Rural Innovation in Manitoba: Reducing Barriers to Commercialization and Growing Capacity in the Agri-food Sector
Rural Development Institute, Brandon University

Brandon University established the Rural Development Institute in 1989 as an academic research centre and a leading source of information on issues affecting rural communities in Western Canada and elsewhere.

RDI functions as a not-for-profit research and development organization designed to promote, facilitate, coordinate, initiate and conduct multi-disciplinary academic and applied research on rural issues. The Institute provides an interface between academic research efforts and the community by acting as a conduit of rural research information and by facilitating community involvement in rural development. RDI projects are characterized by cooperative and collaborative efforts of multi-stakeholders.

The Institute has diverse research affiliations, and multiple community and government linkages related to its rural development mandate. RDI disseminates information to a variety of constituents and stakeholders and makes research information and results widely available to the public either in printed form or by means of public lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences.

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Researchers/Staff

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Institution

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University, 270 18th St., Brandon, Manitoba, R7A 6A9

Contact: William Ashton  
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RDI Web-page: www.brandonu.ca/rdi/  
Background and Objectives

The Rural Innovation in Manitoba (RIM) project seeks to create new knowledge that enhances the process of innovation by addressing barriers and opportunities in commercialization and will improve capacity in organizations so they can facilitate innovation. The research takes a rural perspective as innovation services and processes are often located in larger urban areas where both density and specialization exist.

Residents and producers in rural Manitoba are innovators and users and adaptors of innovation. As well, rural residents are generating solutions to problems, and a portion of their solutions have potential of being commercialized. What is not clear is the nature of the barriers to innovation in rural Manitoba. This RIM project intends to identify and address barriers from a rural perspective.

Innovate Manitoba describes barriers in terms of lacking social capital and infrastructure. Manitoba’s participation in commercialization process is low, our share of federal funding for commercialization of research is among the lowest in Canada. There are few programs aimed at supporting business development by immigrants and not many organized mentorship programs. Moreover, such gaps are not well understood as they pertain to rural Manitoba.

The research and activities undertaken in this project aim to contribute new knowledge to these barriers to innovation in the Manitoba agri-food sector. There exists a commercialization gap in Manitoba, and there is limited data about the nature of this gap in rural regions. Identifying and characterizing the barriers to innovation is a necessary first step to addressing the issues and to building and expanding capacity for successful commercialization of innovation across all of Manitoba.

The two central objectives of this project are:

**Objective 1:** To identify and address systemic barriers impacting on the commercialization cycle as experienced by selected innovators and stakeholders involved in the Manitoba agri-food industry.

**Objective 2:** Conducting research regarding innovation culture and risk-adversity in the Southwest region within the context of the Manitoba agri-food industry.

To expand on these objectives. The RIM project aims to characterize the commercialization gap in the agri-food industry, beginning with the experiences of agri-food processors who have successfully commercialized new products. These cases began with the processors and expanded to include stakeholders along their supply chains who contributed directly to the commercialization process. We examined how they addressed the barriers and who helped them along the way. Their challenges and successes provide insight into what might be needed to support the commercialization process among food processors. These cases were also reviewed to provide insight into the strategies to commercialize their innovation initiatives.

A second line of enquiry focuses on a particular location, Southwestern Manitoba, where our key partners are the Southwest Regional Development Corporation (SRDC) and Community Futures Westman. SRCD is actively pursuing a place-based strategy to innovation. This dimension of the RIM project gives insight into the prevalence of a risk averse culture, which has been reported as a systemic barrier to commercialization. This objective provides specific information from rural business people in the region and those who support business development. Data includes their perceptions of risk adversity / risk tolerance, along with broad community attitudes, culture and resources among 12 SW Manitoba rural communities.

Both objectives are complimented with further research that compiled an inventory of assets available to agri-food innovators in Southwestern Manitoba. A review of innovation centres supporting rural innovators was also completed, this included a brief literature scan.

These applied research activities when taken together can inform the development of support programs, strategies and tools that are available to facilitate the commercialization value-added products. This has the potential for creating an environment where Manitoba’s agri-food enterprises are more likely to flourish and succeed in bringing their products to market.
Procedure and Project Activities

There were several phases to the work plan developed to reach the two objectives of this research outlined above.

