



Interior Health



# Interior Region Indigenous Food Forum: Summary Report

September 17-19, 2024

Williams Lake (T'exelc)

Esk'etemc Community

Tl'esqox Community

**Health and well-being for all**

Quality | Integrity | Compassion | Safety

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## Land Acknowledgement

Interior Health would like to recognize and acknowledge the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Dãkelh Dené, Ktunaxa, Nlaka'pamux, Secwépemc, St'át'imc, syilx, and T̓silhqot'in Nations where we live, learn, collaborate and work together.

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## Acknowledgements

It is with great respect that the Steering Committee acknowledges the Northern Secwépemc and the Tsilhqot'in Nations and the traditional territories on which the Interior Region Indigenous Food Forum (IRIFF) event was held. We wish to express our sincere gratitude for the invitation from the Tsilhqot'in National Government to host the 2024 IRIFF and the extended welcome from the Williams Lake First Nation (WLFN). We acknowledge and thank both Tl'esqox and Esk'etemc communities for inviting food forum participants into the community, providing delicious and nourishing food and sharing their culture, knowledge, and traditional songs and stories.



*Welcoming ceremony in Esk'et.*

Thank you to the members of the Community-led Advisory Committee, Interior Health (IH), and First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) for their partnership and efforts in coordinating the food forum.

We are humbled and grateful to the Elders, speakers, presenters, panelists, community leaders and members as well as the workshop facilitators who contributed their time, knowledge, expertise and thoughts on a variety of topics.

We also thank [Julie Elizabeth Photography](#) for capturing special moments through her visual storytelling. Her creativity and artistry show the connections people have made with each other, with the land, and with the traditional songs and food shared at the food forum. We are honoured to share her photography in this report.

## Overview

The third annual Interior Region Indigenous Food Forum (IRIFF) was a gathering to remember. Time was spent connecting on the land of the Secwépemc and Tsilhqot'in Peoples from Sept. 17 – 19, 2024. For two-and-a-half days communities came together to build connections, share knowledge and learn from each other on Indigenous food security, food systems and traditional wellness.



*Emcee Joan Gentles*

On a beautiful and warm evening of Sept. 17, we held our welcoming feast at the Williams Lake Curling Club on the traditional territory of the WLFN. Joan Gentles, a Tl'esqox elder, was the emcee, sharing stories and laughter throughout the event. Kristy Alphonse Palmantier of



*Elder Freddie Johnson Sr. & Freddie Johnson Jr.*

Williams First Lake Nation (WLFN) opened the event with a few words and was joined by Elder Virginia Gilbert for the dinner prayer. Connie Jasper, Tsilhqot'in Nation Health Manager, also welcomed guests and participants and spoke about spending time in rural and remote communities and how the growing season is much different than other areas of the Interior. The attendees feasted on a delicious buffet dinner catered by Logger's Lunch, including items such as bison meatballs, elk stew, and poached halibut. Later in the evening, cultural



performances were led by Elder Freddie Johnson Sr from Esk'etemc and the evening ended with a lively game of Lahal (stick games).

The next two days each began with a traditional opening and welcome by Kristy Alphonse Palmantier in Williams Lake. The morning sessions included presenters, a panel, and group discussions, followed by lunch and community visits by bus to Esk'etemc and Tl'esqox.

The food forum ended with much appreciation and gratitude for the speakers, workshop facilitators, and guests and there was excitement to move forward with new connections and a plan to meet again in 2025.

## Attendance: Who Participated



*Guests listening to a morning presentation.*

Most of the attendees were Indigenous community members from throughout the Interior region. This included individuals working in health and wellness, food security, gardening and agriculture, and food sovereignty within their respective communities or Nations. We were fortunate to come together with members from syilx, Nlaka'pamux, Secwépemc, St'at'imc, Ktunaxa, Tsilhqot'in, and Däkelh Dené Nations.

Additionally, participants representing organizations such as the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, En'owkin Centre, Community Futures Development Corporation of Central Interior First Nations and New Relationship Trust (NRT) joined the gathering.

Non-Indigenous partners and organizations also attended the food forum. There were representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Thompson Rivers University (TRU), Interior Health (IH), First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) and United Way.

