ARRELL FOOD INSTITUTE

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH



ANNUAL REPORT

September 2025 - August 2026

Shared Vision and Commitments

Shared Vision

A sustainable, reliable and just food system.

Collective Goal

Informing resilient and sustainable global food systems based on a rigorous and comprehensive understanding of the latest evidence.

Land Acknowledgements

The University of Guelph is on the territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit and is part of the Land Between the Lakes Purchase (Treaty Number 3). The Dish with One Spoon Covenant made between the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Mississaugas is an agreement to share territory and protect these lands, now known as parts of Ontario, Quebec and New York State. The Covenant reminds us of our common connection to the land and to each other. Recognizing the contributions and importance of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples is an important part of our collective commitment to make the promise of Truth and Reconciliation real in our communities.

Words of Gratitude

We are extremely fortunate to be surrounded by a range of wonderful and supportive colleagues at the University of Guelph, Canada's Food University. Without their support it would be impossible to drive the mission of Arrell Food Institute – to improve global food systems. Special thanks to the Arrell Family Foundation for the ongoing support of Arrell Food Institute (AFI).

Statement of Inclusion

A world where every community has access to safe and healthful food is also one where every community has the opportunity to thrive. AFI is an equal opportunity employer and does not tolerate, ignore, or condone any form of discrimination. We work to support people from communities historically and structurally excluded, including Indigenous Peoples, Black and racialized communities, people with disabilities, LGBTQ2IA+ people and those with caring responsibilities. AFI strives to be inclusive in its events and projects so that diverse perspectives are presented, and a full range of individuals have equal opportunity to participate in discussions and conversations. AFI ensures that we recognize both non-traditional and traditional excellence. We welcome further feedback and dialogue.





Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends of Arrell Food Institute,

A few months ago, I sat in a dialogue in Rome with food-system experts from around the world, alongside major UN experts and philanthropic donors. What struck me most was not the data, but the tears — shed out of frustration and fear. Progress on hunger and nutrition has stalled and climate change is accelerating faster than even scientists like me expected.

That experience stayed with me and left me thinking about two things: buffers and choke points.

Buffers are what keep food systems stable through turmoil. Healthy soil and abundant groundwater can help a farmer bring in a harvest during drought. Emergency food aid systems, from the World Food Programme to local food banks, create parallel infrastructure that activates when calamities befall communities. At the household level, stable income, affordable housing and social support can determine whether families have room to absorb an unexpected shock.

Unfortunately, many of these buffers are eroding. Soil health and groundwater are under pressure as extreme weather becomes more common. Rising costs are leaving many households with less room to manoeuvre. When supply chains strain, weather patterns shift and communities struggle to access what they need, food systems reveal those pressures in immediate and tangible ways.

This past year, AFI's work has been guided by that understanding. Through Sustainable Food Systems for Canada (SF4C), we trained innovators across the country to build solutions and strengthen resilience. We also contributed to major policy processes, including the federal National Food Security Strategy and the UN Committee on World Food Security. Through research, public events, student learning, community food initiatives and national partnerships, AFI continued to create knowledge, convene partners and cultivate leaders.

The second idea is choke points: the places where the food system can seize up. Conflict in the Black Sea continues to constrain grain supply. Drought has affected movement through the Panama Canal. Disruption in key shipping routes like the Strait of Hormuz can quickly affect fertilizer, energy and food prices far from the point of origin.

Through our work with NASA Harvest, the Rockefeller Foundation and RAAPID, AFI is helping identify choke points and working with decision-makers to address them before they become crises.

AFI does not have all the answers. But we believe the work of finding buffers and choke points is worth doing, and worth doing well. The pages that follow reflect a year of ideas in motion, partnerships taking shape and people coming together around shared challenges.

Thank you for joining us at the table,

Dr. Evan Fraser

Food as a Climate Lever

Connecting agriculture, policy, community and climate

For many people, a connection between food and climate feels natural, maybe obvious. But too often, society's responses – the plans, policies and actions – splinter into a fractured landscape, leaving "food people" and "climate people" working in different spheres.

That is a major problem, as it misses opportunities to make food systems more resilient in a changing climate, and to reduce food's detrimental impacts on the planet. So AFI held two events this past year to bring climate and food closer together, under the banner "Food: The Other Big Climate Lever."

In Fall 2025, AFI explored the often-unseen links between climate, food, technology, innovation and Indigenous approaches to food and land stewardship. When layered together, the audience heard those elements can be amplified for deeper impact. "When you can achieve something that is positive for climate and positive for nature, and the producers are thrilled with it, that's the gold standard and that's what we have to push ourselves to do," said Richard Florizone, Special Advisor, Global Futures to the President of the University of Waterloo and former CEO of the International Institute for Sustainable Development.

The success of the event, held at the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo, ON, as part of the inaugural Canada Climate Week Xchange, led to AFI being invited to co-host the flagship food event at Toronto Climate Week in June 2026. Held at the Lawson Centre for Sustainability at the University of Toronto, that gathering added aquaculture, social innovation and circular systems into the mix.

Speakers highlighted the value of creativity, deliberateness and collaboration – particularly working across divides – to meet multiple positive ends. The morning's discussions continued over a lunch created by four chefs focusing on sustainable practices: Leah Steduto from Hawker, Yasi Zorlutuna from Guelph's Community FEWD, Spent Goods founder Dihan Chandra and private chef Destiny Moser.

"Having [a] triple focus – economic sovereignty, environmental sustainability and national food security – is not bad for business," said opening speaker Laura Arrell. "It's what will set Canada apart. We should and can be a global superpower. This can only happen if we understand the challenges and opportunities that tie at the intersection of food and climate."



