

Foodlands Access Program Description

June 2023

The Foodlands Access Program is intended to increase the amount of productive agricultural land in the Capital Regional District (CRD) and give opportunities to young and new farmers seeking access to land. The proposed program has two delivery streams.

- **Stream #1 – Surplus Land Conversion:** Convert surplus publicly owned land to agricultural use and offer affordable leases to new and young farmers. A qualified non-profit operator would provide farm site management and offer incubator services. Incubator services include new farmer education and support for matters such as production and marketing. The CRD would secure surplus properties, manage leases, provide capital investments to bring land into production and provide program oversight.
- **Stream #2 – Grants:** Provide a granting function to support agricultural lease agreements. The granting function would leverage an existing land matching initiative offered by Young Agrarians that connects landowners with new farmers.

Phased Implementation: Trial Site at Bear Hill Regional Park

Staff propose to phase the implementation of the Foodlands Access Program, beginning with a trial phase to test the viability of converting surplus public lands for farming purposes. The preferred trial site is the eastern portion of Bear Hill Regional Park, which is in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). The site has existing agricultural assets, land use designations that permit farming, and is estimated to have the lowest overall costs to bring the land into food production. The proposed program could be facilitated through a license agreement in accordance with the Regional Parks Bylaw.

The proposed concept for the trial phase is to:

- Create 10 to 15 farmer plots of 0.25 to 0.5 acres each.
- Partner with an agriculture focused non-profit organization (NPO) with experience in farm site management and farmer incubator programs.
- Offer affordable leases to young and new farmers, as well as incubator services through the NPO.
- Undertake key capital investments at the site to support farming efforts.
- Commit to a minimum five-year test period to gain experience in running a farm site, and to explore the CRD's capacity to convert surplus lands to productive agricultural spaces.

It is proposed that CRD Regional Parks maintains ownership of the site during the test period. The new service would likely not have the funds at the outset to acquire property.

The program would be reviewed after a five-year test period to determine next steps for the foodlands access service and ongoing use of the site.

Next Steps:

The CRD needs new service and funding authorities to deliver this work. CRD staff need to confirm that an NPO is available to provide farm site management and offer new farmer incubator services. CRD staff must also prepare a draft service establishment bylaw, canvas local

governments and electoral areas for interest in service participation and finalize the funding approach. Once these matters are confirmed, staff will seek direction from the Board to initiate the service establishment process.

Timing is anticipated as follows:

- Q2 2023**
 - Seek CRD Regional Parks Committee conditional approval for use of the Bear Hill site for agriculture.
- Ongoing**
 - Engage First Nations on use of Bear Hill site and participation in the proposed Foodlands Access Program.
- Q3 2023**
 - Confirm availability of farm site NPO.
 - Seek input from agricultural stakeholders and local government staff.
 - Prepare draft service establishment bylaw.
- Q4 2023**
 - Present draft service establishment bylaw to CRD Board.
 - Canvas local governments for interest in participating in service.
 - Seek Regional Parks Committee approval for use of the Bear Hill site.
- Q1-Q2 2024**
 - Finalize service establishment bylaw and deliver service establishment bylaw process.
- 2024-2025**
 - Develop detailed operational requirements and activate Bear Hill site for agriculture and initiate grant program.