

POPULATION HEALTH TRUST

# FOOD SECURITY REPORT 2023



POPULATION  
HEALTH TRUST  
ADVISORY COMMITTEE

# VISION

Skagit County has a resilient local food system that provides equitable access to nutritious, sustainable, and culturally appropriate food for all.



## INTRODUCTION

Access to nutritious food is vital to our physical and mental health. It is linked to improved health across the lifespan, including a stronger immune system, lower risk of chronic health conditions, and longevity. Kids with stable access to nutritious foods learn better and people with adequate nutrition are more productive. This leads to more positive economic outcomes for all.<sup>1,2</sup>

In 2020-2021, Skagit County Public Health and the Population Health Trust (PHT), advisory committee to the Board of Health, completed a Community Health Assessment (CHA). The goal of the CHA was to identify our most pressing population health issues as we recover from the impacts of the pandemic. During the process, food security was identified as a challenge for many residents.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA):

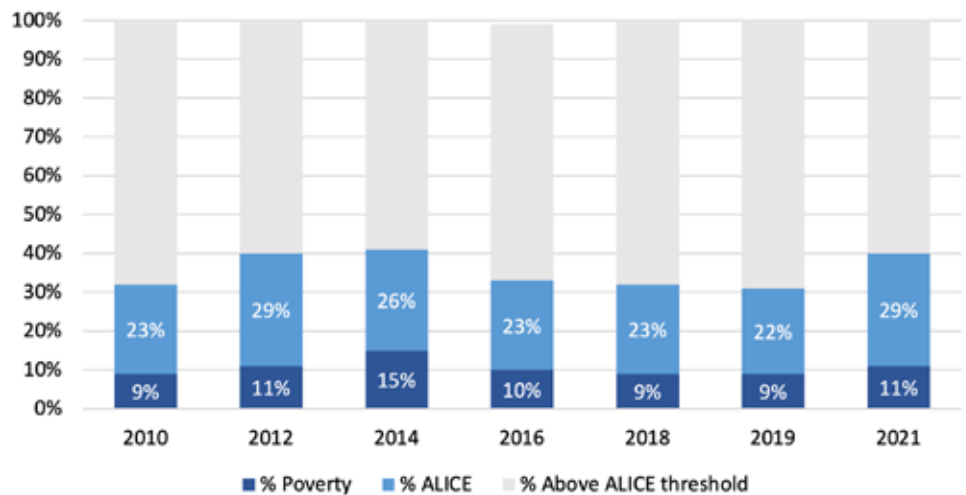
**11%** of Skagit County adults experience some level of food insecurity.

**16%** of children under the age of 18 in Skagit County experience some level of food insecurity.<sup>3</sup>



The ALICE Essentials Index (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) is used to present a more equitable view of income levels needed to make ends meet. It includes households that are just above the federal poverty line (FPL) but when other costs of living are factored in, struggle financially. These families often reduce their monthly budget for food to ensure they can pay rent, utilities, and other monthly expenses.

Figure 1  
Percent of households below ALICE and FPL thresholds. Skagit County, multiple years<sup>4</sup>



In response to the challenge of food insecurity in our community, a Food Security Workgroup was formed to build a stronger, more resilient food system. Central to their work was increasing nutrition security, ensuring that people have consistent and equitable access to foods that are optimal to their health and well-being.<sup>5</sup>



*“While I am currently fortunate in my food security, there have been several years in the past where food banks, free/reduced lunch, Skagit Gleaners, etc. were a necessity for my family.”*

— Food Security Survey respondent



**What is a food system?**  
 The food system is an interconnected network of activities involving the production, distribution, and consumption of food.

Figure 2  
 Image of the food system<sup>6</sup>

## GOALS OF THE FOOD SECURITY WORKGROUP

- 1** Understand the scope of food security in the community, using quantitative data, surveys, and focus groups.
- 2** Identify work already happening that supports residents experiencing food insecurity.
- 3** Conduct a gaps analysis to understand areas of need.
- 4** Create an improvement plan to guide the community in a shared vision.

This document outlines the results of a shared community process. It is a guide developed to create a stronger, more resilient food system, one that ensures all Skagitonians have access to nourishing food.

