked in unsafe conditions, with no guaranteed COVID testing and little or no financial support for sick time.

Most of the interviews that informed this CFA were conducted before March of 2021 and do not capture the specific issues COVID created or exacerbated. The Whatcom Food

Network hosted an online meetup in May of 2020. People across the food system shared how they were being impacted by COVID-19. The notes from that meeting can be found in the Appendix.

Recognizing there was a need for immediate action, the Food System Committee convened in the summer of 2020 to draft and send a list of recommendations for the Whatcom County Council. The recommendations referenced the Washington State Food Policy Forum's [Early Implementation Action Report](#) as well as called on the County Council to commit to preventing outbreaks among some of our workers most susceptible to COVID, such as farmworkers. The Council did not respond or take the actions recommended in 2020. The Committee presented the recommendations before Council in April of 2021.

The Federal Government has provided substantial financial relief through a myriad of programs including direct financial relief, forgivable loans, and purchasing locally-produced foods for emergency food programs. The delivery and distribution of these resources has not been equitable, leaving several small agricultural and food retail [businesses](#) without adequate resources to stay open. This disproportionately impacted businesses owned by Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.

Strict regulatory measures and mass vaccinations are effective in slowing transmission rates, but this pandemic is far from over. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will outlast the final clusters of cases. So far, CARES Act and American Rescue Plan funding were distributed across sectors, but there will continue to be support needed. The Food System Plan will consider some of these needs and work towards an equitable and sustainable future.

Sector Summaries

Land

► Key Developments

Programs are in place to protect agricultural lands from development.

There are 86,054 acres of land protected by agricultural zoning in Whatcom County. The County has a 100,000-acre farmland preservation goal; however, no target has been set for local or organic farmland acreage. Land prices and development pressure continue to increase.

A total of 1,456 acres of farmland have been protected from residential development by Whatcom County's Conservation Easement Program (formerly called Purchase of Development Rights Program), through the removal of 179 development rights and placement of conservation easements on those properties.

Whatcom County was awarded approximately \$1.3 million in 2018 through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program for a project entitled Whatcom County Working Lands Conserving Watersheds. This is a partnership between Whatcom County, the Whatcom Conservation District, the Whatcom Land Trust, and the Ag Water Board to cooperate to strategically protect 650 acres of agricultural land through enactment of agricultural conservation easements. Money has not yet been received but the project is expected to run through 2023. Additional agreements for project funding exist between the County and the Washington Recreation & Conservation Office.

Tools have been developed to mitigate some of the environmental impacts of farming.

The Sustainable Farms and Fields bill ([SB 5947](#)), passed by the Washington State legislature, addresses agricultural emissions by creating a grant program to incentivize farmers to adopt practices designed to sequester carbon or reduce emissions.

Since 2017, more agencies and organizations have supported and encouraged the use of the manure Application Risk Management (ARM) tools, and a greater number of farmers/landowners/applicators are using it to support good decisions around manure application. The inception of the manure text alert system for Whatcom County in 2018 has increased to over 120 users. It is one of the most popular tools we have for reaching folks immediately for weather and manure spreading advisories.

► Key Challenges

Farmland is a constrained resource.

The rich agricultural land of Whatcom County is becoming more difficult to obtain and maintain as farmland for many reasons:

- **Available farmland is limited and costly** – Population increases, rural residential housing development and foreign investment in agricultural land have driven up the demand for land and land prices making farmland harder to find, conserve, and afford. In many cases, the cost of the land itself now far exceeds the ability to pay it off by farming. This situation is exacerbated for sustainable local food farmers who don't have the same economy of scale. Also, access to capital for farmland development or purchase can be a barrier.
- **Export crops dominate local agriculture** – The vast majority of Whatcom County farmland is occupied by commodity export agriculture, with most of that land planted as monocrop acreages of grass and corn silage for dairies, raspberries, blueberries, and to a much lesser extent, potatoes.
- **Access to land with adequate water for irrigation is limited** – Significant farm acreage currently is irrigated without legal water rights, making these farms vulnerable to losing water access. Additionally, there are seasonal shortages of water in places where it is needed.
- **There are competing needs for farmland** – There is conflict between preserving farmland (through buying up development rights) and the need for housing for smaller-acreage local market farmers in agricultural areas.
- **Zoning is a coarse method for preserving land with good agricultural soils**, thus there will always be properties with good soil that end up lumped in with residential, commercial, or industrially-zoned areas, leading to the loss of farmland.

The impacts of climate change will reduce available land and water for agriculture.

Rising sea levels will reduce low-lying coastal farmland areas putting increased development pressure on upland agricultural acreage, further exacerbating land affordability and availability of farmable ground.

Increased flooding will decrease the amount of usable farmland in the Nooksack floodplain either due to erosion of land along river banks or because the land is too wet too late in the growing season.

Increasing drought is likely to cause a decrease in the productivity of farmland – During the 2015 drought in Washington, the state had \$633-\$733 million in economic losses.

Goals and practices for soil conservation and maintaining soil health have not been widely implemented.

[Few farms use organic practices](#) – Only 2% of Whatcom County farmers used organic practices as of the 2017 Census of Agriculture. The vast majority of export crop farms are dependent on chemical fungicides, herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers 1) to meet the demands of the buyer; 2) to manage all of the pest and disease implications of growing a monocrop; and 3) to ensure profitability. This has impacts on soil quality for decades.

[Goals for protecting soil health have not been set](#) – Whatcom County has not set acreage goals for the following: 1) Organic acres (2% in 2017); 2) reduced tillage acres; 3) acres using cover crops; or 4) acres growing food for local markets. This is important if we are to move forward towards better soil conservation and soil health of our farmlands.

County policies are needed to address habitat loss and impacts on biodiversity.

[Wildlife lacks places to reside, feed, and forage](#) due to development, clearing, or fencing off of wild spaces, and lack of continuity in wildlife habitat corridors.

[Wildlife-farm conflicts become more common as habitat encroachment increases.](#)

[Recreational impacts on wildlife and habitat are increasing](#) due to population increases.

[Loss of species and balance in the ecosystem is resulting in other species becoming pests.](#)

There is a need for more data to determine best practices for maintaining the health of farmland and water.