From Soil to Systems
At Canada Climate Week Xchange, Amber Kivisto of BioNorth Solutions said: "What works for wheat in Saskatchewan may not work for soybeans in Ontario. Climate solutions must reflect local conditions, markets, resources and regulations."

Shared Practices, Different Motivations
At Toronto Climate Week, Brent Preston of Farmers for Climate Solutions said: "Farmers may be motivated by climate change, soil health, lower costs or greater independence. What matters is that we are moving toward the same destination."

Making Sense of a Changing Food System

Research and insight for urgent challenges

Food-system challenges are deeply connected. Climate pressures affect farms, supply chains and prices. Consumer behaviour shapes business decisions, influencing what foods are produced, marketed and available. Processing, packaging and policy decisions also affect food waste, safety, shelf life and how quickly evidence translates into action.

Through the Arrell Chairs, AFI supports research that connects these issues across scales, from the molecular structure of food to decisions made in grocery stores, restaurants, farms and policy settings. The goal is not only to publish research, but to translate evidence into practical understanding for decision-makers, partners, communities and the public.

This past year, Arrell Chair research explored how food systems can become safer, more equitable and more resilient. Dr. Maria Corradini examined food chemical safety, spoilage, packaging, digital twinning (using data to create virtual models of foods), including work that could reduce waste and improve food quality. Dr. Sadaf Mollaei studied the environments that shape food choices, from plant-based dairy and sustainable restaurant practices to campus food systems and student food security. Dr. Tongzhe Li used experimental economics to examine how farmers, consumers and the public respond to innovation. Dr. Sara Edge brought an equity and immigration lens to community food infrastructure, social supermarkets and informal food networks.

This research complements AFI's issue briefs, reports, op-eds, public commentary and emerging initiatives. Growing Tomorrow and Powering Food Futures will build on this foundation by connecting research with practical insight and helping Canadian leaders move from evidence to action.

Together, this work shows how specialized research can address broader questions of sustainability, health, agriculture and public decision-making. Packaging connects to shelf life, waste and environmental impact. Plant-based products raise questions about affordability, nutrition and market readiness. Innovation depends on trust, information and the realities facing farmers and consumers.

Knowledge in action

- **Research:** Arrell Chair publications and applied projects
- **Public dialogue:** media interviews, op-eds and expert commentary
- **Policy insight:** issue briefs and reports for decision-makers
- **Partnerships:** industry, community and university collaborations
- **Emerging work:** Growing Tomorrow, Powering Food Futures and future knowledge products



Growing Tomorrow

A national initiative to identify science-based, practical opportunities to advance sustainable agriculture in Canada, starting with a focus on soil health.



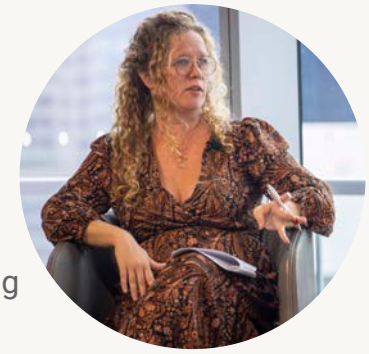
Powering Food Futures

An AFI, Ontario Agricultural College and Loblaw Companies Limited research partnership exploring how Canada can strengthen its role as a global, climate-resilient agri-food powerhouse.

Turning Knowledge in to Shared Understanding

Ideas that inform action and dialogue

Dr. Sara Edge, Arrell Chair in Food, Policy and Society



Dr. Edge's research examines how communities can build stronger, more inclusive food systems when mainstream approaches fail to meet people's needs.

Over the past year, her work has helped reframe understandings of the community food sector and its supporting infrastructure. Rather than viewing food hubs, social supermarkets, community kitchens and similar initiatives as charitable responses to food insecurity — she demonstrates how they strengthen local food access, reduce supply chain vulnerabilities, promote dignity and enhance resilience during disruptions. Her research argues that the community food sector should be recognized as critical infrastructure and a public good worthy of sustained investment. Such investment can reduce corporate concentration in food systems while ensuring national food security efforts are grounded in local communities.

Her work also highlights the leadership and innovation of immigrant and racialized communities. Through culturally appropriate food initiatives, food entrepreneurship, and digital and social innovations that support food procurement, sharing and exchange, these communities are developing practical solutions to food access challenges. Her research explores how governments, funders and food-system leaders can better support and scale these efforts.

Dr. Evan Fraser, Executive Director



Dr. Fraser's work focuses on food security, resilience and the future of food systems in Canada and around the world.

This year, Fraser was named to the Royal Society of Canada's Class of 2025 in recognition of his interdisciplinary work on feeding humanity equitably and nutritiously while protecting the ecosystems people depend on. His research and public leadership continued to connect food-system pressures with questions of national security, economic resilience and global responsibility. His thought leadership was featured in national and international media, including The New York Times, The Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star, among others.

Nationally, Fraser co-authored the Canada Food Price Report, testified before the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry and continued his work as co-chair of Sustainable Food Systems for Canada with Dr. Lenore Newman. Globally, he was reappointed to the scientific steering committee of the UN High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition and contributed to international food-system resilience work.

Dr. Maria Corradini, Arrell Chair in Food Quality



Dr. Corradini's research focuses on food chemical safety, food waste and the role of food processing and product design in building a safer, more resilient food system.