If you would like to gain a greater understanding of the issue through data, you can view the full data report on our website [www.skagitcounty.net/Departments/PHTAC/reportsmain.htm](http://www.skagitcounty.net/Departments/PHTAC/reportsmain.htm).

*“Food is really expensive, even for middle-class households. It might not prevent us from purchasing food, but it does impact how far our money goes.”*

— Food Security Survey respondent





FARMING, PRODUCTION,  
AND PROCESSING

## FARMING, PRODUCTION, AND PROCESSING

*Increasing the amount of locally produced food available to residents while supporting small and emerging farmers is essential for building a healthy food system.*

**GOAL 1:** Consistent and coordinated, mutually beneficial purchasing practices among producers, food businesses, and organizations providing food ensures expanded markets for farmers and that nutritious, local foods are available at community access points.



STORAGE AND  
DISTRIBUTION

### STRATEGY 1

Organizations providing food, meal, and other support services leverage their collective buying power to purchase locally produced goods.

#### ACTION STEPS

- Create a buyers and a growers network to assess the feasibility of institutional purchasing at the local level and to improve coordination.
- Convene relevant stakeholders (K-12 schools, child care facilities, senior-serving organizations, hospitals and food pantries) to understand current barriers to local purchasing and advocate, as appropriate, for additional state-level funding.
- Connect producers to funding sources such as tax incentives, grants, and equipment subsidies, designed to encourage sales to local organizations.



RESOURCES, PROGRAMS,  
AND EDUCATION

### STRATEGY 2

Create structure and systems that simplify purchasing between food access organizations and local farmers.

#### ACTION STEPS

- Utilize guidance from the Washington State Food Coalition to establish a collaborative food purchasing system between the Community Action Distribution Center and local food pantries.
- Research possible operational models, such as cooperatives, to strengthen and expand partnerships between food pantries and local producers.



FOOD SURPLUS  
AND WASTE



The USDA recommends eating at least two servings of fruit and three servings of vegetables each day for health. <sup>7</sup>

In Skagit County

**16%** of kids

(grades 8, 10, 12) are eating the USDA daily recommended amount of vegetables. <sup>8</sup>

**18%** of adults

are eating the USDA daily recommended amount of vegetables. <sup>9</sup>

# GOAL 2:

Farmers and producers have equitable and easy access to necessary support services to develop and sustain a viable business in Skagit County.

## STRATEGY 1

Improve access to sources of funding that support farmers in making capital purchases.

### ACTION STEPS

- Conduct an assessment to identify needed resources and supports for farmers, especially those that are resource-limited or from communities of color.
- Identify sources of funding (grants, low-barrier loans) developed to provide support for farmers.
- Engage agencies providing technical assistance to farmers in creating and promoting training programs designed to meet the needs of individual farmers.

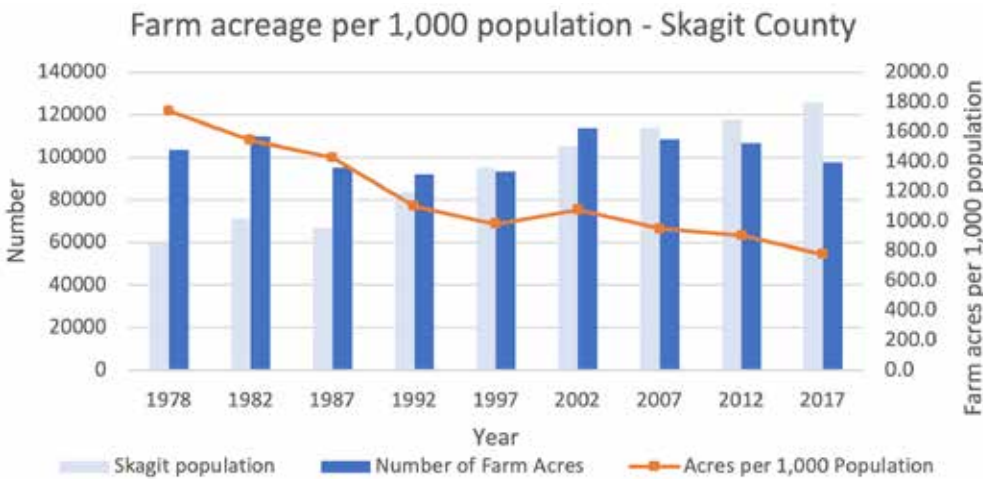
## STRATEGY 2

Support organizations working to connect emerging and small farmers to available land.