[There are many questions under study that require further research](#) to determine best practices. These include questions about nutrient application setbacks as affected by vegetative buffers, and pesticide application rates and the impacts of these chemicals.

► Current Collaborations

[Whatcom County Agricultural Advisory Committee](#) (AAC) is composed of representative large and small-scale food producers, conservation organizations, educators, and others who provide the Whatcom County Council with reviews and recommendations on issues that affect agriculture.

[Whatcom Food Network](#) is a network of people and organizations in the food system that aims to increase communication, coordination, and collaboration among local and regional food system-related organizations. Through online communication tools and Network

events, organizations can share information, pursue projects of mutual benefit, and develop community initiatives to strengthen the local food system.

[Purchase of Development Rights \(PDR\) Oversight Committee](#) provides oversight and evaluation for the Whatcom County PDR program, advising the County Council in the selection of eligible lands offered for permanent protection from conversion through PDR acquisition. To date, 1,288 acres of working farmland have been protected.

[Watershed Improvement Districts \(WIDs\)](#) are groups of farmers organized by watershed to represent the water needs of the agricultural community. There are six WIDs in Whatcom County: Bertrand, North Lynden, South Lynden, Drayton, Laurel, and Sumas.

[Whatcom Land Trust](#), Whatcom County, and the City of Bellingham have partnered to identify and establish conservation easements to protect properties with conservation value from development. To date, over 20,000 acres have been preserved throughout Whatcom County.

[Puget Sound Conservation District Caucus](#) – The 12 Puget Sound Conservation Districts (including Whatcom) aim to bring uniformity to guidance and plans for the region in the areas of stormwater, restoration, livestock stewardship, and more. By working together as a caucus, they hope to increase the breadth and quality of available technical assistance.

[Washington Soil Health Initiative](#) (a partnership between WSU and WSDA) – During the 2019 Legislative Session, the Washington State Legislature appropriated \$250k as a proviso in both FY20 and FY21 to WSU to initiate the Soil Health Initiative, with specific language requiring WSU to establish the proposed Long-Term Agroecological Research and Extension (LTARE) site at the WSU Mount Vernon Research & Extension Center. This initiative is an ambitious plan that funds research, extension, and demonstration of soil health best management practices through a network of LTARE sites across Washington state's diverse agricultural systems.

Water

► Key Developments

The farming industry has adopted strategies to improve water health.

Manure Application Risk Management tools have been supported and encouraged by [agencies and organizations](#). A greater number of farmers, landowners, and applicators are using these tools to support good decisions around manure application. The inception of the manure text alert system for Whatcom County in 2018 has increased to over 120 users. It is one of the most popular tools available for reaching folks immediately for weather and manure spreading advisories.

[Advancements in farming application and practices](#) – The Whatcom Conservation District launched a comprehensive and science-based manure Application Risk Management System in 2014 to help landowners determine better timing and placement of manure for water quality protection. Tools such as the Manure Spreading Advisory (MSA), MSA text alerts, ARM field assessment worksheet, and seasonal setback guidance, have provided manure applicators with a set of decision support tools to both educate and inform better decision making. Since its inception, the use of the tool, which extends throughout all of Western Washington and British Columbia, has been growing with over 500 views per month during high risk seasons. The use of the ARM tools has increased both accountability and flexibility and improved manure application timing and placement in Whatcom County.

Government and public-private partnerships are working to improve water quality.

Since the [Portage Bay Partnership](#) agreement was signed in January 2017, Watershed Improvement Districts have taken the lead on water quality improvement.

Shellfish Growing Area Upgrades:

- 129 acres in Birch Bay were upgraded in 2018 from “prohibited” to “approved” status, providing year-round harvest.
- Spring harvest restrictions were lifted in 2019 from Portage Bay shellfish growing areas for March, April and June. Harvest restrictions remain in place during October, November, and December.
- 765 additional acres of Drayton Harbor were upgraded in 2019 from “prohibited” to “approved” status.

[The British Columbia-Washington Nooksack River Transboundary Water Quality Task Group \(WQTG\) produced final recommendations in summer 2018](#); recommendations led to the formation of the current 3-year transboundary Technical Collaboration Group (TCG), through July 2021. (See Year 1 report [here](#))

New laws and management plans have been enacted to protect water.

The [Streamflow Restoration Law](#) was passed by the Washington State Legislature In January 2018. This law aims to help restore streamflow to levels necessary to support robust, healthy, and sustainable salmon populations while providing water for homes in rural Washington.

- The law clarifies how counties issue building permits for homes that use a permit-exempt well for a water source. The law directs local planning groups to develop watershed plans that offset impacts from new domestic permit-exempt wells and achieve a net ecological benefit within the watershed. The Legislature appropriated \$300 million over the course of 15 years to help with implementation of projects that improve streamflow. The funds are available statewide and administered through a competitive grant program.

In 2020, the Department of Ecology (DOE) identified the Nooksack basin as one of two top priority watersheds for an [adjudication](#). According to the DOE's website, an adjudication is: "a process that brings all water users in a watershed into one big court process that leads to full and fair water management by confirming legal rights to use water. The process legally and permanently determines everyone's water rights in that area. It creates certainty around water use and helps secure water for future use." In Spring, 2021 the state legislature included funding in the 2022-2023 operating budget to begin pre-adjudication work.

The [Whatcom County Coordinated Water System Plan](#) was updated in August 2019 to include a Criteria for consideration in timely and reasonable disputes in future service areas.

There has been an increasing urgency around salmon and orca recovery in the past few years, including the creation of the Governor's Southern Resident Orca Task Force's [final report and recommendations](#), and (locally) the revitalization of the [WRIA-1 \(Nooksack Basin\) Watershed Planning Unit](#).

Research on water quality has garnered new attention.

New research on microplastics in water has increased the awareness of and concern for plastic pollution and human, as well as ecosystem impacts.

► Key Challenges

There are competing needs for water and a limited quantity available.

Ensuring sufficient water for land-based agriculture irrigation, stock drinking water, and facility wash down, as well as instream flow needs for fisheries, is an on-going challenge and source of tension between farmers and fisheries.

Freshwater supply limitations include climate change projections which indicate a future of dry summers, more intense rainfall events in the winter, and decreasing snowpack, as seen in 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Water quality is being degraded by multiple sources of contamination.