Her work looks closely at how the structure, quality and deterioration of food can affect shelf life, waste and long-term health. In one project, her team is studying mushrooms using multiple data streams, including colour, shrinkage, microstructure and microbiome data, to better understand freshness and improve packaging. The goal is to support packaging that reduces condensation, limits spoilage and helps food last longer without creating unnecessary environmental trade-offs.

Corradini's research also points to the often-overlooked importance of food manufacturing. While food-system conversations often move from production to consumption, she emphasizes that processing, packaging and distribution are central to food safety, food access and national resilience.

Dr. Tongzhe Li, Arrell Chair in Behavioural and Experimental Economics



Dr. Li's research uses experimental economics to understand how people make decisions in food and agricultural systems.

Rather than focusing only on what people say they will do, Li designs experiments that measure what farmers, consumers and the public actually do in specific decision-making contexts. Her research has touched on issues such as vertical farming, fertilizer management, consumer behaviour and innovation adoption, with a strong focus on building reliable, evidence-based methods.

A recurring insight from her work is that more information is not always better. In some cases, giving decision-makers too much information can dilute the most important message or reduce credibility. For Li, understanding behaviour means looking carefully at context, incentives, trust and how people respond to interventions. Looking ahead, her work will continue to explore innovation adoption and the relationship between consumer decisions, producer expectations and the role of policy makers, NGOs and other intermediaries.

Dr. Sadaf Mollaei, Arrell Chair in Business of Food



Dr. Mollaei's research focuses on the everyday food environments that shape how people eat.

This year, her work has centred on plant-forward eating, sustainable food environments and the decisions consumers make in grocery stores, restaurants, cafés and on university campuses. One project examines how Canadians understand and consume plant-based dairy products, including newer categories such as plant-based cheese, yogurt and cream. Another major area of work explores campus food environments at a time when students are facing rising food prices, accessibility challenges and growing food insecurity.

Mollaei's team is also developing a sustainable campus food environment assessment tool with collaborators across North America. Designed to be comprehensive but easy to use, the tool will help institutions assess their food environments and identify practical opportunities for improvement. Across her work, Mollaei's work makes sustainable choices easier, more accessible and better supported.







Creating Knowledge

+

Convening Conversations

+

Cultivating Leaders

Resilience Reimagined for Food Systems



Rethinking readiness for a changed world

At the 8th annual Arrell Food Summit in Toronto, leaders gathered from across the food system to confront the challenges of feeding a changing world. The strength of the event came from the diversity of participants. Policymakers, entrepreneurs, farmers, Indigenous leaders and global thinkers shared the stage, facilitating discussions that spanned scales, regions and sectors.

The theme, "Resilience Reimagined: Redesigning Food Systems for a Changed World," set the tone for the day. Speakers explored how climate change and a shifting geopolitical landscape have created new challenges, and with them, new opportunities to envision a more resilient, sustainable and equitable food system.

The morning sessions of the Arrell Food Summit 2025 highlighted a powerful, interconnected theme: the North American food system is at a critical juncture where community-led innovation is needed for achieving both economic resilience and social justice. Sessions explored how we might redesign trade in North America and why resilience must mean more than bouncing back, calling instead for food systems that transform and bounce forward in the face of increasing climate shocks, pandemics and supply chain disruptions. A fireside chat on Indigenous foodways with Kallie Wood, President and CEO, National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture and Food called on leaders to change Canada's food story, emphasizing that solutions must be designed by communities and empowered through systems and policy change.

Keynote speaker Devita Davison, Executive Director of FoodLab Detroit, earned a standing ovation for her engaging remarks on community-rooted food systems and how they can drive economic justice. In her presentation, Davison argued the building of food systems for "scale" has obscured context, prioritized corporate power and has created brittle systems that are unable to adapt to today's complex problems.

AFI was honoured that Irene Etyang of MAMLO FOODS travelled from Kenya to receive the Arrell Global Food Innovation Award. Awards adjudicators Janet Dean and Abra Brynne joined Etyang in a conversation exploring how the enterprise is driving change, the connection between community and economy, and the value of women-led businesses in shaping sustainable food systems.

The afternoon focused on implementation, underscoring that innovation must be the engine of growth across all levels of the food system. Discussions around CANZA's Million Acre Challenge demonstrated that large-scale corporate initiatives rely on cross-sector collaboration and long-term investment to achieve regenerative agriculture at scale.

Further, the session on *The Next Generation of Growth* emphasized that the Canadian innovation ecosystem is struggling and requires targeted investment to support emerging leaders and boost agri-food entrepreneurship.

Insights from Farming on the Front Lines: What Works for Climate Resilience confirmed that producers are already driving practical innovation against climate change. Fully realizing the potential, sessions *Ag-Tech Stories and Retooling for Resilience* highlighted that policies should reward risk-taking, break down data silos and prioritize human-centered technology.

From grassroots movements to global trade, from Indigenous sovereignty to corporate responsibility, this year's Arrell Food Summit reimagined a food system that is adaptive, inclusive and deeply human. The event served as a call to action: a resilient food future for Canada is possible, but only if we build it together.



Local leadership for resilient food

National Food Security Starts in Community

Food security is shaped by local relationships, by people who know firsthand what their community needs and by the infrastructure holding it all together. As the connection between food security and national security came into sharper focus this year, AFI worked to make community food's role in the landscape more evident.

Pauline Cripps, AFI's Community Food Lead, spent nearly a decade at the Guelph Food Bank before joining AFI, and her work now connects systems-level thinking with community-rooted action. This year, Cripps continued to work with and learn from the charities and non-profits that are meeting rising demand on precarious funding. They have been filling gaps for years, innovating as they go and propping up systems that are failing. COVID, rising inequality. geopolitical tensions and a changing climate are further exposing deficiencies in the system that have long been there.

