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# Growers Station

*Helping keep farms  
in the green*



**Canada** 

## Central organic food hub growing at a steady pace

Mirroring a trend that is happening across the world, organics is one of the fastest growing sectors of PEI agriculture.

Production has skyrocketed from 1,615 acres in 2003 to 11,700 in 2021. To help sustain that trend, the PEI Certified Organic Producers Cooperative has been developing a long-range strategy that includes a centralized food cooperative called Growers Station.

With help from the Organic Industry Development Program, funded through the federal-provincial Canadian Agricultural Partnership, Grower Station opened its Malpeque Road location in 2021 with 12 growers selling an array of fruit and vegetable products through the central hub. They collectively realized almost \$100,000 in sales to retail outlets, restaurants and directly to consumers.

A year later, sales are edging towards the \$500,000 mark, with over 40 farmers supplying vegetables, beef, poultry and a broad range of value-added products like sea salt and coffee roasting beans.

“The idea really grew out of the first organic summit back in late 2020,” explains Karen Murchison, research coordinator for the cooperative. “A working group of five farmers studied the issue over that winter.”

A decision was made very early in the process to adopt a slow and steady approach to developing a cooperative approach to sales and marketing. Research showed similar efforts in other parts of the country often faced significant challenges if they developed too much infrastructure quickly and the cooperative was determined to avoid that pitfall.

Growers Station has proven to be a winner with both producers and clients. Murchison says growers like the fact that Growers Station handles distribution and marketing, allowing them to focus their efforts on growing the highest quality organic products.

“The retailers and restaurants like the fact they only deal with one person, and they have a guaranteed supply,” she says.

Growers Stations Logistics Coordinator Robert MacPherson spends much of his week on the road picking up produce from growers and delivering it to a growing client list of up to 60 clients during the peak summer months. All of the ordering is done through a centralized website.

“The demand is definitely there and growing,” says MacPherson.



The full freezer at Growers Station



Karen Murchison, research coordinator with the PEI Certified Organic Producers Cooperative, looks over some of the items in the fridge at the Growers Station central organic food hub in Charlottetown.

Murchison agrees, saying the short-term goal is to double Grower Stations sales to \$1 million within the next couple of years. For that to happen, the hub will need another van and a second driver and they are currently exploring funding options to make that a reality.

While there has been interest expressed from both producers and potential clients in the Summerside area and western Prince County, Murchison says they are currently not able to capitalize on that until they have another truck on the road.

“Our goal is certainly to have both producers and clients Island-wide,” she says.

They are also hoping to make inroads into the institutional market, including long-term care facilities, and have launched an assessment study to help determine the next move.

While the hub does have some refrigeration capacity, Murchison says the cooperative wants to offer more meat and poultry products and that will require more refrigeration and storage space.

She describes the food hub as a not-for-profit social enterprise, adding the producer sets the price for their product and the hub receives a fee to cover expenses. The goal, she says, is to keep the profits on the farm rather than investing in a lot of infrastructure.

“We tend to grow slow and steady, investing in what we can afford,” Murchison says. “That is the best way to make sure the hub is viable going forward.”

While products sold through hub are slightly higher in price, she adds “our customers are telling us we are competitive, and they are getting better value.”