Ground and surface water quality problems are serious in Whatcom County due to many types of contamination from multiple sources including fecal coliform from leaking septic systems, sewer lines, urban and rural stormwater runoff, agricultural runoff, and saltwater intrusion of groundwater from sea level rise.

- Fecal coliform runoff alters the dissolved oxygen in the Salish Sea through eutrophication from excess nutrients.
- Agricultural runoff includes chemical pesticides and fertilizers, manure runoff, and the occasional overflow of manure storage facilities.
- Chemical runoff impacts drinking water and aquatic species, some of which are local food sources.

Climate change also is impacting water quality with ocean acidification and warming water temperatures which negatively affect marine life.

It is difficult for farmers to obtain an adequate, legal water supply in the form of a state-issued “water right.”

The Nooksack basin is closed to new water rights due to the Nooksack Instream Resources Protection Program (also known as the Nooksack Instream Flow Rule). At least 50% of current agricultural operations in Whatcom County either do not have a water right or they are not operating in compliance with its provisions.

Most water rights are owned by commodity export farmers who grow water-intensive crops to serve export markets leaving the smaller farmers that serve local markets on the fringes, operating under the “industrial water use” exemption on private wells (limited to 1-2 acres), or using high cost city water.

There is a lack of enforcement of unpermitted water use by regulatory agencies in WA State and Whatcom County.

In other places financial speculators are buying up water rights as an investment, which could happen in Whatcom County.

► **Current Collaborations**

Whatcom County Water Quality Program

Whatcom Watersheds Information Network – A network of organizations and individuals interested in marine and freshwater ecosystems education and outreach. They host an annual outreach event called Whatcom Water Weeks that has been held every September since 2012.

Whatcom County Marine Resources Committee – Hosts their annual Speaker Series and symposiums which brings research to the community on key topics such as challenges surrounding water supply, climate change, and food supply for both marine and land-based systems. The focus is on adaptation to these challenges.

Water Resources Inventory Area #1 (WRIA 1) Management Team and Water Supply Group – Initiating Governments (the Lummi Nation, the Nooksack Tribe, the City of Bellingham, Public Utility District No. 1 of Whatcom County, and Whatcom County) are working on tracking the linkage between groundwater and surface water, how wells impact surface water, and how to understand and reduce these impacts.

Puget Sound Recovery Program and **Puget Sound Partnership** – The Partnership is working with watershed groups, which contribute creativity, knowledge, and motivation to implementing lasting solutions to the complex challenges facing salmon and Puget Sound.

WSU and Washington Sea Grant – Washington Sea Grant (WSG) has served the Pacific Northwest and the nation by funding marine research and working with communities, managers, businesses and the public to strengthen understanding and sustainable use of ocean and coastal resources. Based at the University of Washington, WSG is part of a national network of 33 Sea Grant colleges and institutions located in U.S. coastal and Great Lakes states and territories.

Lake Whatcom Management Program – In 1998 the City of Bellingham, Whatcom County, and Water District 10, now the Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District, by Interlocal Agreement established the elements of the Lake Whatcom Management Program. The entities have funded and implemented projects annually to improve and protect the water quality of Lake Whatcom which is the drinking water reservoir for the City and the District. Project partners have included WSU Extension, the Sudden Valley Community Association, and property owners.

Birch Bay Watershed and Aquatic Resources Management District (BBWARM) has a Citizen Advisory Committee with five members appointed by the Whatcom County Flood Control Zone District Board of Supervisors (County Council).

Abbotsford/Sumas International Task Force – A coordinated effort between British Columbia and Washington to ensure groundwater protection in the aquifer region

across the common border between Canada and the United States based on the 1992 Environmental Cooperation Agreement.

Ag Water Board – All six Watershed Improvement Districts (WIDs) cooperate through an Interlocal Agreement to work together with coordination by the Ag Water Board. They focus on countywide issues that transcend the boundaries of the individual WIDs involving water supply, drainage, and water quality protection.

Tenmile Clean Water Project – An independent, citizen-led group dedicated to improving the overall water quality in the Tenmile Creek watershed. Their goal is to bring the waters of the Tenmile Creek watershed into compliance with bacteria water quality standards, and maintain those clean water conditions. Main efforts include citizen-led water quality testing and educational speakers. This group is currently on hiatus.

Labor

► Key Developments

Court cases and legislation protect workers' rights.

In 2020, a [Washington State Supreme Court Case](#) ruled that the decades-old overtime exemption for dairy workers violated the state's constitution.

The Governor signed [SB 5172](#) which went into effect in July 2021. This bill recognizes agriculture workers' right to overtime pay. Historically, they have been exempted from overtime pay.

In November 2021, Bellingham residents will vote on [Initiative No. 2021-04: An Ordinance regarding fair treatment of hourly-wage employees and gig workers](#), which outlines strategies for a fair work week and hazard pay.

[Familias Unidas por La Justicia](#), a local farmworker-led union formed in 2016, continues to represent farmworkers in our region.

Bornstein Seafoods, a large processor, laid off dozens of unionized employees in 2019.

► Key Challenges

Immigration policies impact food system workers in Whatcom County.

Immigrant and migrant workers make up a significant number of our low-wage food system workers in Whatcom County.

Federal immigration policies make it increasingly challenging for Latinx farmworkers to safely, legally, and justly work in the U.S.

- Some employers use E-Verify to confirm documentation status of workers.
- Immigration and Customs Enforcement conduct raids of communities of workers.

The H2A Guestworker program is harmful to our food system.

The H2A Guestworker program provides temporary work permits to workers from other countries. This program is becoming more popular as a solution to growing political concerns about immigration. Only two Whatcom County farms currently use this program, but they employ over 700 workers. Local labor advocates note that [this program is not effectively regulated and hurts workers across the food system](#).

- Wage caps allow H2A workers to be paid less than other laborers which has an impact on the earning power of laborers who have worked here longer and work year-round.
- The quality of housing, food, and lives H2A workers experience are insufficient.

Food system workers are underpaid.

The price we pay for food does not reflect the cost of the production of food. Increasing costs of food production are offset by limiting pay increases among food chain workers. Underpaid food industry workers are often reliant on emergency food and other social services.