Case Studies of Agri-Food Commercialization

1. Case Study The Canadian Birch Company: Amber Gold Birch Syrup (Appendix D)
2. Case Study Canadian Prairie Garden Puree Products: Purees (Appendix E)
3. Case Study Crik Nutrition: Cricket Protein Powder (Appendix F)
4. Case Study Floating Leaf Fine Foods: Wild Rice in Minutes (Appendix G)
5. Case Study Solberry Incorporated: Seabuckthorn Puree (Appendix H)
6. From Ideas to Sales: Commercializing Food Processing Innovation in Manitoba (Appendix C)

Criteria for selecting case studies included SMEs located in or using raw materials from rural Manitoba, who have introduced a new food product to the market in the last 5 years. Fourteen potential companies were identified and following Brandon University’s ethics approval, they were contacted in random order. Five processors/inventors agreed to be part of the research.

Semi-structured interviews explored the commercialization processes with particular attention to the role of stakeholders. Innovators were interviewed in-person, they identified major milestones during the commercialization of their new product, the chronology / timeline, key stakeholders who helped them and how they helped, and their thoughts on key leadership characteristics needed for commercialization. Key stakeholders along their supply chains referred by innovators were usually interviewed by phone. A similar set of questions were used for stakeholders: on their involvement with the commercialization of the case-study product, plus more general discussion of services they offer to innovators and entrepreneurs in general, as well as their thoughts of leadership qualities needed and barriers faced by agri-food innovators.

Based on data from 29 interviews, case study included details about each innovation’s journey to commercialization, and afterwards they report was validated by those interviewed and published on the RDI web-site.
A thematic analysis of the five cases was conducted and reported on, to reveal the patterns, along with similarities and difference in the commercialization process for these five Manitoba innovations. Various aspects were examined, including the duration and steps of the commercialization process; types of stakeholders and the nature of their involvement; barriers to commercialization identified by innovators and stakeholders, and leadership qualities for successful commercialization of innovations. A journal article is also being prepared on the nature of innovation featuring these five cases and the data from the interviews.

**Exploring risk adversity in business culture in southwest Manitoba (Appendix B)**

A survey of rural Southwestern Manitoba was conducted to investigate rural risk tolerance and the perceived culture of support and resources for entrepreneurs at the community level. The two target audiences were businesses and those that support business development and entrepreneurship. This quantitative survey completed in-person, with visits to 12 rural towns in the region. Participant recruitment was facilitated by local community leaders who spread the word in their communities, by visiting businesses in each town and emailing using publicly available contact information. An online survey extended participation within and outside these 12 communities. The 220 completed surveys were analyzed thematically and findings were reported.

**Commercialization Strategies of Food Processing Innovations: Five Case Studies in Manitoba (Appendix A)**

Strategies for supporting commercialization of innovation were extracted from the five case-studies. In total six strategies were identified and pathways of commercialization were constructed for each case study. Of particular importance was creating the sequence of events for each innovation.

Support of Innovation and Commercialization for Food Processors in Manitoba: Summary Consultation Event April 13 2017 (Appendix R)

**Purpose of Our Asset Inventory PPT (Appendix O)**

An inventory of business support assets available to Southwestern Manitoban agri-food innovators formed of a data-base and spreadsheet. The data was compiled through internet searches and consultation with support agencies and others, including those involved with the five case-study companies. RDI worked closely with Women’s Enterprise Centre Manitoba (WECM) and World Trade Centre’s Business Information Centre in the development and discussion of this resource, along with other project partners. The inventory compiled several 100 assets and programs from 97 agencies. It was shared with interested agencies and others. To ensure this data base is used and has an impact, RDI teamed up with agencies with staff on the front lines of business development. This data is time sensitive so enabling access was critical to our intended impact. As a result, the data base was shared to supplement activities by two very active business support agencies: Manitoba Agriculture, business development and the MB World Trade Centre. Both can use it as a base for a web-resource – be it on the in-house side of their respective web sites or on the public side. In addition, RDI is in discussion with WECM who also want to include the data into their ongoing efforts to support business development. Each organization made it clear the rapid use of this data is critical, since some part of it will be ‘stale dated’ quickly – as departments, organizations, and personnel change, along with programs and services. Having this embedded in business support agencies will have a significant impact as staff can quickly be informed about food development specialists and programs.