What has grown up in those gaps is a second food system, with its own warehouses, commercial kitchens, trucking and cold chain, reaching communities the industrial system does not. Community food should be valued and funded according to the social, environmental and economic impacts it provides alongside a system that depletes.

Cripps made that case to national audiences twice this year. On World Hunger Day, she wrote with Tenille Bonoguore and Dr. Evan Fraser that Canada's idea of food innovation is too narrow, and that connecting the industrial and charitable systems together, while investing in both, is a genuine pathway to addressing hunger. Writing in The Conversation with Drs. Jenelle Regnier-Davies and Sara Edge, she argued that solidarity, non-profit and social enterprise grocery models deserve treatment as public infrastructure, and that governments should invest in the wholesale distribution and regional procurement that let them work.

Most of the work, though, stays closer to the ground and Cripps continues to collaborate with the organizations holding that second system up.

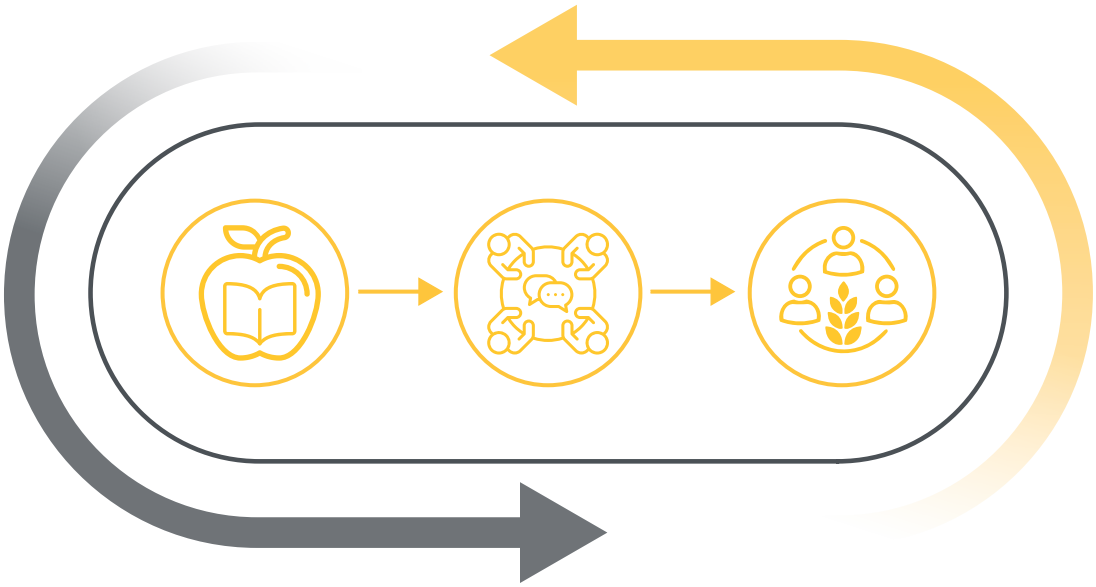
Food by Community, for Community

AFI was proud to sponsor School Food for All: Nourishing Futures, held this June in Montréal. Pauline Cripps, AFI Community Food Lead co-moderated the panel “Buy Local: School Food as a Catalyst for Strengthening Community Food Systems and Local Food Infrastructure.”

Panellists represented community food initiatives from four provinces, including a producer co-operative food hub in Manitoba, a school food program in southeastern British Columbia, an initiative serving 2,300 students across the four Nations of Maskwacis in Alberta and Équiterre’s Commun’assiette procurement network in Quebec.

Across these examples, school food emerged as more than a meal program. It showed how public investment can create steady demand for local producers while strengthening the food infrastructure that communities rely on. Cripps also represented AFI at the Common Ground forum in June, where she contributed to a timely panel discussion on deepening relationships with local food systems, food producers and food itself.

Insight to Action Loop



This is what “insight to action” looks like at AFI: not a straight line, but a loop. It’s an ongoing exchange where ideas are tested through conversation, strengthened through partnership and carried forward by the people positioned to use them — building momentum.

That work is taking shape across AFI’s work, where relationships are growing, ideas are finding new audiences and knowledge is moving to impact. As AFI looks ahead, the opportunity is to keep widening that exchange so research and community knowledge can inform the decisions shaping Canada’s food future.



From Conversation to Practical Action

How ideas move through AFI's work

The power of people in a room is not to be underestimated. This spring, AFI hosted the 2026 Good Food Innovation Awards (GFIA) in partnership with Food Day Canada at the Anita Stewart Memorial Food Lab. The event brought together farmers, chefs, researchers, Indigenous food leaders and community innovators to celebrate the people shaping Canada's food future. It was a small event with an outsized purpose — demonstrating how AFI's work moves from conversation to practical action.

The recipients didn't arrive at their work through theory alone. Their innovations grew out of on-the-ground work and relationships: with land, with communities, with the people they feed. That's the same instinct behind AFI's own model.

Ideas rarely stay contained to the rooms where they start.

A summit conversation, a panel discussion or an awards gathering surfaces a shared concern. AFI's teams turn that concern into evidence — through programs like Food from Thought, SF4C, CARE or projects like Growing Tomorrow and Powering Food Futures, all testing and scaling solutions with partners on the ground. What holds up can influence policy through public commentary that helps Canadians make sense of food systems challenges. And the leaders who emerge, like this year's GFIA recipients, become the people who carry that learning back into their own networks, starting the cycle again.