### ACTION STEPS

- Identify a local agency working to build connections between retiring and emerging farmers.
- Create a communication system linking farmers with land for sale or lease to those searching for available land.

**Figure 3**  
Farms acreage per 1,000 population - Skagit County, 1978- 2017 <sup>10</sup>



# STORAGE AND DISTRIBUTION

Food is always necessary, especially in times of crisis. Ensuring we have adequate storage and distribution to get food to those who need it most when they need it is critical.

**GOAL 1:** Adequate storage, distribution, and processing capacity ensures that food grown in Skagit County is widely available to residents.

## STRATEGY 1

Convene relevant stakeholders around potential infrastructure opportunities.

### ACTION STEPS

- Assess then determine infrastructure needs by sector and identify assets in the community.
- Determine additional storage needs for hunger relief organizations as collaborative systems evolve and collective purchasing increases.

## STRATEGY 2

Ensure that programs providing foundational meal services have access to adequate storage and preparation space.

### ACTION STEPS

- Engage city and county leaders to support the development of necessary infrastructure.
- Advocate for funding to support infrastructure needs for senior services programs like Meals on Wheels.
- Explore national/regional funding opportunities to support the development of necessary infrastructure for Head Start meal programming.

**GOAL 2:** Skagit County's Emergency Management system is aligned with the emergency food distribution system and has infrastructure, procedures, policies, and training in place to ensure disaster-level provision of nutrition and water.

## STRATEGY 1

Establish a network of public serving organizations able to support disaster-level provisioning.

### ACTION STEPS

- Identify potential partner organizations representing retail, infrastructure, transportation, and special populations.
- Convene agencies to discuss coordination of services in case of a disaster (Emergency Medical Services, food pantries, Port of Skagit)
- Determine roles for mitigation, response and recovery, and draft specific plans for emergency food rations and hydration.
- Practice scenarios to modify and solidify partner knowledge, preparedness, and education to the public.

## STRATEGY 2

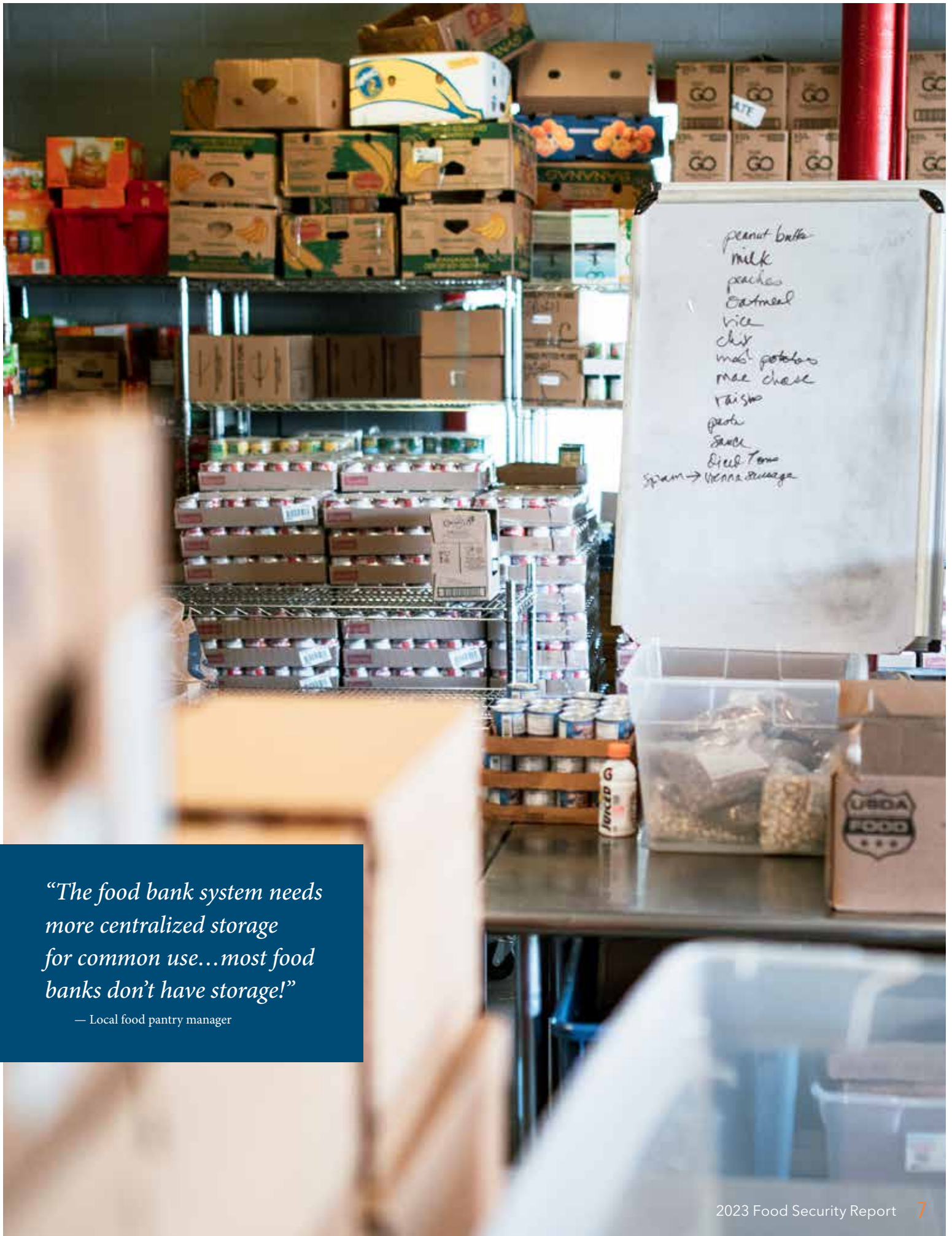
Improve coordination between EMS, food distribution sites, and food banks.