Low-wage jobs have high turnover rates, costing companies more in training and leaving some workers trying to fill multiple positions at once. Temp agencies fill in gaps, but do not offer employees benefits.

The global economy impacts domestic wages. If another country is undercutting the price of a commodity, our domestic producers need to cut costs. Because people need to work, they accept lower wages.

Many employers still limit hours of employees to avoid paying benefits.

Tipping culture is problematic.

- Some employers take a cut of the tips, some workers face discrimination or harassment to get tips.
- Back of house restaurant staff do not receive tips, which can result in lower earnings.
- Additional services charges on bills are perceived as tips by customers, but they all go to the employer.

Inconsistent work schedules result in inconsistent income.

Workers often do not have consistent schedules and need to balance multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Many low-wage jobs, from farms to processing facilities to restaurants, are seasonal. It is more difficult to get adequate hours in the winter. Workers are never guaranteed 40 hours a week.

Many food system jobs have unstable and unsafe working conditions

Despite labor laws for many workers, low-wage workers do not always take breaks and have to be physically able to function without adequate rest.

People can work in farm fields as young as 12 years old.

[Sexual harassment is rampant across the food system.](#) Harassers can include customers in the service industry, coworkers in the field, or managers requiring reciprocation for earnings.

[Laborers experience a lot of environmental and occupational hazards.](#)

- Exposure to pesticides and fire smoke are common among farmworkers.

[While unions can help with working conditions, they cannot protect workers from companies shutting down,](#) such as was the case with Bornstein Seafood.

[Automation is replacing knowledgeable workers](#) (such as check-out stands and berry pickers).

[It is difficult for workers to support one another](#) due to lack of authority and structural hierarchies.

- Grocery workers know distributor workers are being exploited, but are unable to directly help.
- Restaurant workers know the food they are working with comes from farms that employ H2A workers, but do not have a say in what products they use.

[Workers feel unsupported and ignored by management.](#) There is no system for managers to learn from their employees.

► **Current Collaborations**

Rapid Response – When Bornstein Seafoods laid off 40 employees, the Union, Washington State Labor Council, and WorkSource stood up a Rapid Response model to support those who were losing their jobs.

Domestic Fair Trade certification – [Community to Community Development](#) is working with the [Agricultural Justice Project](#) and others to launch a [Domestic Fair Trade](#) labeling protocol for local farms and other food system businesses to alert buyers to fair and just labor practices.

Worker-owned cooperatives – [Familias Unidas por La Justicia](#) and Community to Community are working together to provide training and help farm workers develop worker-owned cooperatives.

Farming

► Key Developments

Land prices continue to increase.

Cooperatives help small-scale farmers access land and markets.

Cooperative Farmers Markets, such as Twin Sisters Market (established in 2015) and Birchwood Market (established in 2018), emerged as a model for farmers to sell directly to local consumers. The two markets merged in 2021.

Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad officially launched in 2017 in Everson. This farmworker cooperative runs a 65-acre farm and sells organic berries locally.

The Food Safety Management Act (FSMA) continues to phase in with increased compliance every year, impacting farm businesses and the standards of buyers and sellers.

► Key Challenges

Access to land for both large and small acreage farms is a long-term issue.

As the population of Whatcom County continues to increase, ongoing development reduces total acreage available for farming, increases constraints on water access, and inflates land prices.

Restrictive agricultural zoning incentivizes commodity export farming and reduces opportunities for co-stewardship of land, farmer cooperatives, and smaller acreages.

Current tax classifications for agricultural land have too many loopholes. Property taxes are cheaper for agricultural land use, but landowners only need to meet low thresholds of agricultural sales per year to meet the definition. This results in underutilized agricultural land and even fewer opportunities for farmers seeking land.

Competition from other countries and regions is impacting local farms and the food system.

Local food producers and processors are competing with products entering the U.S. market from other countries. In the U.S., the cost of production is much higher than in other countries because of the higher costs for labor and land, stricter environmental rules, and a much stricter policy on food safety. As other countries don't have these costs, they can charge less for their products and out-compete local growers in the bidding process to sell to grocery chains. Foreign imports are especially impacting berry growers.

Foreign companies are buying up American farmland and water rights.

Competition from the Central Valley, Midwest, and even Eastern Washington are impacting Whatcom farmers focused on certain crops.

Food prices are lower than the actual cost of production.

People have become accustomed to food prices that are artificially low, because of factors such as crop subsidies and imports from other countries, and do not reflect the actual cost of food production.

Given the real production costs for local farmers, most do not have the financial solvency to absorb increased costs for their businesses such as increased wages for labor, food safety, and environmental regulations. They cannot pass all these costs on to consumers and still compete in the market.

Increased demand for local and organic produce has put pressure on farms to increase production, increase efficiencies, and lower prices.

Large farms produce consistently high volumes, but because they tend to focus on a single crop, they are more vulnerable to commodity price fluctuations.

Small farms are typically more diversified in their crop mix, but they need to increase production efficiency and product consistency to effectively expand market opportunities beyond farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares.

It is very challenging for small farms to compete in terms of price with large farms and food imported from other states/countries.

A big part of the financial challenge for farms is paying labor costs. With the increase in minimum wage, and elimination of the overtime pay exemption for agricultural workers, farms are increasingly challenged to pay workers and still make ends meet. While all agree that farmworkers should make a living wage, many farm owners are struggling to make a living as well.

Consumer trends and misperceptions impact food purchasing decisions.

Greenwashing by some agricultural producers and retailers can make a product seem better for the environment than it actually is.

Local organic food is not the same as industrial organic, but consumers generally don't know the difference.

There is a belief that food should be cheap, but cheap food has hidden costs such as labor practices, nutritional deficits, and environmental impacts.

Consumers are considering certifications for different growing practices and specific ingredients.

It is hard for local farmers who sell directly to consumers to be profitable.

Many local farmers doing direct sales are not making a living wage. This makes farming unappealing and inaccessible, especially for people who are low-income, young, Black, indigenous, or other people of color.

Many farmers have to travel several counties away (to Snohomish and King) to find more markets to sell their products.

Consumer Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscriptions had been declining for several years, but saw an increase during COVID. In 2021, CSA numbers appear to be leveling out.