At a glance: SF4C

- **Sustainable Food Systems for Canada is a national innovation and entrepreneurship training platform**
- **Includes regional nodes across Canada**
- **Has micro-credentials and industry-led challenges**
- **Offers mentorship and concierge support for innovators**
- **Delivered 104 training activities this past year**
- **Has 55 mentors, instructors and facilitators support training and programming**

SF4C in Action

Building sustainable food systems capacity with students, partners and ideas in motion

Canada has the land, research strength and entrepreneurial talent to be a global leader in sustainable agri-food innovation. But potential does not become progress on its own. It needs the people, partnerships, training and networks that help good ideas move from early insight to real-world application.

That is the role Sustainable Food Systems for Canada (SF4C) is beginning to play.

Led by Arrell Food Institute as the central secretariat, SF4C is a national innovation and entrepreneurship training platform designed to help Canada produce more food with fewer emissions while strengthening the agri-food sector. It brings together 25 universities, colleges, Indigenous organizations, accelerators, funders, industry partners and global collaborators through a pan-Canadian network focused on sustainable food-system solutions.

This year marked a major transition for SF4C, from network formation to national-scale implementation. Through new governance structures, digital infrastructure, training programs, mentorship frameworks and cross-sector programming, SF4C began building the foundation for a coordinated agri-food innovation ecosystem.

The platform is organized around connected streams of work. SF4C*train* builds innovation capacity through micro-credentials, workplace learning and online modules, including bilingual learning in Innovation Systems Thinking and Knowledge Mobilization. SF4C*mentor* is developing a national mentorship system connecting researchers, industry leaders, Indigenous partners and emerging professionals. SF4C*collide* puts learning into action through hackathons, workshops and challenge-based events focused on real food-system problems.

This model is already creating momentum. In Winnipeg, the Cultivating Ideas: Solutions in Scaling Sustainable Agriculture Hackathon brought students and learners from across Western Canada together with challenge partners including McCain, Nature United, TELUS and South East Research Farm. Participants developed practical ideas to make Canada's food system more sustainable, productive and resilient.

The event also aligned with the announcement of RBC Generate, a five-year, $5-million investment in Manitoba connected to a broader national effort supporting skills, markets and financing in Canadian agriculture. The announcement reinforced that food-systems innovation depends not only on technology, but also on training, relationships and the next generation of agricultural leadership.

As SF4C grows, it connects AFI's pillars in practice by convening partners, mobilizing knowledge and cultivating future leaders. More than a single program, it is becoming a national platform that connects talent with opportunity, ideas with partners and food-system ambition with the skills needed to act.

Why it matters

SF4C helps turn food-systems potential into practical capacity by connecting students, researchers, industry, communities and partners around shared challenges.

Learning Through Real-World Food Challenges

Applied skills for complex systems change

Food-system challenges rarely fit neatly into one discipline. They involve farmers, communities, policymakers, companies, researchers, consumers and the land itself. For students and emerging leaders and innovators, learning how to work in that complexity is as important as understanding the problem. That is why hackathons have become an important part of SF4C's applied learning model over the past year.

Across the country, SF4C hackathons brought learners together with mentors, judges and challenge partners to explore real issues facing food systems. In Ontario, the Guelph InnovEAT Hackathon connected 47 students from seven institutions and 21 academic programs to challenges shaped by climate change, food insecurity, nutrition and supply chain resilience. Students worked in interdisciplinary teams, moving from design thinking and empathy mapping to ideation, prototyping, implementation planning and final pitches.

In Quebec, participants at Université Laval worked with partners including INAF, Zone Agtech and DUX manger mieux to develop practical solutions for the bio-food sector. The event emphasized entrepreneurship, mentorship and confidence-building, with many participants indicating that the experience strengthened their entrepreneurial mindset.

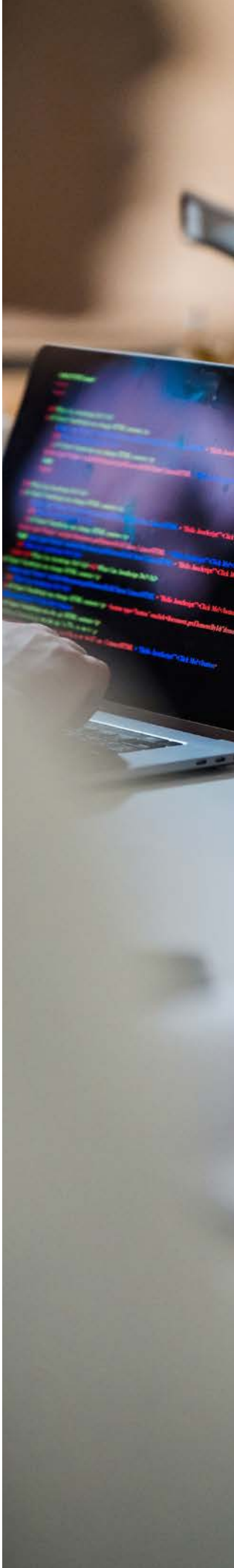
In British Columbia, SF4C's first policy-focused hackathon asked learners to consider how proactive policies could help communities better anticipate and respond to food-system emergencies such as wildfires, flooding and landslides. Participants worked with food policy councils, academics and local organizations to scope problems, consider stakeholder needs and develop policy pitches that could be shared with regional decision-makers.

In the North, From Seeds to Systems brought youth from Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut together to explore food sovereignty, climate change, innovation and entrepreneurship. The virtual format helped support equitable participation across territories while centring Indigenous knowledge, cultural practices and community priorities.