## Day 2: Sept. 18, 2024

The morning event had several presentations including a panel and group discussions around food sovereignty training initiatives available for communities. Joan Gentles from Tl'esqox guided the morning discussions and presentations.

### **"Elskstwéwc ne tmicw" Training from an Indigenous Food Sovereignty Perspective: Community Action to Support Training and Careers in Food Sovereignty Presentation**

**Speakers:** Fred Fortier (virtual), Laura Kalina (virtual) and Gillian Watt

The speakers shared the courses available through Thompson Rivers University (TRU) to support food careers in community including the Regenerative Agriculture Program and the Food Sovereignty micro credential course. Each course through the Regenerative Agriculture Program is available individually without having to enter the program. The core of the



program focuses on building a foundation in business and enterprise management and blending learnings with natural resource science courses such as soil health and diversification and biodiversity. The courses are offered either virtually or in-person through the TRU Williams Lake Campus. There is an applied practicum with Fred Fortier to provide hands-on experience such as planting fruit trees and harvesting. The goal of the courses is to create a positive relationship with food through reciprocity, ensuring the traditional ways around food are not lost.

## Table Discussions

After hearing from the presenters and panelists, everyone gathered in small groups for further discussion. There were several themes highlighted at various tables such as the need for leadership buy-in, building community capacity and addressing financial barriers.

The importance of good food and sustainable practices needs to be shared with community members and leaders. Providing opportunities to learn from one another, such as sharing experiences of harvesting and preserving food, brings people together. A common idea was starting food production training at a younger age, so children know where their food comes from. The Food Sovereignty micro credential program at TRU aligns with Indigenous ways of food production and could be one way for communities to build capacity.

*“If those who are good at it could be more vulnerable with their journey, it would give confidence to those who feel they do not have the skill set, or those who have tried and failed to attempt food production.”*

Many participants acknowledged inconsistent funding sources, systemic racism and logistical challenges such as lack of water, as barriers to implementing sustainable food production and food sovereignty programs. Allocated funding for food production would support the continued growth of food sovereignty programs and the hiring of more individuals to help manage community gardens/greenhouses and programs. Reliable funding would provide food sovereignty coordinators and community garden coordinators with a living wage. By building capacity of these programs, funds could be generated at the food production, food processing and food distribution level. Profits would be put back into the food programming.



Gillian Watt



Guests participating in table discussions.

## Food Sovereignty Panel

**Speakers:** Shona Myers, Sam Green, Julie John and Taylor King; facilitated by Gillian Watt

Graduates of the TRU's Regenerative Agriculture Program and Food Sovereignty Micro Credential Course shared successes and challenges with developing food sovereignty in First Nations communities. Panelists shared that the TRU program provided connection with colleagues and community members and hands-on experiences for students to work together and share new ideas around food sovereignty. The flexibility of the program was a benefit for those who had other ongoing responsibilities. Panelists also spoke about challenges including grant funding timelines that do not align with community timelines, matching capacity needs with grant writing, and sustainable food sovereignty programs with ongoing funding and recruitment and retention of people to work in this space.

### Esk'etemc Community Visit

Esk'etemc spans the Alkali Lake area, about 50 kilometers southwest of Williams Lake. As caretakers of Esk'etemculucw (land of the Esk'etemc), Esk'etemc have a strong connection to their land and culture (please see: [Esketemc.ca](https://esketemc.ca) | [Esk'etemc Website](https://esketemc.ca))

Participants were welcomed to Esk'etemc by Dave and Marilyn Beaulieu with a traditional prayer, drumming and songs shared by the Cultural Committee. [Esk'et Mewecw Cafe](https://esketemc.ca) prepared an incredible homemade lunch using the bounty from their community garden; soups such as the salmon chowder and a cream of green tomato, a fresh garden salad, finishing with pumpkin bread, apple tarts, and raspberry tarts for dessert.



*Highlights from the Esk'etemc community visit.*

### Esk'et Community Garden Presentation & Tour

Kimberly Paul shared the story of transforming an overgrown hayfield in 2023 into a thriving 40-row community garden. Despite limited water infrastructure and a late start, innovative techniques like plastic mulch for water retention and mushroom compost for soil enrichment





*Kimberly Paul provided gardening tips & tricks during the tour.*

were key to its success. Crops such as corn, tomatoes, squash, potatoes, and lettuces were planted as they are well-suited to the short growing season.