- A major barrier to CSA uptake is the inability to accept EBT.

Farmers Market sales have been increasing around the county. 2020 was a difficult year for Farmers Markets, but sales are bouncing back.

Industrial agriculture has more resources than small local farms.

Lobbyist interests and government grants and funds benefit larger-scale industrial agriculture, and often these types of programs are not available to small-scale growers.

Climate change will require different growing practices.

There are many challenges as a result of global warming including increasingly hot summers, low snowpack combined with more winter rain, increased pest pressures, and reduced seasonal availability of water resources.

Exotic pests will continue to enter Whatcom County

Whatcom County's location between major shipping terminals in Seattle and British Columbia, as well as its proximity to agricultural operations in Idaho, Oregon, and California, exposes local farms to exotic pests (e.g., soil-born, migratory insects, diseases) such as spotted wing drosophila and the marmorated stink bug. Whatcom's berry industry is especially vulnerable to these new pests. With concerted attention over the past few years, pest management and soil health are improving.

Political polarization is making it increasingly difficult for farmers to come to consensus about how to address the many environmental, legislative, and economic issues they face.

► Current Collaborations

Cooperative Enterprises – Regional food producers, with support from [Northwest Agriculture Business Center](#), operate two cooperative business models which are helping small farms expand their markets. The [Puget Sound Food Hub](#) is a farmer-owned cooperative marketing, aggregating, and distributing locally produced food to institutions, restaurants, and retailers. Many Whatcom farmers are member-owners. There are more than 200 accounts throughout the Puget Sound Region. The farmer-owned and managed [North Cascade Meat Producers Cooperative](#) offers USDA processing and a mobile slaughter unit, as well as a North Cascade Meat grass-fed brand marketing program. Several Whatcom farmers participate in [Island Grown Farmers Co-Op](#) as well.

Businesses Aggregating Local Food – Farms offering CSA shares frequently pool their crops to increase the efficiency of their farms while offering shareholders a greater variety of items. Several businesses aggregate products from many farms and deliver to customers' homes.

Watershed Improvement Districts – Whatcom County has six Watershed Improvement Districts (WIDs) representing a significant number of agricultural producers and acreage. These WIDs collaborate through the [Ag Water Board](#) to provide a unified and organized voice for larger acreage food producers in the County.

Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) provides review and recommendations to the Whatcom County Council on issues that affect agriculture. The AAC also provides a forum for farmers and others interested in enhancing and promoting the long-term viability of Whatcom County agriculture.

Whatcom Family Farmers is an outreach and advocacy group that focuses on advocating for farmers on a variety of issues and engages in educating the community on key topics such as water quality, water quantity, labor, and trade.

Access to Capital – The [Community Food Co-op Farm Fund](#), the Sustainable Whatcom Fund of the Whatcom Community Foundation, and Industrial Credit Union (ICU) partner to provide grant funding and low-interest loans to help local sustainable farms scale up production to serve wholesale markets.

Discovery Farm – Whatcom Conservation District manages the West Coast's first Discovery Farm, a promising model in which a group of farmers identifies a challenge that can be addressed through science, such as manure application setbacks. This model generates buy-in among farmers for adopting beneficial farming practices.

Twin Sisters Market merged with Birchwood Farmers Market. This collaborative market model allows farms to specialize in specific crops and share the labor of selling on market day. Eight farms supply crops to three market locations in Bellingham, Deming, and Kendall.

Sustainable Connections and Cloud Mountain Farm Center merged in early 2019.

Fishing

► Key Developments

Imperial Metal, a Canadian mining company, is interested in mining the headwaters of the Skagit River. The Skagit River is the largest producer of Chinook salmon in the Puget Sound.

In October, 2020, Dockside Market launched. Consumers can buy seafood directly from the fishermen who catch it.

► Key Challenges

Fishing is becoming less profitable in Whatcom County.

Local demand is low.

Self-marketing for smaller fishing outlets is expensive.

The need to replace equipment makes it hard for local fishermen to make a profit.

It is more profitable for fishermen to sell abroad. Ninety percent of our crab caught here is sold to China, for example.

There is no place to process or smoke fish or process crab in Whatcom County, so fishermen take business to Skagit.

Some storage facilities have threatened to move out of Whatcom because the cost of business is too high.

It is expensive to get into the fishing industry and the industry itself is aging.

Grocery chains require expensive inspections.

Water drainage restrictions and new restrictions regarding fish pump water will make unloading to processing facilities more expensive next year.

Environmental factors threaten fish and shellfish populations.

Climate change is warming waters.

Human activity such as burning fossil fuels has resulted in greater levels of CO2 released into the atmosphere which gets absorbed by seawater increasing ocean acidification.

Dams and mines have an impact on our waters:

- Unregulated mining in British Columbia is impacting us downstream.
- Dams and mines in the region (Washington State, Oregon, Northern California, and Idaho) impact fish here.

Distribution of seafood has a significant carbon footprint.

Pollution and runoff from agriculture and industry are bad for shellfish and important fish habitats.

Productive runs of salmon are declining. Pink salmon runs have become less predictable and Fraser River sockeye runs are less frequent.

Consumer perceptions impact sales

Consumers prefer fresh fish, but frozen fish is easier to distribute and retains quality.

Public perception about orcas is impacting the sales of king salmon. Consumers sensitive to dwindling orca populations choose not to purchase king salmon.

Competing lobbyists impact fishermen

Sports and recreational fishermen have better lobbying power than commercial fishermen.

Commercial fishermen are regulated more than sports and recreational fishermen and the recreational fishermen want to ban non-tribal gillnetters.

► Current Collaborations

Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association and dairy farmers are attempting to improve conditions of waterways for salmon preservation.

Several local fishermen are organizing against the Bristol Bay Pebble Mine in Alaska.

Sustainable Connections' Food & Farming program is a strong contributor to building connections between chefs, farmers, and consumers.

Dockside Market, a collaboration between SeaFeast, the Port of Bellingham, and the Working Waterfront Coalition, aims to sustain the marine trade in Whatcom County.