Supporting Innovation for Businesses in South West Manitoba: Summary of Consultation Event – March 24 2017 (Appendix U)

Two consultation and research dissemination events involved agencies that support commercialization. In Brandon, 16 participants from agencies supporting entrepreneurs and innovators in SW Manitoba; the Winnipeg event with 14 participants, focused on the agri-food processing industry. These events featured presentations on the asset inventory, barriers identified through the case-studies, and the rural SW survey. They also served as a forum for discussion and feedback on the best way to present / organize the inventory and the most challenging barriers from the point of view of the participants.
Dissemination of project material
(Appendix K)

Throughout the project the researchers were raising awareness of supports available to innovators, as well as other insights from the research as they were revealed. Dissemination was carried out in many ways to different audiences. The following examples provided an opportunity to disseminate both research progress and results and resources identified to a rural audience:

- Group presentations and webinars to the wider academic community in Canada along with practitioners and policy makers
- Presentations and discussions to those supporting businesses in individual and group meetings
- Presentations at conferences, including regional events like at Dauphin’s Take the Leap (appendix T) and the SRDC’s “Looking within: A future for rural Manitoba communities” (appendix S)
- Presentation to an international rural policy summer school (30 graduate students and 28 faculty from 11 countries) and a related conference with 128 graduate students from two classes and faculty from the University of Bologna, Italy
- Webinar (appendix L), Updates (appendix M, Q) and fact sheets (appendix N, V)
- By attending the ABIC conference in Winnipeg provided an opportunity to network and spread the word on the results and insights gained through the RIM research to both a Manitoba and international audience.
- Understanding the nature of innovation – peer reviewed article in MB Ag newsletter in June/July ’17 (Draft – appendix P)
Results

From Ideas to Sales: Commercializing Food Processing Innovation Manitoba (Appendix C)

- Each of the case studies found that the stages of commercialization were realized but in a unique sequence, including completing activities with milestones from multiple stages concurrently (e.g. market research, planning and financing). Most models of commercialization follow a linear progression, where the activities follow a linear path from ideas to commercial sales.

- Business and food processing supports were essential in moving prototypes to higher levels of production. They were involved in multiple activities, including assisting in arranging financing, executing product and process development, and scaling up to commercial volumes.

- Leadership capabilities are needed along the supply chain, with processors, and their customers. Leadership was consistently found to be fundamental to entrepreneurship and was identified in all five case studies as essential to commercializing innovation in food processing, including processors, their customers, and those along their supply chain.

- While innovation was evident in each of the five case studies, there were no explicit mentions of businesses intentionally fostering a culture of innovation.

Exploring risk adversity in business culture in southwest Manitoba (Appendix B)

- The survey results matched the literature scan regarding risk tolerance in business people, with business people being the most risk tolerant, followed by those with a dual role of business and support role, and support only respondents being the least risk tolerant.

- Business people tended to be less positive in their views of community attitudes, support for entrepreneurs and readiness to change. This may indicate that business people are less aware of programs and initiatives than support people, or that support people are less aware of challenges and barriers than business people, or both.

RAIL – Regional Action and Innovation Lab PPT (Appendix W)

- Through meetings with economic development agencies and businesses in Altona, Dauphin, Portage la Prairie, Steinbach, and Winkler, as well as business support organizations North Forge and Women in Enterprise, stakeholders reported that rural innovators and entrepreneurs face unique challenges in building a business or bringing an innovation to market. They have limited access to prototyping, processing and product development equipment, and though Government and NGO support services are available to them, these services are fragmented and difficult to navigate.

- Resources for business people are centralized in Winnipeg and not easily accessible to rural entrepreneurs and innovators. Bringing resources to rural locations should be done strategically to take advantage of local business assets (e.g. advance metal fabrication in Winkler region, or industrial food processing and related waste streams in the Brandon region).

- RDI proposes a three-part project to gain support and establish 4 or 5 ‘hubs’ in rural regions to support and resource commercialization by guiding innovators and entrepreneurs to success. This project will add value to the services that currently exist by coordinating these services around the client’s needs. This coordination will result in a Community of Practice, where each client’s journey will add to the community’s body of knowledge around how clients can successfully navigate the available services.

- Part One: A rural regional innovation and action lab will provide rural innovator, entrepreneurs and interested businesses and residents a place to gather, to learn, to experience innovation and commercialization activities, while drawing on specific technology, knowledge and know-how from areas in each region. Part Two: A “Store Front” of service to connect clients with the services available in Manitoba to support entrepreneurs, business development and innovation. Part Three: The Back Door, will address the fragmentation of support services by creating a Service Helix. Business services will be inventoried by sector, location, stage of business development, etc. to be client-specific and offer “smart” service.
Purpose of Our Asset Inventory (Appendix I, O)

- There are many agencies with many business development services and programs, but not all of them have practice with commercializing food development innovation. Some agencies treat innovators as any other business – similar to any other start-up. This has resulted in problems and ‘wasted time’, since they needed expertise familiar with this sector. Most agencies ask for business plan, and none of the agencies use the Business Model Canvas – an international standard to transform thinking and action from a business approach to a focus on the commercialization of innovation.