The garden has become a hub for education and mentorship, teaching youth and community members about sustainable farming, food preservation, and traditional medicines. Kimberly also highlighted the community's efforts in processing 600 donated salmon into 948 canning jars, alongside numerous cases of vegetables from this year's harvest, for winter storage.

Looking to the future, plans include building a geodome greenhouse for year-round seedling production, expanding the garden to include a medicinal section, and creating a dedicated space for processing and cold storage.

After the meal, Kimberly led a garden tour, showcasing how the produce supports community events, with surplus items available at the Esk'et Store and Café.



## Day 3: September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2024

The morning event had several presentations along with group discussions on food emergency planning in communities. Joan Gentles from Tl'esqox guided the morning discussions and presentations.

### Tl'etinqox Internation Cultural Garden "Food & Love" Presentation

**Speakers:** Trevor and Alejandra Valeria Mack



*Trevor Mack & Alejandra Valeria Mack*

There is a saying that goes "how can two walk together unless they are agreed?" It was beautiful to watch a young couple present their shared passion for food sovereignty and how they have incorporated their cultural knowledge with the spirituality of food production. Trevor shared his Tsilhqot'in teachings while Alejandra shared her Mexican teachings and the intersection between the two was very clear.

Both shared that food sovereignty is beyond gardens. Ceremony is a necessary part of the whole food production cycle from planting to harvesting. Alejandra spoke about the corn planting and harvesting ceremony to ask





Mother Nature to make the plating and harvest season successful. Key points from this are that ceremony has resulted in a bounty harvest and results in a better connection with the food we eat.

Trevor spoke on how the T̓silhqot'in people were not purely nomadic but that there is evidence of community gardens. He has taken a special interest in working with the youth, so they take on the responsibility of bringing back the culture of community gardens singing and talking to the gardens. He also recognizes that due to how hard the work is, a strategy to retain interest is important. Youth who stay the course are rewarded with an international trip.

## Indigenous Food Sovereignty is Emergency Planning in Community Presentation

**Speaker:** Dawn Morrison

A passionate leader, educator and researcher in Indigenous Food Sovereignty, Dawn Morrison provided an overview of transformative networks and projects dedicated to creating awareness, concerns and strategies impacting food security in Indigenous communities. As a founding member of the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty (WGIFS), Dawn saw the need to create space for Indigenous leadership and voices to support and build capacity for communities around food sovereignty. She shared a toolkit developed by the Working Group titled "From the Ground Up" for anyone interested in starting their journey with Indigenous Food Sovereignty planning and mobilizing towards food justice such as building cultural resurgence, relationships and networks.



Dawn Morrison

### Table Discussions

Following the presentations, Dawn facilitated a session for small groups to explore emergency planning in communities where three questions were asked to guide discussions. Below is a snapshot of ideas and responses shared.

#### What currently supports Indigenous food sovereignty and emergency food security in your community?

- Elders, workshops on how to process deer and fish.
- Grassroot gatherings led by elders, aunty and uncle knowledge.
- Traditional ecological knowledge.
- Volunteers in community.
- In Tl'etinqox -cultural gatherings, deer hunting, berry picking, fishing and sharing food.
- Distributing food and produce through food boxes; prioritizing Elders, providing healthy choices; food boxes for new and expectant mothers.
- Monthly calendars with cultural activities.
- Community garden produce provided at ceremonies, funerals.
- Provide fish to members.

#### Thinking about what your community has, what's needed?

- Root cellar is great, but a C-can would be better (more secure/capacity).
- Build and/or provide storage space, root cellar, freezers.



