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Hope for the Future

Our food system moving forward

Wolfville, NS: Health professionals, farmers, and food service providers came together on May 28th and 29th at Acadia University for the 2016 Food Summit. This event was hosted by Friends of Agriculture of Nova Scotia and was themed “putting the pieces of our food system back together”. It was organized with the hope that we can all work together to bridge the gaps in our current food system by connecting people who see things through different lenses. The people in attendance were pioneers of change who are aware and affected by the current food landscape. Increasing food prices, unpredictable weather, and poor health conditions are the fallout of a broken food system that can no longer be ignored. At the end of the conference, each person submitted their own piece of the puzzle that they could contribute. This was a good starting place, but now these pieces must be put together with more added to complete the full picture.

Emma Wallace, Jessica Wall, and Stephanie Miller are Acadia Students interested in Community Development and Environmental Sustainability. All three have been helping Linda Best and FANS leading up to and since the Summit in order to collect and analyze all data retrieved at the two-day Summit. Wallace, Wall, and Miller all came out of the weekend with a renewed sense of hope for the future.

Each student has written an interesting and passionate personal statement with regards to reflections made following the 2016 Food Summit.

Emma Wallace:

“We need to focus on food literacy. We need to bring this into our education system because it is something that affects all of us - especially the younger generations. Our current food system is already having a huge negative impact on our health, and our local economy. We need to take action before it becomes any worse. One way to start is by educating those ignorant of the issues. Introducing food literacy in schools has potential to create great change. That being said, we can’t expect everything to change for the better just by introducing food literacy programs into schools. We have to make a thoughtful commitment to taking action whenever and wherever possible in terms of moving our food system in the right direction. We need to evaluate our priorities, change our habits, and support local. We need to take a minute to understand the ramifications our current food system will have on our future if we don’t encourage change and realize that this is our fight. It is our future and our children’s futures that are at stake. We need everyone on board with creating such a change. For change to happen we need to come together as a community. We need to come together as one community, diverse in our ages, income levels, career paths, interests, and passions. Everyone holds an important stake in our food system and therefore it is imperative to ensure everyone with such a stake has space to help with such a change. It is only as a diverse community that we can begin to make significant positive changes to our food system.”

Jessica Wall:

“Many of us have made personal statements about what we are going to do to fight the injustices in the food system - and that is what the food system is; a lot of injustice. Farmers are struggling to feed their own families, policy is preventing people from starting up businesses, and our earth is feeling the fallout from the quick, processed, and pre-

packaged foods that we grab on the way out the door to such food summits. The problem is that for years we have been trying to make scalable change by changing our own habits. This is a start, but is not a very solid base if there is no one to hold you accountable, empower you, and give you direction. The more we move away from dinner table conversations, the more we move away from one another in our communities. In order to have sustained positive change, community must be at the core of every action going forward. We need to have more intergenerational conversations with people of all vocations. The message to "vote with your fork" is often repeated, but a lot of people still lack the education or financial resources to really embrace what this means. The Summit was a great starting point to move the needle of action by gluing together the skills, expertise, and wisdom of the people who were in attendance. The only piece significantly missing was a wider representation of people under 30 and above 60, and of lower income levels. Everyone eats, so no one should be left out of this "vote". For this movement to really stick, we have to start by setting a place for everyone at the table."

Stephanie Miller:

"To young generations, going into the grocery store and being able to buy strawberries, blueberries and avocados year round is "nothing special." This is the system we have always known, so the vast majority of us do not even think twice about it. We want bananas - we drive to the grocery store, and we get some without even considering the hands that cared for them, where they came from, and all they went through to reach our grocery store shelves. However, underneath this seemingly luxurious system and endless variety there are a number of enormous problems. Humankind has never been more disconnected with their food than they are today, and this needs to change. The current globalized food system is not working and in fact, it is failing not one, but all, pillars of sustainability: the environment, society and local economies.

Firstly, the global food system is failing the environment. Large scale, industrial agriculture is responsible for an enormous amount of environmental destruction. This mode of agriculture is extremely energy intensive in all areas of operation - from production and processing, to export and trade throughout the world. As was pointed out at the Food Summit, globalization has resulted in a dangerous obsession with export. However, the reality is that we need action on climate change and this means reducing our emissions globally. This cannot be done with a food system that depends on fossil fuels for its very existence. We need a local food system to achieve sustainability, and one important step is reducing the distance between farmers and consumers.

In terms of the social issues that have resulted from the global food system, small farmers all over the world are struggling to compete with large corporate producers who enjoy subsidies, access to foreign markets and control over the majority of product quota. This is a reality for Nova Scotian farmers as well. Not only is the work of a farmer one of the most difficult and laborious occupations, it also results in one of the smallest incomes and many find it difficult to earn a living. Food policy, at present, revolves around large scale producers while making it extremely difficult for small local farmers to earn a living wage. Food policies and regulations in Nova Scotia and elsewhere deter young people from taking up farming and in many cases make it financially impossible for them to do so. Nova Scotia used to be home to over 12,000 farms and today there are less than 4,000. Considering the fact that everyone needs food to live, it is time to give these hardworking and dedicated individuals the respect and support that they so desperately need and deserve.

Another social issue is the fact that if you were to ask a small child where a potato comes from, they may tell you it grows on a tree or give you a simple shrug - because they had never even thought about it before. Food literacy is essential. Food used to be something that connected families and communities, but today in our hectic lives this has been replaced with happy meals and to-go containers. Youth - and people of all ages for that matter, need to become exposed to farming and a reconnection with food must be made. Food plays a central role in human health and wellbeing, and just how important it is is often underestimated. Food needs to be made a priority again and this starts with education and the creation of opportunities for engagement.

Last but not least, the economy. When we go to big chain grocers – most of our money leaves Nova Scotia and goes into the bank accounts of corporate actors who are sitting on billions of dollars. In comparison, when you buy local you are supporting a Nova Scotian family who appreciates every customer, because each customer makes a difference in their income and the overall success of their farm. These people will then put that money back into their farm and use it to support their family. I know which one I would prefer, how about you? I think that consumers often underestimate the impact that they can have, just based on where they choose to spend their money. Instead of spending that fifty dollars at a chain store Sobeys, try going to your local farm and meeting the person who produced the food. Not only will you enjoy better quality food, and they a better salary - as a result the environment and local economy will enjoy the benefits of your actions too.

Everyone has a role to play in the development of a local, sustainable food system. The time is now. Let's continue the conversation, and make the changes that we so desperately need. For present generations, and generations to come."

All three statements point out the need to begin moving forward now. It is time to make changes to our food system before it becomes too late. While the Summit ended on a hopeful and encouraging note, Wallace, Wall, and Miller state that the momentum can't stop there. We must keep moving forward, we must keep taking action, and we must encourage others to do the same.

After all, this is our fight.

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