Processing & Distribution

► Key Developments

Processing

Planning for The Millworks (formerly the “food campus”) on the Bellingham waterfront, is supported by the Whatcom Community Foundation (WCF). The food campus part of the Millworks will include a food hub, business incubation, workforce training, and more.

Bellingham Public Schools opened their Central Kitchen in the Irongate neighborhood of Bellingham in 2018. The Central Kitchen is equipped to support production of school meals featuring locally grown foods and commitment to healthy communities.

Distribution

Twin Sister’s Market in the Foothills Region of Whatcom County (est. 2015) and the Birchwood Farmers Market in the Birchwood neighborhood of Bellingham (est. 2018) use an innovative cooperative model. These groups merged in 2021.

In response to the 2016 Albertson’s closure and restrictions on re-opening a grocery store in that building in the Birchwood Neighborhood, the **City of Bellingham passed Ordinance No. 2019-12-041 banning restrictive covenants on grocery stores.**

Cloud Mountain Farm Center, which serves as the northern-most hub of the Puget Sound Food Hub Cooperative, **and Sustainable Connections merged in early 2019.**

The Salvation Army began renovation of its thrift store location on Birchwood Avenue in 2020 in preparation to move its food bank to that location and **open a grocery-style food bank distribution center.**

► Key Challenges

Processing and Distribution

Whatcom County lacks some of the infrastructure for processing and distribution and access to viable markets that are essential ingredients for sustaining local and regional agricultural systems.

It is challenging to calibrate the scale of processing and distribution operations to achieve economic viability.

It is expensive to build infrastructure.

Large organizations are able to consolidate processing and distribution, thus reducing costs, which makes it harder for smaller organizations to compete.

Smaller businesses continue to be acquired by larger corporations.

The cost of labor is high. Some processors and distributors run most efficiently with just above 50 employees, but since they can't afford healthcare, they have to keep staff under 50 people.

Some large food packaging is using prison labor at lower cost than local employment rate.

Small-scale processing and distribution organizations have higher turnover.

Large organizations are able to pay workers a living wage and are able to provide benefits.

Smaller organizations are having a hard time offering those benefits and seeing high turnover in staff.

Processing

Small-scale processing facilities find it hard to be profitable. A local large poultry processing facility is selling off their equipment.

The seasonality of processing impacts demand for labor. Because most products need processing in the summer and fall, processors do not have a need for year-round labor.

National recalls on food have local impact. A recall on one food from another state will have an impact on demand across the industry.

Distribution

Labor to distribute food is expensive.

New regulations require a limit on the number of hours drivers spend on the road which leads to inefficiencies in moving goods.

Fuel costs and truck driver wages are increasing, which is making distribution more expensive.

There is a growing shortage of truck drivers.

► Current Collaborations

Processing

The Farm to Freezer Program was conceived by the Food Security Task Force in late Spring 2020 to help local farmers whose consumer-direct and restaurant sales were severely impacted by the pandemic. Funding from WSDA Food Assistance enabled community partners – Bellingham Food Bank, Bellingham Public Schools, and Common Threads – to purchase crops from farms with disrupted markets and prepare soups and sauces in the Central Kitchen to freeze and provide to hunger relief programs in 2021.

Distribution

Cascade Cooperatives formed in 2019 as a network of Whatcom County cooperatives united to promote the development of a cooperative economy. Some participants include Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad, [North Cascade Meats](#), WECU, [Community Food Co-Op](#), and Puget Sound Food Hub.

Summer Meal Food Box and Programming Project – The Bellingham Food Bank (BFB), YMCA, Mercy Housing Northwest, Catholic Community Services, CTK Farm, and the Whatcom County Health Department started a pilot project in 2019. Christ the King Food Share and Farm and BFB provided weekly food boxes to low-income housing developments in Bellingham. YMCA provided programming for youth residents. This project continued into 2020, with expanded service locations, including migrant farmworker camps.

Consumption

This broad sector includes issues of food access; retail/wholesale food supply for stores, restaurants, institutions; and food and nutrition education. Each of these areas will be addressed in turn below.

► Key Developments

Food Access

Communities did strategic planning to increase food access.

[Food Summits in October 2019](#) in the Birchwood neighborhood in Bellingham and in the Foothills Region of East Whatcom each engaged 60 community members in a discussion around food access, laying the groundwork for new and updated Food Action Plans.

[Foothills Community Food Partnership](#) accomplished the goals in the [2015 Foothills Food Access Plan](#) and developed a 2021 update to the [Food Action Plan](#).

Healthy food access was a vision outlined in the [Aging Well Whatcom Blueprint](#) (2019).

Utilization of food access programs has shifted.

[Food banks in Whatcom County](#) have seen significant increases in people needing food assistance, especially during 2020-2021.

[There has been a continued drop in WIC participation.](#)

[Federal policies requiring government-issued IDs around TANF and SNAP eligibility](#) have negatively impacted the hunger safety net. Undocumented residents are hesitant to seek these funds, as well as other emergency food services.

New funding and programs to address hunger have been implemented.

[WSDA Food Assistance funds](#) enabled two new projects designed to mitigate impacts of the pandemic by both supporting local farmers and addressing hunger: Farm to Freezer and Tip the Scales (see project descriptions under Current Collaborations below).

[Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer \(or P-EBT\)](#) began during the pandemic. It provides funds for food to children who have limited access to meals at school and childcare centers while schools are closed due to the pandemic.

In 2021, [the USDA re-evaluated the Thrifty Food Plan](#) and increased the amounts allocated to SNAP recipients.

There has been an [increase in the number of school backpack programs in the county](#), providing school children with food for the weekend and longer school breaks.

New facilities for food distribution have opened.

In March, 2020, the [East Whatcom Regional Resource Center](#) in Kendall/Maple Falls opened [Building 2](#), which houses the Foothills Food Bank.

The [Bellingham School District](#) completed construction of [the Central Kitchen](#) in November 2018 and it was fully operational for the 2019-20 school year. This [state-of-the art facility](#) has enabled the district to prepare, distribute, and serve scratch-cooked items with locally produced ingredients to all schools in the district. Food boxes including items prepared in the Central Kitchen have been distributed to Bellingham district families throughout the pandemic.

[Common Threads Farm](#) has expanded their school garden program to include the [Sterling Paz garden](#) for residents of Sterling Meadows and the garden space at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center.

