
Nutri-Net Database Project

Accompanying Notes

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1 - Introduction

Over the fall of 2007 the first database of Canadian funding sources for the functional foods and natural health food product sectors was assembled, on behalf of the Nutri-Net initiative. This *Accompanying Notes* document describes this project, and provides a basis from which to contemplate the follow-on work that is required if the relevance of the database is to be maintained.

This discussion starts with an overview of the project, followed by an examination of project outcomes. Some issues and challenges that were encountered in constructing this database are then addressed in the *Project Caveats* section. And finally, some suggested next steps are presented, along with a final word from the project team.

2 - Project Overview

In June of 2007 George Brook was approached about developing a database of funding sources for the Canadian functional foods and natural health products sectors, on behalf of the Nutri-Net Canada initiative. In the fall of 2007, the project was launched, with the project team undertaking to “identify and document the various programs and initiatives within both the federal and provincials spheres, including government financing and support, relating to the functional food and natural health product industry in Canada”.

The project was structured in three broad phases:

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|---|---|
| Phase 1 – Initial preparatory work | This phase involved developing an inventory of the relevant information available from existing sources, the creation of a draft database format for vetting by the Project Steering Committee, and initial contact with the Project Steering Committee. |
| Phase 2 – Creation and refinement of the project “Hit List” | Phase 2 focused on creating a list of programs for inclusion in the database. A draft list was assembled by the project team, and then this draft was circulated for input from the Steering Committee. The database structure was finalized, and material was developed for engaging with target programs and initiatives. At the end of this phase, the input from Steering Committee members was amalgamated into the final “Programs for Inclusion” list. |

Phase 3 – Engagement with identified programs and initiatives to assemble database information

Working from the comprehensive “Programs for Inclusion” list assembled in Phase 2, all identified programs and initiatives were contacted and engaged with, to secure their participation in filling out a completed data sheet, for inclusion in the database. All data that has been received / gathered was assembled into the final project databases.

The project was largely concluded by the first week of December, with some additional late submissions to be added to the database as received.

3 - Project Outcomes

This project has produced a preliminary database of federal and provincial funding sources for Canadian functional foods and natural health food initiatives, divided into Tier 1 and Tier 2 programs.

The decision to divide funding sources into two tiers was suggested by the project team, and ratified by the Project Committee, in response to the perception that there are a core group of funding programs that are directly targeted at the functional foods and natural health food sectors on the one hand, and then another group of funding programs that are not directly targeted at these sectors, but are nevertheless important sources of support. With the limited project budget, it was felt that collecting a full suite of information on both groups of funding programs would not be feasible. Therefore, the full suite of information would be collected for the core programs, now called Tier 1, and a more basic set of information would be collected on the more general programs, now called Tier 2. Collecting information on Tier 1 programs involved direct interaction with the target program, while information on Tier 2 programs could be researched by the project team online.

As has been noted, the process of identifying the programs to be included in the Tier 1 and 2 databases was driven by the input of the Project Steering Committee. While a preliminary list of programs for inclusion was created by the project team, it was the input of the individual Committee members, with their in-depth knowledge of their regional situation that was invaluable. The project team would like to thank the following people for their invaluable input on the list of programs for inclusion:

Connie Kehler – Saskatchewan Herb and Spice Association	Craig Urton – AVAC Ltd.
Tamara Kononoff – NRC IRAP	Sally Rutherford – Monarchus Consulting
Kelly Fitzpatrick – Flax Canada 2015	John Argall – BioAtlantech New Brunswick
Lisette Mascarenhas – Ag West Bio	Ann Eastman – BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands
Richard Hallman – BC Innovation Council	Marli MacNeil – BioNova

Susan Mullins – Newfoundland Department of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development	Rory Francis – Prince Edward Island BioAlliance
Isabelle Marquis - Directrice Réseau Nutra-Innovation, Québec	

The final list of Tier 1 programs for inclusion identified a total of 59 programs. Of these, 23 were subsequently found to be expired. Of the 36 active programs, all 36 were contacted by the project team. To-date, 15 of these programs have returned a form, despite persistent follow-up by the project team. This response rate of 42% is disappointing, but not unexpected (see discussion of project caveats).