- What is missing from the large array (and confusing at times) list of services are specific references or expertise in food development and commercialization. The RDI inventory tried to fill-in some of this gap.

- If food development is critical to economic strategy in MB, there is need for sector specific commercialization supports, based on actual experiences – both success and failure.

Consultation Events. March 24 and April 15, 2017 (Appendix R, U)

- Barriers to commercialization included ineffective communications between business support agencies, accessing resources locally (in many cases not knowing what is available), coupled with the practicalities of limited skills and knowledge for completing market analysis and pitching an innovation to investors.

- Those commercializing an innovation need to lead the development and continue to build their business aspects. In the food development sector this means emphasizing process and product development (PPD) and also marketing and organizational development. All four aspects are critical for success.

Commercialization Strategies of Food Processing Innovations: Five Case Studies in Manitoba (Appendix A)

- After examining the five cases studies, six strategies are involved in commercializing their innovations, but they are not evident in the same sequence or emphasis. Much depends on the resources brought in by the innovator.

- Pathways of commercialization are varied, suggesting there is no single pathway to commercializing food innovations, but rather the support services have to tailor their resources to the situation of the innovator at the time.

Nine innovation centres - a strategic environmental scan (Appendix J)

- There are two different approaches to facilitating innovation: student centered and business centered. Both produce results and try to help coordinate connections among the many (and often overwhelming) government and NGO and private sector business/innovation support services. Both approaches help the innovators see both the large picture of commercialization and respond to the innovator's immediate needs.

- The target audience of the Innovation Centre varies based on the approach (student or business) to facilitation taken, but an innovation idea or purpose is needed before assigning resources.

- Similar programs and services are offered by Innovation Centres in an effort to move their client along the commercialization path. All use the globally accepted standard Business Model Canvas to accelerate commercialization and keep a focus on innovation, not just business aspects. See: https://www.creatlr.com/template/UOLHsfqGrLzugzVttotie/business-model-canvas/

- The Innovation Centres examined struggle with reflecting their efforts, results, and wins with meaningful metrics. Many centres supported the accuracy of this statement: From 100 contacts initiated by interested individuals about innovation and business (by phone, emails, webinars, events, etc.), less than 10 will attempt to complete a Business Model Canvas (that adds value to their idea), and less than 5 would result in seeking specific advice and may move their idea ahead.
Other Funding Sources

Significant efforts with partners resulted in their commitments of both cash at $7,800 and in-kind contributions at $38,799.

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*Used to offset costs for RIM consultant event.

**In-Kind Contributions**

*Various attendees & participants’ mileage & time*

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**Financial Report**

**Brandon University**
Rural Development Institute
Research Project "Growing Forward 2 Rural Innovation in Manitoba (RIM)"
Principal Investigator: Dr. William Ashton

### Revenues:
- **GF2 RIM Funding:**
  - Rural Innovation in Manitoba (RIM) funding: Sept. 2015 $50,202.00
  - Rural innovation in Manitoba (RIM) funding: Mar. 2016 $50,001.00
  - Rural Innovation in Manitoba (RIM) funding: Nov. 2016 $40,763.00
  - Rural Innovation in Manitoba (RIM) funding final payment with 30 days upon project completion $40,762.00
  - Total Project Funds: $181,928.00

### Cash Contributions:
- Community Futures Westman Contribution: Feb. 2016 $2,500.00
- Research Connections MB Contribution: Mar. 2017 $500.00
- Westman Agricultural Contribution: Apr. 2017 $2,000.00
- Community Futures Westman Contribution: Aug. 2017 $2,500.00

(Note cash contributions were allocated to R in the budget)

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Funds available: (33.51)

I/we certify that the above information is correct and the expenditures were for the purposes for which the grant was made.

Ms. Allison Noto, CPA, CGA
Director, Financial & Registration Services
Brandon University

Dr. William Ashton
Director, Rural Development Institute
Brandon University

10/15/2017 \Projects\2017 Projects\GF2 RIM 2015 to 2017\Project (Budget, etc)\Project Management\Budget and timelines - start up\Budget Spreadsheets Eileen\Interim Reports\2523_GF2 RIM Interim Final Rpt Nov 2017
Conclusion

This project has contributed five case studies of successful commercialization of food development, and five new major reports examining commercialization, support agencies, and risk tolerant attitudes in rural communities. Four important conclusions point a way forward to foster innovation that will increase participation in rural Manitoba with industry-relevant business development services, and a proactive initiative that connects rural commercialization opportunities with local and, if needed, services and infrastructure in Winnipeg or other rural areas.