There has been a notable [increase in participation and installation of community gardens in the Lummi community since COVID](#).

Retail/Wholesale Food Supply

Efforts have been made to increase retail/wholesale food outlets in food deserts.

City of Bellingham adopted [Ordinance 2019-12-041](#) banning restrictive covenants on grocery stores.

Two cooperative markets, [Twin Sisters Market](#) in East Whatcom and [Birchwood Farmers Market](#) in the Birchwood neighborhood in Bellingham, are merging for the 2021 season. The group of participating farmers will serve both communities with weekly farmers market days June - Oct.

Dodson's IGA in Nugents Corner closed in 2018. In 2020, [Nugents Corner Market](#) opened in the same location.

Food and Nutrition Education

A new food and nutrition education model was successfully tested and implemented.

A pilot test of the [Whatcom Veggie RX program](#) was conducted in 2019. Unity Care NW, Sea Mar, PeaceHealth, Community Health Plan of Washington, Bellingham Food Bank, and the Community Food Co-op collaborated to provide Whatcom Veggie Rx "prescriptions," nutrition classes, and a \$40 fruit and vegetable voucher each month for 15 months to 180 patients who have Type II Diabetes and experience food insecurity. Results showed that participants' average Hemoglobin A1c (a blood sugar measure) levels dropped, attitudes

toward self-management improved, and there was a reported decrease in food insecurity. In 2020, Unity Care NW expanded the program with funding from CVS Health.

► **Key Challenges**

Food Access

We still do not have equitable access to healthy food for our whole community.

Quality, non-GMO, local, organic food is not accessible to all.

Immigrants have additional barriers accessing food.

Some former food bank clients who [are immigrants](#) are avoiding the food banks due to [Public Charge legislation](#). This rule ended on March 9, 2021, but fears will likely continue.

[Migrant farm worker families](#) experience barriers to accessing food that others do not, including limited time, working and living in rural locations, lack of transportation, and desire for culture-specific foods.

Some food banks lack adequate storage for food donations.

[Storage capacity remains an issue at county foodbanks](#). They receive donations of fresh produce, but do not always have adequate cold storage to hold the food for distribution.

Retail/Wholesale Food Supply

Washington State no longer funds the Fresh Bucks Program, which provided incentives for purchasing produce from Farmers' Markets and grocery retailers.

The increased minimum wage is driving up costs for food from farms and restaurants.

Grocery stores have closed reducing food access in certain areas.

[Several grocery stores closed around 2017](#), leaving gaps in food retail in Sumas, East Whatcom, and the Birchwood Neighborhood in Bellingham.

[Prohibitive COVID-19 rules at the Canadian border](#) threatened the only grocery retailer in Point Roberts.

Food and Nutrition Education

People are not always willing or able to pay higher prices for local food.

While more and more people see the value of local agriculture, there is still a [large gap in understanding the value of fresh and local food](#).

Schools would like to do more to address food and nutrition education but lack funding.

Schools are interested in integrating food and nutrition education, but there is no money [allocated](#) specifically for nutrition education. Some school district PTAs fund Common Threads seed to table education programs.

The 2018 [Healthy Youth Survey](#) showed an [increase in the number of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students reporting eating fewer than 5 servings of fruits or vegetables per day](#).

► Current Collaborations

Food Access

[COVID-19 Food Security Task Force](#) was established under Whatcom Unified Command to increase emergency food distribution throughout the county during COVID-19. The Task Force is facilitated by the Whatcom Community Foundation, and includes about 25 organizations including Whatcom Family Farmers, Whatcom County Food Banks, the YMCA, Salvation Army, and other programs working to increase food access.

[The Farm to Freezer Program](#) was conceived by the Food Security Task Force in late Spring 2020 to help local farmers whose consumer-direct and restaurant sales were severely impacted by the pandemic. Funding from WSDA Food Assistance enabled community partners – Bellingham Food Bank, Bellingham Public Schools, and Common Threads – to purchase crops from farms with disrupted markets and prepare soups and sauces in the Central Kitchen to freeze and provide to hunger relief programs in 2021.

[Tip the Scales for Hunger Relief](#) is another project funded by WSDA Food Assistance to relieve financial stress for local farmers. Bellingham Food Bank, Sustainable Connections, and Bellingham Farmers Market worked together to design a system to purchase leftover produce from market vendors at the end of the day and distribute it to meal programs and shelters.

[Foothills Community Food Partnership](#) – The East Whatcom Regional Resource Center, Foothills Food Bank, Whatcom County Health Dept., Northwest Agriculture Business Center, and other partner organizations have deployed a Food Action Plan and updated the action plan in 2020.

Christ the King Farm provides produce for Food Banks, Food Pantries, Senior Centers, the Birchwood Food Desert Fighters, and other community groups.

Summer Food Program – In 2019, the Bellingham Food Bank partnered with the YMCA, some affordable housing communities, Christ the King Farm, the Bellingham School District, and the Whatcom County Health Department to provide food boxes and children activity programming to residents at some affordable housing developments in Bellingham.

Food Recovery Program – This program run by Sustainable Connections works with restaurants and grocery stores to collect and redistribute surplus food to food banks and meal programs across the County.

The Birchwood Food Desert Fighters continue to work for food justice in the Birchwood Neighborhood. They are a group of community members who support a produce share spot, little free food boxes, and community gardens.

Retail/Wholesale Food Supply

Puget Sound Food Hub Cooperative – The Northwest Agriculture Business Center supported regional food hub development which evolved into a cooperative of family farms, aggregation centers and distribution networks. PSFH enables wholesale sales by local producers to restaurants, groceries, and institutions throughout the Puget Sound region.

Supporting Farms to Scale up Production – Sustainable Connections, Northwest Agriculture Business Center, and Cloud Mountain Farm Center collaborated on a WSDA Specialty Crop Block Grant project to help small and mid-size Whatcom and Skagit farms scale up production and increase wholesale sales to meet the needs of institutional buyers such as school districts.

Eat Local First Collaborative – Sustainable Connections, Tilth Alliance and regional partners across the state worked to merge different online farm finder tools into a single easy-to-use [Washington Food & Farm Finder](#).