Together, these events show how applied learning can move beyond the classroom. Students are not simply asked to study food-system problems. They are asked to listen, collaborate, test ideas and communicate solutions in ways that reflect real constraints and real communities.



Skills students build: systems thinking, collaboration, communication and practical problem-solving.



Driving Shared Dialogue

Where community, history and expertise meet

Canada's food systems are large, layered and diverse. So are the conversations that shape them. This year, AFI continued its efforts to support and share dialogue towards a more resilient and just food system.

In February, AFI was proud to support the inaugural Black Farmer Groundings Symposium, organized by Drs. Marsha Myrie Obi and Andria Jones and informed by their research into the mental health impacts of climate change on Black farmers. The symposium was designed not only to share research findings, but to build meaningful relationships with farming communities and help shift away from long-standing patterns of extractive research. Farmers travelled from Ottawa, Nova Scotia, British Columbia and across Ontario, some from families who have farmed for generations, others growing in cities or working to reconnect Black youth with the land. Elders, agricultural researchers and farm business owners led panels on food sovereignty, land justice and the ties between climate change and colonialism, and farmers presented research on belonging, wellness and passing knowledge between generations. A dedicated session gave farmers the floor for direct conversations with OMAFA, the National Farmers Union, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and senior University of Guelph leadership. More gatherings are being planned, with the relationships intended to outlast the research.

At the national level, AFI sent a team to the Yukon Food Security Summit in August; Tenille Bonoguore, Strategic Initiatives Lead, spoke on a panel about economic incentives for sustainable agriculture at the Food Leadership Summit in Calgary in October; and staff had valuable discussions at Farm Credit Canada's (FCC) Future of Food in Ottawa in February, held on Canada's Agriculture Day and marking the event's 10th year.

AFI was featured at the AUTM Canadian Meeting in Winnipeg in April, where Aaron Misener, SF4C Network Activator, shared the stage with other NSERC-funded entrepreneurship networks to discuss how Canada builds pathways for agri-food innovation. SF4C is the only sector-specific member of the NSERC Lab2Market group, which opens the door to collaborative program delivery. In winter, Misener co-led the successful Lab2Market Discover National Agri-Food cohort, co-creating and delivering a 10-week virtual program to support researchers across Canada who are interested in exploring entrepreneurship.

Whether backing a first gathering or joining a national stage, AFI's aim is consistent: help these conversations happen, and help the knowledge grown in particular regions, communities and sectors travel through the ecosystem.





Preparing people for systems change

Cultivating Tomorrow's Food Leaders

For Manahil Zaid, food-systems leadership begins with a simple but urgent question: how do we help young Canadians build healthier, more sustainable food habits?

A first-year master's student in Applied Human Nutrition and an Arrell Scholar, Zaid's thesis focuses on plant-based protein consumption among Canadian youth.

Under the supervision of Drs. Jess Haines and Sadaf Mollaei, she is engaging young people through focus group interviews to understand what they know about plant-based protein, why they may not choose it and what would make those options more appealing.

That applied, people-centred approach has also shaped her experience with AFI. Through UNIV*6050: Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Agri-Food, a competitive program led by AFI and supported by Food from Thought, Zaid worked with students from different disciplines to consult regenerative farmers in the Prairies and help develop modules supporting the adoption of regenerative farming practices.

"6050 was definitely one of the most unique courses I've taken," she said. "Everyone that I worked with was so different and came from different backgrounds."

Zaid also took part in an SF4C hackathon with Riverside Natural Foods, manufacturer of MadeGood products, on a challenge focused on upcycling waste products while improving the nutrition, flavour and texture of granola bars. The two-day experience included pitch training from AFI and the John F. Wood Centre, helping students turn ideas into a clear, three-minute presentation.

"It was super fast paced, but really fun," Zaid said.

Now, Zaid is exploring entrepreneurship by developing the idea for a convenient, appealing plant-based protein product informed by her research with youth.

"I've been able to build that bridge between doing research, working with youth, learning all the problems, developing solutions and then also accessing entrepreneurial support," she explained.

Across its programs, AFI helps students and early-career leaders build that same bridge between knowledge and action.

"Through scholarships, programming and entrepreneurial support, young people can see the many opportunities to contribute to the future of food," she said.

Scholars Shaping Food Futures

Research with purpose, reach and impact

Arrell Scholarships provide emerging agri-food leaders with $50,000 annually, educational programming, industry connections and access to a wider network. Scholars are selected for academic excellence and their commitment to a sustainable, productive and equitable food system.

Incoming Scholars



MUNIRA ABDUL-NASIR
Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics

Abdul-Nasir's research aims to better understand how agricultural innovations can be adopted and scaled to support more productive, resilient and sustainable food systems. Building on her background in development economics and agricultural policy research, her work will examine how policies, markets and institutions influence the availability and uptake of biological crop inputs in Canada's grain and pulse sectors. Abdul-Nasir will be completing her degree under the supervision of Dr. Getu Hailu.

CHINENYE AGBO
Capacity Development and Extension

Agbo's research aims to reduce food loss and strengthen smallholder farming systems through the responsible adoption of digital agricultural technologies. Building on her experience as an agri-food entrepreneur in Rwanda and Tanzania, her work will examine how AI photo recognition technology can help reduce food loss at the point of aggregation, using her own venture, Lima Aja, as a live case study. Agbo will be completing her degree under the supervision of Dr. Ataharul Chowdhury.