In the Tier 1 database, all active programs are listed, divided by region. Active programs that did not return a completed form are color coded in green. Expired programs are listed in a separate table at the bottom of each region.

The final list of Tier 2 programs listed approximately 160 entries. Of these, roughly 45 of these entries were found to be no longer active or otherwise not relevant. Complete data was collected for all active Tier 2 programs.

The Tier 2 database lists all active Tier 2 programs by region. Obsolete Tier 2 programs are listed in a separate table at the bottom of each region.

Additional project outcomes

In addition to the core project deliverables, consisting of the Tier 1 and 2 databases, as well as this *Accompanying Notes*, this project has generated several other deliverables, including:

- A data collection format, vetted by the Project Steering Committee (Excel files *Nutri-Net Project Data Format Tier 1 Oct 22* and *Nutri-Net Project Data Format Tier 2 Oct 9*).
- A cover letter for use in engaging targeted programs, attached here as Appendix A.

4 - Project Caveats

George Brook was approached to develop the Nutri-Net database in part due to his experience in developing a very similar database. In 2005 he developed the *Inventory of Canadian Bioproducts Funding Sources* for Industry Canada and Bioproducts Canada. This previous experience provided a strong head start for the Nutri-Net project, and has allowed for a substantial amount of work to be completed within a modest project budget.

This previous experience led George to outline three caveats in the initial project proposal that was submitted. It is worth quickly examining these caveats, and how they were born out in completing this project.

Caveat A concerned the danger of having a substantial amount of program information still outstanding at the end of the project. This concern was based on the experience of the previous bioproducts database project, where a return rate of 60% was achieved after a considerably longer effort than was available here.

It is likely that some additional program information will be received by the project team over the coming month, hopefully pushing the final project completion rate around 50%. This means that a full 50% of all programs contacted by the project team will fail to fill out the supplied datasheet and return it, despite the best efforts of the project team.

This inability to get a significant percentage of contacted programs to participate in the database is the primary problem that will need to be addressed if this database is to be developed further.

Caveat B addressed the need for the comprehensive involvement of the Project Steering Committee, if the goals of the project were to be realized.

A considerable amount of input from the Project Steering Committee was indeed received by the project team. Overall, there was a high degree of confidence in the list of programs for inclusion that was developed, due to the thorough vetting by regional stakeholders. The two areas of weakness in the vetting of the programs for inclusion list involved 1) federal programs, and 2) the Province of Ontario. Any subsequent work on this database should address these two areas.

Once again, the project team thanks the Steering Committee for the considerable input received.

Caveat C identified the fact that the database would have relevance only in relation to how up to date and complete the information it contained was kept. Many government programs and initiatives have relatively short lifespans. Indeed, a significant proportion of the programs identified for this project were found to be obsolete. If the database is to be kept relevant, it will need to be periodically updated. The development of the 2nd Ag Policy Framework was identified by Steering Committee members as a potential logical trigger for an update to the database.

However, the issue of how to achieve greater participation from identified programs will need to be addressed if the database is to become truly complete. Ongoing updating and maintenance is required, but just as important is the ability to get returned data sheets from all programs (or at least the great majority of programs). Updating an incomplete database is of limited value. An updated and complete database is of considerable value.

5 - Next Steps

This Nutri-Net database is by definition a work in progress. If resources were not an issue, a very accurate and up-to-date database could be maintained by sheer ongoing effort. However, in the real world, the issue is how to deliver maximum results for more limited resources.

The following is a discussion of potential next steps for the database. These next steps are described as a series of tasks, presented in a logical order of priority.

Task 1 – Address the issue of how to secure more participation from target programs

This issue needs to be resolved before any other significant work is undertaken. The problem is a lack of interest in submitting applications on the part of many programs that are approached, and the lack of any leverage on the part of the project team in gaining this participation.

The project team would welcome the chance to discuss this issue with a group of key project stakeholders.