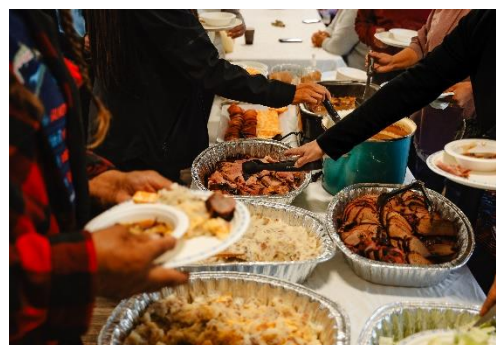
- Gathering space (e.g. garden), make the garden an attractive and relaxing space so it's inviting.
- Cultural mentorship due to knowledge gap: how to store, preserve food, gather
- Create a safe place in the garden so women and men feel safe.
- "Welcome back" or "welcome home" ceremony for those who were disconnected from community, family and culture.
- Getting schools involved such as building a greenhouse, using the greenhouse, seeding etc.

**What are the most important ACTIONS to take, starting now, and what kind of help do you need in order to take them?**

- Start small and grow.
- Save seeds and share.
- Learn about food preservation.
- Make do with what you have.
- Build network within community and surrounding areas.
- Think outside the box, look at alternative ways of growing food, it doesn't always have to cost money.
- Opening conversations with medical professionals around food as medicine rather than defaulting to prescriptions
- Creating a safe and inviting space at the garden rather than a doctor's office.
- Bring families together through healing circles to bring young people and adults home; need to build strong families and Nations.
- Support the spiritual piece that may be missing to recreate balance

## Tl'esqox Community Visit

Tl'esqox (Toosey) is one of six communities in the Tsilhqot'in Nation, located southwest of Williams Lake, with its name derived from the muddy creek (Riske Creek) flowing through it. Traditionally, the Tsilhqot'in people thrived by moving with the seasons, hunting and gathering; however, the intergenerational transfer of food-related knowledge has been impacted over the past century. Climate change, infrastructure gaps, and human-caused disruptions have affected food security, making planning for traditional food sources a concern for the community.



*Lunch buffet provided by chef Aaron Sparkes.*

Participants were welcomed by Joan Gentles and with a prayer and song by Gary Steam. Afterwards, participants were fed a delicious meal prepared by chef Aaron Sparkes featuring smoked venison and stew with a variety of sides and salad.

### Medicine Making Workshop

During the workshop, Maggie Ranger (owner of [Earthdance Botanicals](#)) shared her expertise on traditional medicine picking, emphasizing the importance of approaching the practice with respect and intention. She highlighted the significance of harvesting medicines with a good heart and being mindful of the land, cautioning against areas exposed to chemical spraying.



*Tinctures guests created and took home after the workshop.*



Maggie encouraged participants to observe and listen to nature for guidance, explaining that plants thriving in an area are often safe to harvest. As part of the workshop, each attendee had the opportunity to create their own Cold, Flu, and Sore Throat Tincture with the dried components listed below, blending practical skills with traditional knowledge.



**Arnica:** Bruises, sprains, muscle aches, wound healing, superficial phlebitis, joint pain, inflammation from insect bites, and swelling from broken bones.



**Mullen:** It may reduce the severity of pain and inflammation in rheumatoid arthritis.



**Red Clover:** Blood-thinning properties, which keeps blood clots from forming. might help reduce symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes and night sweats, because of their estrogen-like effects.



**Lichen:** Wound healing and protection against certain cancers.



**Balsam:** Cuts and respiratory issues.



**Garden Sage:** Lower cancer risk, memory improvement, and improved brain function.



**Rosehip:** Lowers cancer risk, memory improvement, and improved brain function.

## Traditional Drying Workshop



*Venison meat hangs in a traditional smoke house at Tl'esqox.*

Mildred Tenale showed participants a glimpse of traditional drying where a separate drying and smoking room was built near her home.

A deer, freshly harvested by her brother, was smoking at the time; Mildred shared that time is crucial to get smoke on the meat as soon as possible to keep flies away.

It takes about three-to-four days for deer meat to dry and once completed, the meat is portioned out and stored in the freezer. Mildred said she finds that freezing dried meat preserves the quality of the meat.



## Community Garden Tour

The community garden tour was provided by Kaitlyn McClure. A new metal fence was built around the garden to keep animals away from the produce. There was an abundance of colorful flowers, plants and produce such as squash, pumpkins, and corn. Participants were invited to help themselves to harvest some of the produce like tobacco leaves, tobacco buds and carrots. Participants enjoyed exploring the gardens on a warm and sunny day and heard about the community's hopes in expanding and growing their garden for the upcoming seasons.