### ACTION STEPS

- Train key participants in nationally recognized curriculum for managing food emergencies.
- Establish written agreements, strategies, protocols, and a training manual to be used in a disaster situation.







*“The food bank system needs more centralized storage for common use...most food banks don’t have storage!”*

— Local food pantry manager

# RESOURCES, PROGRAMS, AND EDUCATION

There are a variety of resources, programs, and educational initiatives designed to increase access to nutritious foods, but they can be challenging to navigate. Improving coordination will facilitate a more easily navigable system.

**GOAL 1:** Representatives from the food system collaborate regularly as a Food Policy Council (FPC) to ensure that advocacy and policy initiatives developed to build a stronger local food system are a priority in Skagit County.

## STRATEGY 1

Align the interests and needs of food system partners to prioritize and implement this strategic plan.

### ACTION STEPS

- Identify a lead convening organization and establish group membership, scope of work, expectations, and outcomes for the Food Policy Council.
- Advocate for policies that support increased access to nutritious foods and a more sustainable food system.
- Increase grant writing capacity across all non-profits in support of local farmers and food access initiatives.

**GOAL 2:** All Skagit County residents have equitable access to food and meal support programs and to nutrition and food access education.

## STRATEGY 1

Understand and address barriers to ensure food access programs are more equitable and attainable for all.

### ACTION STEPS

- Map current food access points to identify geographic needs.
- Identify methods to establish year-round access points for local produce, especially in food deserts.
- Medical providers, especially pediatricians, routinely screen for food insecurity and connect patients to resources.
- Create a community referral system to connect people to food access resources (Supplemental Nutrition Access Program (SNAP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), free/reduced school lunches, food pantries, etc.) and to nutrition education.

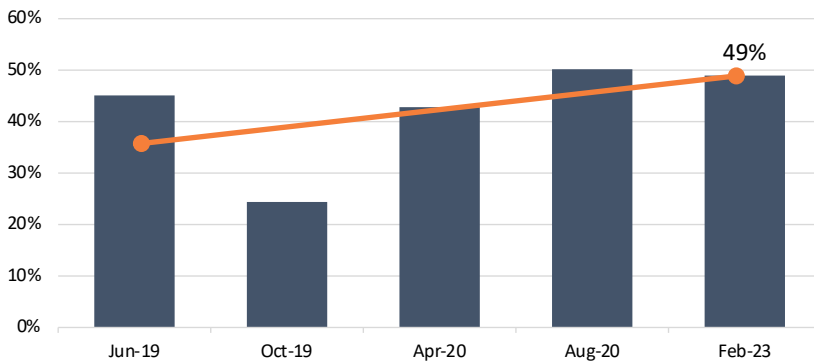
*“I really appreciate that we have food banks here in Skagit County to help supplement my family’s diet with healthy food choices.”*

— Food Security Survey respondent



**Figure 4**

Residents who are presumed eligible for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program, but are not receiving benefits – Skagit County, multiple years <sup>11</sup>



## STRATEGY 2

Understand the role of federal and state funding in advancing evidence-based programming to improve food security and advocate for sustained financial support.