RICHMORE IBEH
Plant Agriculture

Ibeh's research aims to reduce food loss and strengthen resilient food systems through molecular breeding and postharvest biotechnology. Building on his experience in crop improvement and cassava breeding, his research focuses on the genetic and physiological factors that influence fruit quality, ripening and shelf life, with the goal of improving crop quality, reducing waste and supporting more sustainable food systems. Ibeh will be completing his degree under the supervision of Dr. Jayasankar Subramanian.

Graduating Scholars

- **An Sakai**, MA in Geography









Learning Where Food Systems Happen

Field experiences that ground student learning

AFI's approach to experiential education is to give students real problems that are still waiting for answers. This year, students were tasked with solving for how to get policy makers and funders to value biodiversity the way they already value carbon.

The challenge came from ALUS, a national organization that helps farmers, ranchers, Indigenous communities and municipalities restore ecosystem services on their land. In October, students came together in Guelph for an intensive hackathon that turned that challenge into a project they could build on.

Students learned first-hand what those ecosystem services look like on working land.

Three Ridges Ecological Farm in Elgin County, just north of Lake Erie, holds the highest concentration of species at risk in Canada. Farm owners Drake and Sarah Larsen walked the group through 50 acres of permanent pasture, permaculture orchard, native prairie and constructed wetland. Nearby at YU Ranch, Bryan and Cathy Gilvesy showed rotational grazing and ALUS's model in practice. The difference was audible insects loud in the tallgrass prairie and the mown hayfield beside it nearly silent. For Stella Wertger, an environmental policy student at Sciences Po, the farm visits were the highlight of the whole project, a chance to watch sustainable agriculture at work rather than read about it.

Over the eight weeks that followed, four teams split up the challenge. One worked on low-cost, credible ways to measure biodiversity gains. Another built out ALUS's data collection so the numbers could carry a story. A third designed financing models, including a biodiversity credit. The fourth put the case to investors using data and visuals.

"Your suggestions have already sparked new ideas," Jen Hoesen, ALUS's director of data and analytics, wrote to the teams, "and are giving some departments fresh insight into how we might move forward."

Students left with more than findings. They gained practical skills in framing a problem, communicating clearly and presenting their work to an industry partner, skills future climate and food system leaders will need to make an impact.

> "Being able to think big and connect research ideas to solve problems on the ground is something you should all be very proud of.
>
> — Jen Hoesen, Director, Data and Analytics, ALUS, in a letter to the student teams



Climate Leadership in Practice

Students connecting research, policy and action

The Climate Adaptation, Resilience and Empowerment program (CARE) aims to build the kind of leadership that only comes from putting climate knowledge into practice. CARE is a joint initiative of Science Po, the University of Guelph, the University of British Columbia, and the university of Toronto, with the support of Fondation DRG. For Guelph participants, it provides unique opportunities to meet across institutions and to explore new perspecties and approaches to learning.

This year those opportunities took several forms. In October, students came together in Guelph for the InnovEAT Hackathon, three days of design thinking built around a live ALUS biodiversity challenge, from early ideation through to working prototypes. On day two, students took part in the Climate Ribbon Project, a story-sharing arts ritual run with the Student Wellness Centre, writing down what they hope never to lose to climate change.

In November, Chloe Zinn, a master's student in Geography, Geomatics and the Environment whose research focuses on food loss and waste governance, attended the Canadian Science Policy Conference in Ottawa. She sat in on sessions covering AI ethics, science diplomacy and Canada's agri-food strategy, and came away with new skills and relationships she will carry forward

The program's annual conference took students further afield. This year it was held in Paris, hosted by Sciences Po's Paris School of International Affairs, and Guelph students brought food systems questions into a week built around climate justice and urban adaptation. Emilie Hart, an M.Sc. student in Environmental Sciences, presented on carbon and soil health in Canadian grazing systems. Emma Pothion, an M.Sc. student in Rural Planning and Development, compared French and Canadian approaches to urban greening on a field visit with the City of Paris. The week closed with the Tribunal for the Yet to Come, a moving student-run simulation where participants argued cases for climate justice across generations.

"The CARE 2026 Annual Conference showed me ways to translate my research into action, particularly by learning how to communicate in the language of policymakers," said Claire Mercier, a M.Sc. student in Environmental Sciences.

These opportunities reinforced the power of bringing together research, policy and practice to address complex climate challenges.









A Canadian Voice in Global Food Security

AFI shaping food-system conversations

This year has provided stark lessons in the fragility of global food systems and the impacts that carries for Canadians. Aggressive geopolitical trade tactics and the closure of key international shipping routes have compounded the worsening impacts of climate change. The resulting crisis in food production, availability, trade and affordability made the links between global and local extremely clear. Food was suddenly, finally, in the spotlight.

AFI has worked for years to identify emerging global issues, and to advocate for effective, sustainable localized responses. So when the federal government announced in January that it would respond to this global uncertainty by creating a national strategy on food security, AFI quickly connected with Canada's leading thinkers in food, farming and trade to publish opinion pieces in national media, and to write and release a policy recommendations paper in April. When the National Food Security Strategy was released in June, it included efforts to address a number of the critical infrastructure gaps and barriers highlighted in that policy paper.

Behind the scenes, this global-to-local work continues with an eye to the future. Over the past year, AFI has collaborated on a project with international partners, aiming to create the tools and knowledge needed to better respond to food crises and catastrophes as they emerge around the world. This area of work will continue building out over the coming year as a key aspect of AFI's globally focused efforts.

DUST BOWL BLUES

History carries important lessons for the challenges of today. In the 1930s, two catastrophes hit North America: one environmental, the other economic. AFI and CBC Ideas co-produced a special episode that aired nationally in May, outlining the cascade of disasters that triggered the Dust Bowl and Dirty Thirties – and delivering important insights and lessons for today's uncertain world.