*Participants enjoy fresh produce from the community garden.*

## Wellness Supports

The Steering Committee and Advisory Committee together saw the importance in making sure that key wellness support (e.g. smudging, brushing off and a safe space to debrief) as well as traditional practices and protocols (e.g. prayer before meals) were available throughout the Forum.

### Cultural Support

- Danikka Murphy, Williams Lake First Nation
- David Archie, Williams Lake First Nation
- Valerie West, Williams Lake First Nation

## Closing



*Lunch from Chef Aaron Sparkes in Tl'esqox.*

Food is healing and goes beyond nourishing the physical body as it has strong ties with culture, ceremonies, people, communities, and connection to the land. Colonization has disrupted traditional food practices and systems from being passed from generation to generation which in turn, affects the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples. Despite this, food can be a source of healing and re-connection with culture and the land. Bringing people together at the Food Forum provides an opportunity to celebrate, strengthen and deepen ties with each other and with traditional foods and practices.

The Food Forum Steering Committee would like to thank all the speakers, Elders, panel presenters and cultural teams for welcoming and sharing their stories, perspectives and knowledge around food and its ties to culture. We are grateful for the opportunity to bring people together to build meaningful connections and engage in meaningful dialogue. We also want to thank



the participants who have provided feedback from the event as they will help guide future Food Forum events.

## Advisory Committee

- Byron Louis – Chief, Okanagan Indian Band
- Connie Jasper – Health Manager, Tšilhqot'in National Government
- Dawnalyn Webster – Health Director, Tl'esqox
- Fred Fortier – Secwepemc, Nlaka'pamux
- Gabe Pukacz – Economic Development, Esk'etemc
- Judy Ventry – Health Director, Esk'etemc
- Lorna Elkins – Health Programs Coordinator, Tšilhqot'in
- Mildred Tenale – Elder, Tl'esqox
- Shona Myers – LPN, Tšilhqot'in
- Vera Quilt – Food Security Lead, Xení Gwet'in



*Fresh dill growing in the Tl'esqox garden.*

## Sponsorship

This year we had many sponsors to help make the Food Forum happen! Thank you to the following organization and businesses that helped to make this event so successful!

The Interior Region Indigenous Food Forum is funded by Community Food Action Initiative (CFAI), a health promotion initiative that aims to increase community food security within what is known as British Columbia. The primary objective of CFAI is to support food security in rural, remote and Indigenous communities and encourages community involvement, community-led decision-making and partnerships.



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## Steering Committee



*(L – R) Kathleen Yung, Fiona Goorman, Jill Worboys, Kris Murray, Kaelyn Elfert, Katrina Lehenbauer, Savannah Brown, Sarah Edwards, Carnation Zhuwaki, Ashley Cruickshank, Kristi Christian, Alexis Blueschke*

- Alexis Blueschke, IH – Public Health Dietitian
- Ashley Cruickshank, IH – Administrative Assistant, Indigenous Partnerships
- Carnation Zhuwaki, IH – Knowledge Facilitator, Indigenous Partnerships
- Fiona Goorman, FNHA – Environmental Health Officer
- Jill Worboys, IH – Public Health Dietitian
- Kathleen Yung, FNHA – Food Security and Healthy Eating Specialist
- Katrina Lehenbauer, IH – Manager, Healthy Communities
- Kris Murray, IH – Corporate Director, Indigenous Health & Wellness
- Kristi Christian, IH – Lead, Indigenous Food Security
- Sarah Edwards, IH – Lead, Indigenous Strategy & Accountability
- Savanna Brown, IH – Director, Quality, Standards & Initiatives, Food Services

## References

Stories @ IH: Interior Indigenous Food Forum allows for important conversations  
<https://www.interiorhealth.ca/stories/interior-indigenous-food-forum-allows-important-conversations>

YouTube: Interior Indigenous Food Forum Talks Climate Change & Food Systems  
[https://youtu.be/XFba6hci\\_Tk](https://youtu.be/XFba6hci_Tk)