### ACTION STEPS

- Support the expansion of produce match programs through communication with retailers not currently participating.
- Convene relevant Farm to School partners to better understand funding and resource needs, including infrastructure, for sustaining and expanding programs.
- Encourage and support eligible organizations in applying for Food and Vegetable Prescription Program (FvRX) funding.

## STRATEGY 3

Identify and address barriers, real and perceived, to nutrition education programming.

### ACTION STEPS:

- Conduct a needs assessment, with a special focus on underserved populations, to understand current needs regarding resources, programs, and education.
- Increase the reach of nutrition education through improved coordination and amplification of existing systems.

*“The cost of food is not sustainable. Families that do not historically need help are now needing it.”*

— Food Security Survey respondent



Washington’s **Fruit and Vegetable Incentives Program (FVIP)** helps families on limited budgets afford more fruits and vegetables and encourages healthier eating.

There are a variety of incentive programs including, **SNAP Market Match, SNAP Produce Match, and Fruit and Vegetable Prescriptions (Rx).** <sup>12</sup>

When utilizing food pantries, individuals may not have access to the types of foods they would prefer to eat. **Scarcity of preferred foods can be challenging for a person’s health and sociocultural needs.** Many food pantries understand the need and are working to increase access to preferred foods. They know that giving people a level of control over their food choices is important for breaking down the stigma of accessing food relief and for ensuring that they are nourished physically and mentally.



# FOOD SURPLUS AND WASTE

Waste happens at all points of the food system. Reducing waste while increasing the amount of food available to those that need it will support nutrition security.



In the Northwest region (Island, San Juan, Whatcom, and Skagit Counties)

over **23,000** pounds of edible food ended up in the garbage (2020-2021).<sup>13</sup>

**GOAL 1:** Skagitonians minimize food waste and redirect surplus to building a thriving, sustainable local food system.

## STRATEGY 1

Improve food recovery process through coordination and collaboration among food system partners.

### ACTION STEPS

- Identify partner agency to lead collaboration around food recovery and diversion efforts in Skagit County.
- Educate businesses about food donation laws to encourage participation in food rescue initiatives.
- Identify and communicate financial incentives to encourage food recovery and waste reduction efforts by local producers and distributors.

## STRATEGY 2

Collaborate across government, educational institutions, and non-profits to ensure the community has access to knowledge, resources, and infrastructure for reducing food waste.

### ACTION STEPS

- Collaborate with relevant organizations to create an educational campaign with a centralized resource hub dedicated to reducing food waste.



# CALL TO ACTION



Let **local policy makers** know how important food security programs are for our community.

**Donate your time or give financially** to a local food pantry.

**DONATE**



Volunteer to **deliver meals** to homebound seniors.



**Prepare** your household for a **disaster** scenario by having water and shelf-stable food on hand.



**Share information** about food access programs with someone in your life who could use the support.

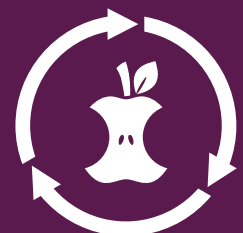


Purchase **local produce** and eat what is **in season** when possible.

**Reduce waste** at home by buying less, eating leftovers, and choosing reusable food containers.



Learn more about how you can **compost household food waste**.





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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Catholic Community Services  
Community Action of Skagit County  
Cutting Vedge Strategies  
Fire District 14  
Food Lifeline  
Helping Hands  
Northwest Agriculture Business Center  
Puget Sound Food Hub

Sea Mar Community Health Centers  
Sedro-Woolley School District  
Skagit County Public Health  
Skagit Gleaners



Skagit Valley College/ Head Start  
Skagit Valley Food Co-op  
Swinomish Tribe  
S & B Farms, Inc.  
United General 304  
Viva Farms  
WA State Department of Social and Health Services  
Washington State University Extension