Food and Nutrition Education

Kids Cook Lunch – Recognizing a gap in summer meal program for participants in the Kids Days of Summer at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center, Common Threads Farm provides a meal prep education activity to kids. Kids got to make and eat their own nutritional lunch.

Food to Bank On – Sustainable Connections runs this three-year beginning farmer business training and mentorship program and the participants are paid to supply fresh produce to Whatcom County food banks.

Whatcom Food Network is comprised of many organizations, agencies, and institutions working to strengthen the local and regional food system. WFN has provided bi-

annual educational community forums for many years. In 2021 the Steering Committee is focusing on issues of equity, racial and social justice across the food system and revitalizing the purpose and goals of the Network.

[Common Threads Farm](#) and county school districts provide experiential education for K-12 students in school gardens and cooking in the classroom. Since school has been happening online, Common Threads has offered online cooking classes. Common Threads' Americorps service members also are supporting the Farm to Freezer program and Bellingham district's food distribution during COVID-19, as well as supporting lunch and education programming at migrant farmworker camps in the Lynden area.

[WSU SNAP Ed](#) has been providing nutrition and food access education for youth, families, and adults with limited incomes in schools, food banks and community settings.

[Whatcom Farm-to-School](#) – This collaborative project funded by the Whatcom Community Foundation brought together school districts, food producers, and organizations across the county food system to increase local food in school meals and food education in the cafeteria, classroom, and community. The Whatcom Farm to School Support Team ended its coordination role in 2020 having achieved its primary goals.

[Whatcom Veggie RX Pilot](#) - Unity Care, Sea Mar, PeaceHealth, Community Health Plan of Washington, and The Community Food Co-op collaborated to provide nutrition classes and a \$40 voucher each month for 15 months to 180 patients who have Type II Diabetes and Food Insecurity. A significant number of patients experienced improvement in their blood sugar. Following this successful pilot test, the program has been expanded by Unity Care NW.

Waste

Waste exists in all areas of the food system from farm runoff of animal waste, chemicals, and plastics, to excess packaging in commercial foods, to food that is not consumed and ends up in our landfills.

► Key Developments

There is a growing lack of market for recyclables and it is increasingly hard to find buyers.

NW Recycling closed in February 2021 due to several factors, including diminishing incentives.

There is increased awareness about food waste.

Local efforts aim to reduce waste.

The County Climate Impact Advisory Committee conducted a [Community Research Project](#) that includes a section on waste.

Sustainable Connections' [Toward Zero Waste Campaign](#) provides services to over 80 businesses.

City of Bellingham passed a [single use plastics ordinance](#) in July of 2021, which will impact restaurants' takeout packaging.

► Key Challenges

The recycling industry is changing making it harder to find buyers for our recyclables.

It is too expensive to recycle most materials in the U.S.

China is no longer purchasing our country's recyclables so we are finding buyers in East Asian countries. Several of these organizations are incinerating our recyclables, highlighting an ethical dilemma.

Some regulations in place to protect food safety and promote good nutrition also lead to food waste.

Some examples of regulations that increase food waste include:

- Washington State food safety rules restrict recovery of prepared food beyond the 1.5 hour hold time, after which it must be discarded.
- Thirty percent of retail fish are thrown away.
- Health codes also prevent reusable container use at restaurants.

There are challenges with composting food waste.

A major challenge with composting food waste is that it frequently is contaminated with non-compostable items (e.g., plastic packaging or utensils mixed in with food).

Many items labeled as compostable cannot actually be composted in local facilities. Even compostable service ware can sometimes be difficult to compost, so many companies do not consider it compostable.

Curbside collection of organic waste is not available in some of the rural areas of eastern Whatcom County for residents, and collection of recycling is not available in some areas of the County as well.

Tax breaks for food donations don't benefit small-scale farmers.

Current tax code provides a tax break for large-scale farms/food producers for donations of food to charitable organizations. The same benefit does not apply to small-scale farmers so there is less incentive to donate.

Agricultural and fishing industries rely on many plastic products.

Some farmers and fishermen rely on a large variety and amount of plastic products on boats and farms. This includes seed trays, drip tape, mulch film, water pipes, and hoop house covers, which are difficult to recycle.

► Current Collaborations

Solid Waste Advisory Committee (SWAC) – The committee consists of a minimum of nine members representing a balance of interests including, but not limited to citizens, public interest groups, business, the waste management industry, and local elected public officials.

With the departure of NW Recycling, **three local companies** came together to find a solution. Sanitary Services Company will haul recyclables to Slater Road Lautenbach Recycle Park, located within the Parberry Environment Solutions' Scrap-It/ Stow-It Industrial Park, which will serve as the baling and transfer station. The County will continue to use a three bin, source separated recycling system, which greatly reduces risk of contamination of recyclables.

Commercial Waste Reduction Education and Technical Assistance –

Whatcom County continues to fund this collaborative group of organizations to support waste reduction through technical assistance and education for three audiences: [Sustainable Connections](#) and [Sanitary Service Company \(SSC\)](#) provide technical assistance, audits, and education for commercial businesses; [WSU's Master Composter/Recycler program](#) provides adult composting and recycling education, and [RE Sources' Sustainable Schools program](#) provides youth education and technical assistance for schools.

Appendix: Questions for Subject Matter Expert Interviews

Questions for Everyone	
1	How would you describe your role in the local food system
1a	When you think about our local food system, what comes to mind?
2	What are some emerging issues in [your sector of] the food system?
2a	What unmet needs, challenges, or barriers do you see in this sector of the food system?
3	How is your sector impacted by external market forces?
4	What are the biggest upcoming or current opportunities for improving our local food system that you know about?
5	What policies [or practices] are currently in place in Whatcom County that hinder a thriving local food system from your sector's perspective?
6	What policies [or practices] could we enact in Whatcom County to support a thriving local food system from your sector's perspective?
6a	Are there any best practices you've seen in other places you'd like to see replicated in Whatcom County
7	Is there anyone else you think I should speak to
Sector-Specific Questions	
1	What is the biggest barrier to accessing local, nutritious food?
2	Are you using guestworkers or are you familiar with any local food producers using the H2A or H2B visa program?
3	How is your sector responding to the impacts of climate change?
4	How has your sector been affected by waste management practices?