LEARN MORE:

Bite-sized Facts

These higlights provide a snapshot of AFI's reach and influence across research, events, communications and partnerships. Drawn from reports, event data and analytics, AFI continued to broaden its reach in 2025-26.

Digital Reach

225,000+
AFI website views

970,000+
AFI website views since 2017



Audience and Media

1,990
newsletter subscribers

4,000+
media references to AFI and its experts



Research Output

36
Arrell Chair publications this year

270
scholar publications since inception



Leadership Development

44
Arrell Scholars since inception

776+
students supported through AFI-related programs this year



Convening Expertise

800+
attendees in the past year across 15 events

200+
experts convened to address food-systems challenges this past year



Growing Knowledge and Partnerships

76+
partner organizations engaged this year

20
knowledge products created this year, including reports and digital resources



A Decade Around the Table

Reflecting on 10 years of AFI

In 2016, the University of Guelph named Dr. Evan Fraser as the inaugural director of a new Food Institute. The decision was a bet that Guelph's 150-year history as Canada's food university could be channelled into something more ambitious: a hub where researchers, agricultural workers, policymakers, industry and communities could sit down together and reimagine how the world feeds itself. One year later, a $20-million gift from the Arrell Family Foundation, matched by the University and the largest in U of G's history at the time, gave that bet a name and a foundation to build on: Arrell Food Institute.

A decade on, the table has grown considerably. AFI's Global Food Innovation Awards, presented annually since 2018, have put $100,000 prizes and international recognition behind changemakers working at every scale of the food system — from farmer-to-farmer training networks reaching rural communities across the Global South, to micro-factories that have helped more than 550 smallholder farmers in Africa, most of them women, secure more stable incomes.

The Arrell Scholars program has provided $50,000 a year for 44 emerging graduate researchers, pairing rigorous academic work in fields from food science to environmental engineering with hands-on leadership training and mentorship from industry and government partners.

The annual Arrell Food Summit has also become a fixture on the calendar, drawing global experts to wrestle with the food system's hardest questions, from climate adaptation to food sovereignty.

Along the way, AFI has also built out the infrastructure to train the next generation of food system leaders more broadly — from experiential courses like Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Agri-Food Systems, which pairs student teams with real industry and community partners, to the Net-Zero Food Systems Challenge, which puts graduate students to work developing practical solutions alongside sector leaders.

What has shifted most, perhaps, is AFI's role in the conversation itself. What began as a portal connecting Guelph's food expertise to the world has become a convenor and catalyst in its own right — helping shape national food policy discussions through bodies like the Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council, building coalitions such as the Canadian Alliance for Net Zero Agrifood, and giving Guelph researchers a stronger, coordinated voice in rooms where food-systems decisions get made.

AFI is no longer simply amplifying existing expertise; it is helping shape the agenda. That evolution did not happen by accident. It was built by researchers prepared to venture beyond disciplinary boundaries, students choosing to build their futures in food systems, donors investing in ambitious ideas, partners trusting a young institute with complex challenges and a skilled staff team willing to work differently in service of real change.

Ten years in, that trust has simmered into a track record worth savouring. Entering its second decade, AFI remains driven by the foundational spirit that first built it. The focus remains on generating and mobilizing knowledge, bringing people together to spur action and championing the inclusive innovation necessary to build a truly resilient and equitable food system.

The challenges facing global food systems have only grown more urgent — but so has AFI's capacity to help meet them, one conversation, one collaboration and one seat at the table at a time.

Many Hands, One Table

Powered by people, grounded in food systems

Evan Fraser	Executive Director
Maria Corradini	Arrell Chair
Sara Edge	Arrell Chair
Tongzhe Li	Arrell Chair
Sadaf Mollaei	Arrell Chair
Maimouna Abass	Project Lead
Nina Berry	Financial Manager
Tenille Bonoguore	Strategic Initiatives Lead
Jac Carson	Program Coordinator
Pauline Cripps	Community Food Lead
Bernard Dzakpasu	Research Associate
Jordan Flemming	Communications Manager
Margarita Fontecha	Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator
Ann Kraus	Administrative Officer
Brianna Langan	Events Coordinator
Janice LeBoeuf	Sustainable Agriculture Lead
Aaron Misener	Network Activator, SF4C
Shelley Morrison	Program Manager
Muriel O'Doherty	Events Manager
Soraya Olszewski	Communications Coordinator
Alice Raine	Director of Operations
Jeanna Rex	Program Manager
Phil Rich	Communications Coordinator
Sweni Sabaratnam	Administrative Officer
Alex Sawatzky	Creative Lead
Elizabeth Shantz	Program Manager
Kristy Tomkinson	Program Manager
Melissa Watkins	Director of Programs



Recipe for AFI

- **Start with** a strong base of evidence-based decision-making, linking research to policy, practice, education and public discourse.
- **Add** a heaping cup of partnerships, dialogue and alignment across sectors, communities and geographies.
- **Stir in** promising ideas, then connect them with the resources, networks, training and policy environments needed to succeed.
- **Sprinkle** in timely, usable insights for Canadian decision-makers.
- **Fold in** diverse perspectives, lived experiences and context-responsive innovation.
- **Season with** mentorship, collaborative learning and opportunities for emerging leaders.
- **Add a generous dash** of collective impact, stir together and voilà: a shared effort to shape food systems that are resilient, equitable and future-ready.



Thank you for being at the table...

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Scan the QR code to sign up for ***A Bite***, AFI's monthly newsletter, and get the latest research, events, stories and insights delivered to your inbox.