This project on commercializing innovation in the agri-food development in Manitoba supports three major conclusions:

- To help accelerate access to business services in rural Manitoba, those pursuing innovation and commercialization need more and better local access. While websites are available (if you have broadband), person-to-person discussions and information seeking request are valued. Many entrepreneurs don’t know what they don’t know, which means they may not be asking the right questions to access available services. Where do you start? When coupled with a risk averse community culture that forms the context of these entrepreneurs (and likely those in other areas too), this conclusion seeks a more learning and guided approach to services. This might be more like a travel agency or mortgage broker, which is beginning to happen with business development officers and FDC.

- What is called for is a case by case approach to create pathways for navigating and accessing needed resources from business and innovation service agencies for each commercialization effort. This is not a call for coordination of services, which is too costly and quickly outdated. There is an abundance of business and innovation services and programs in Manitoba offered by government and NGOs. From the entrepreneur’s view the current array of agencies and services are fragmented, often duplicating services from agency to agency, most services on online were difficult to find (e.g. a dozen services offer business plan tools and after 8 minutes on each site only 2 were found), and many were not specific to agri-food innovation. The conclusion is to create a community of learners within the service agencies with knowledge and expertise in agri-food development, ideally located in rural areas. They share their cases, services accessed, and commercialization successes to build their own pathways with preferred services and programs.

- Rural communities need to be engaged with the positive aspects of innovation and commercialization. Rural regional innovation and action labs (RAIL) are a needed response to effectively extend the reach of business services from government and NGOs into four to five rural regions. The initiative of these labs could be envisioned as a partnership between Manitoba government, related NGOs, local businesses, post-secondary institutions, and communities. They begin with a focus on agri-food development and in time the RAILs assist many different innovators, along with being a hub for legitimizing discussions, promoting and doing innovation and exchanges, and taking steps of commercialization. These RAILs foster a more entrepreneurial attitude across their rural region, be it with activities and events (maker fairs) in high schools, community events, and tapping into new arrivals as well. This results in more entrepreneurs feeding into the infrastructure and innovation ecology already existing in Winnipeg. These RAILS could also be point of innovation themselves, including taking initiatives to resolve blockages or address opportunities, including for example, responses to calls for wet-processing of jams and sauces with initiating ‘toll processing’, ‘toll packaging’ and ‘toll distribution’.

- As a strategic initiative that reflects alignment with Manitoba Government’s framework of economic growth and prosperity, RAILs could benefit from an organization that facilitates the creation, establishing, operation of these rural regional hubs. Connecting government and NGO business services agencies and related NGOs with community desirers and assets could be fulfilled by a well-established centre of excellence, like Brandon University’s Rural Development Institute. A northern version of RAILS could be considered as well.
Acknowledgement

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The data, analysis of data, project analysis and conclusions or other information in this report are those of the authors and the Rural Development Institute and not of the Government of Manitoba or Canada.
Appendices
(All of these are available digitally from RDI)

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Appendix B: Exploring risk adversity in business culture in southwest Manitoba

Appendix C: From Ideas to Sales: Commercializing Food Processing Innovation in Manitoba (Multi-Case Report 2017)

Appendix D: Case-Study The Canadian Birch Company: Amber Gold Birch Syrup
www.brandonu.ca/rdi/files/2017/03/RIM-Case-Study-Canadian-Birch.pdf

Appendix E: Case-Study Canadian Prairie Garden Puree Products: Purees
www.brandonu.ca/rdi/files/2017/03/RIM-Case-Study-Canadian-Prairie-Garden.pdf

Appendix F: Case Study Crik Nutrition

Appendix G: Case Study Floating Leaf Fine Foods: Wild Rice in Minutes
www.brandonu.ca/rdi/files/2017/03/RIM-Case-Study-Floating-Leaf.pdf

Appendix H: Case Study Solberry Incorporated: Seabuckthorn Puree
www.brandonu.ca/rdi/files/2017/03/RIM-Case-Study-Solberry.pdf

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Appendix L: RIM Commercializing Food Innovation in Manitoba – Webinar Sept 2017

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Appendix N: Rural Innovation in Manitoba: Reducing Barriers to Commercialization and Growing Capacity in the Agri-food Sector (factsheet)
www.brandonu.ca/rdi/files/2014/05/Rural_Innovation-Factsheet-v2.pdf

Appendix O: Purpose of Our Asset Inventory PPT May 2017

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