Task 2 – Review of work to-date by the Project Steering Committee

Key Steering Committee members review the Tier 1 and 2 databases, with specific attention to the listings for their own province. Any inaccuracies are corrected, and any updates are made. This step is applicable whether the following on work is undertaken relatively quickly, or further down the road.

Task 3 – Increased input sought on Ontario and Federal listings

Knowledgeable stakeholders are found to review the Ontario and Federal listings in the database, to ensure accuracy. Ideally, these stakeholders would join the Steering Committee.

Task 4 – Campaign to achieve more complete participation from identified programs

Using solutions found in Task 1, more complete participation is achieved from identified programs, and existing program listings are updated if necessary.

Task 5 – Put the database online

The database is put online in a fully searchable and user friendly interface, on an appropriate host site.

Task 6 – Establish mechanism to maintain the database

If the database is put online and found to be a truly valuable tool, a mechanism should be put in place to maintain the database, with periodic update efforts.

Recognizing that this project represents the initial phase of what needs to be an ongoing effort, a log was kept on the communications stream with each program. This log is found in the *Form Sent / Received* column in the Tier 1 database. This will enable follow-on efforts to easily pick up where the last effort left off.

6 - A Final Word

Based on their previous experience, it was clear to the project team from the outset that there were two critical factors that would influence the outcome of this database project:

1. Substantial regional stakeholder input would be an absolute requirement if an accurate list of programs is to be developed in an efficient manner.
2. The biggest challenge would be lack of response from the programs themselves. Put simply, many programs do not seem to respond to repeated requests and reminders.

This project received strong support from the Project Steering Committee, which has been a significant benefit to the quality of the resulting databases. Regional stakeholders provided extensive input on the programs in their province, greatly increasing the efficiency with which an accurate list of programs for inclusion was assembled.

However, the lack of cooperation from the targeted programs has proved to be a more difficult issue. It is not altogether clear to the project team where the solution to this lies. It is unclear if additional project resources would be a solution. If the contact person for a given program has not submitted a completed data form despite multiple reminders from the project team, will more reminders yield results?

If a solution to the problem of lack of cooperation from the targeted programs can be found, the project team believes that a truly useful and up-to-date database can be established and maintained. This initial database project provides a strong foundation for any additional work to follow.

Appendix A - Letter of Introduction for Targeted Programs

The letter on the following page was developed for use as an introductory letter for contact persons from targeted programs.



Voice of the Natural Products Industry



Agriculture and
Agri-Food Canada

Agriculture et
Agroalimentaire Canada



La voix de l'industrie des produits naturels

[Date]

Dear [name of program stakeholder],

Welcome to the Nutri-Net database project, an initiative to develop an online guide to national, provincial, and regional public funding resources for the Canadian natural health products and functional foods sectors. Your agency or program has been recognized as a significant funding source for the natural health products and/or functional foods sectors, and as such, you have been selected for inclusion in the database being constructed.

Your involvement is highly encouraged, and will consist of the completion of a data form on your program, which we estimate should take you approximately one half hour. This form [attached] is designed to provide database users with enough information to enable informed decisions as to the suitability of your program for their particular venture. By contributing to this database, it is anticipated that funding agencies will find a reduction in the volume of misguided enquiries, and an increase in interest from desired funding targets.

If you prefer, the project team would be happy to fill out the form during a brief phone consult with you. To set up a phone consult, or if you have any questions, please call or email us, with contact information below. If you prefer to fill in the data form and submit it, please do so by [date by which form should be submitted]. Our team will be actively following up with all selected agencies and programs, to ensure we generate the most complete and useful dataset possible.

The Nutri-net Database project represents an important tool for building Canada's natural health products and functional foods businesses sectors. Your timely response is greatly appreciated.

Thank-you,

The Nutri-net Database Project Team

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Agroalimentaire Canada



La voix de l'industrie des produits naturels

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Canadian Health Food
Association

Institute of Agri-Food Policy
Innovation

Ag-West Bio Inc

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Natural Health Product
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MaRS Landing

BC Ministry of Agriculture
and Lands

Centre Québécois de
Valorisation des
Biotechnologies

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Spice Association

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