

Food Hub keeps Summerland at the forefront of agri-food innovation

As one of the most productive agricultural regions in the country, the Okanagan presents many opportunities for locally produced value-added food products. Demand has never been higher for healthy snacks, pre-made meals, frozen and dried fruits and vegetables, soups, pre-mixed drinks, and other such products.

There are already 260 food processors in the Okanagan. Most are small-scale businesses and many started as a hobby. They often lack the business and technical skills to effectively market their products and scale up production. They are entrepreneurs with passion and ideas, but not the capital or technical capacity to take the next step.

In many farming regions around the world, local producers have access to so-called 'food hubs' that provide processing space, equipment, training and resources to help develop their food enterprises. Food hubs serve to keep dollars and jobs within the region where the food is grown.

There are more than 350 food hubs operating across North America, including 11 in B.C., but none in the Okanagan.

That is about to change.

More than a decade in the making, the Okanagan Food and Innovation Hub (OFIH) is now under construction on the corner of Highway 97 and Jones Flat Road in Summerland. The 22,660 sq ft state-of-the-art facility with 6,000 sq ft of cool storage is being built by LocalMotive Farmers Network Co-operative and is scheduled to open in May 2026.

The OFIH will be a collaborative space with shared technology, specialized equipment, expertise, and commercial kitchens for research and development of local food products. Processing activities will include dehydration, juicing, processing, freeze drying, blast freezing, cutting and mixing, packaging, and handling of primary agricultural products. There will also be a small retail outlet to sell products made on site.

The establishment of a Food Hub has been a priority of successive Summerland Councils, and Community Futures Okanagan Similkameen (CFOS) has been working alongside the municipality to guide the project. We have brought together a wide array of partners and funders, including all levels of government, academia, economic and community development agencies, farm industry associations, food entrepreneurs, and chambers of commerce from around the Okanagan.

The idea for a Summerland-based food hub was hatched in 2013 when staff at the federal Summerland Research and Development Centre (SRDC) met with the District of Summerland and Summerland Chamber of Commerce to discuss support for the agri-food industry to ensure the viability of local farms. A feasibility study followed in 2016 and draft business plan in 2017. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the initiative but the resulting disruption of worldwide food systems put a renewed focus on food security.

To promote local food production, the BC Ministry of Agriculture developed a model for a provincial Food Hub Network with a series of interconnected but regionally tailored and scalable facilities.

In response, the Summerland business plan was updated in 2021 with funding from the Economic Trust of the Southern Interior (ETSI-BC), and the Ministry of Agriculture then provided \$800,000 start-up funding in 2023.

OFIH will operate as non-profit agency with a board of directors representing key users and industry partners and will lease a portion of the new facility that the LocalMotive co-op is building on Highway 97. The space offers high visibility and accessibility for the Food Hub while Summerland itself is within easy reach of all the Okanagan's growing areas.

Since the establishment in 1914 of the federal Dominion Experimental Farm (now SRDC), the name Summerland has been synonymous with innovation in agriculture, with 80% of all cherry varieties and many apple and grape varieties having been developed here. With the Okanagan Food and Innovation Hub, Summerland retains its place at the forefront of agri-food innovation.

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland