

Streef Produce: Unlocking Value from Surplus

Company Overview

Streef Produce is a family-owned grower and wholesaler based in southern Ontario, operating across both production and distribution. With approximately 3,000 acres in cultivation and a presence at the Ontario Food Terminal, Streef grows and markets a wide range of vegetables including potatoes, sweet potatoes, green beans, asparagus, tomatoes, onions, peppers, and more.

Operating across multiple points in the value chain gives Streef a unique vantage point on where food loss occurs—and where it can be prevented. Over more than 15 years, the company has built practical pathways to ensure edible produce remains in the food system wherever possible.

The Challenge

Like many produce businesses, Streef works to reduce specification-driven food loss while navigating common market and operational constraints, including:

- Green beans that are too small, cut, or cosmetically imperfect
- Potatoes that fall outside preferred size ranges
- Product that no longer meets customer specifications
- Limited scalable outlets for surplus or off-grade produce

Historically, some of this product was directed to lower-value outlets such as animal feed; through collaboration with Food Banks Canada, Streef has been able to retain higher value for edible surplus while reducing waste.

At the same time, food banks across Canada were facing unprecedented demand, requiring new ways to source nutritious, consistent supply at scale.

The Solution: Operationalizing Food Recovery

At Streef Produce, the approach to food recovery is straightforward: if the product is still edible, the job isn't finished yet. Streef demonstrated leadership by adapting its operations to keep edible surplus in the human food system, working with Food Banks Canada to make this operationally viable at scale.


It required changes to how surplus was handled, new relationships, and a willingness to treat recovery as an operational function.

Over time, Streef built a set of practical pathways that allow surplus to stay in the food system, even when it no longer fits commercial specifications.


Where Loss Occurs

-  Farms & Packer/Shippers


Main Drivers

-  Cosmetic standards; Specification mismatch with buyers; Limited secondary markets for off-grade produce; perishability


Solutions

-  Partnership with food security non-profits; Packaging and repacking into usable formats; Light processing to enable distribution; Coordinated redistribution at scale; Animal feed


Key Partners

-  Food Banks Canada; Ontario Gleaners (Cambridge); Niagara Christian Gleaners; Second Harvest


Produce Types

-  Green beans, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, mixed vegetables


Measurement

-  Volume tracked through operational estimates and partner reporting

Social / Environmental Impact

-  More food for people; Less waste to landfill; Improved system efficiency

UN SDGs

-  **2** – Zero Hunger
- 12** – Responsible Consumption
- 13** – Climate Action

Redirecting Off-Grade Green Beans

Historically, green beans that missed cosmetic or sizing standards were diverted to animal feed. While that outlet served a purpose, it also meant edible product was leaving the human food chain.

By working with Food Banks Canada, Streef developed a different route. Off-grade beans were repackaged into formats food banks could move quickly and consistently. Once that logistical hurdle was addressed, these beans became usable inventory rather than surplus waiting for a home.

The change didn't require new crops or new markets—just a different way of handling product already being grown and harvested.

Finding a Home for Off-Size Potatoes

Potatoes presented a similar challenge. Those falling outside retail size specifications routinely missed the primary market, despite being perfectly sound. During the winter season, Streef moved roughly 85,000 lbs of off-size potatoes, packed in 50-lb bags, into the charitable food sector. The experience reinforced a recurring lesson: “off-grade” is often a commercial designation, not a quality one. When outlets are aligned, those products can move efficiently to people who need them.

Longstanding Relationships That Make Recovery Work

Some of Streef's most effective recovery channels are also the longest running. Its partnerships with Ontario Gleaners in Cambridge and Niagara Christian Gleaners have been built over time on trust and responsiveness. When surplus becomes available, it doesn't sit idle. A phone call turns excess vegetables, sometimes with just minor blemishes, into product destined for food aid programs. In 2024, Niagara Christian Gleaners distributed nearly 11 million servings of food aid worldwide, including product supplied by Streef.

Using the Terminal to Respond in Real Time

Streef's role as a wholesaler at the Ontario Food Terminal adds another layer of flexibility. Market conditions can change fast, and when they do, product that ripens early or misses a buyer can be redirected just as quickly. Through food rescue networks like Second Harvest, items such as tomatoes can be pulled back into circulation before they become waste. The ability to respond in real time is critical—once perishability takes over, options shrink fast.

Model Insight: Investing in the System

At the core of this approach is a critical shift led by **Food Banks Canada**. **The investment is in the system, not just the food.**

Rather than relying on informal donation pathways or expecting producers to absorb added costs, Food Banks Canada designs, funds, and operates the enabling infrastructure that allows producers like Streef to act on their sustainability commitments without absorbing added operational risk—while increasing access to food for communities across the network.

This includes:

- Packaging and repacking
- Light processing where required
- Pack sizes aligned to food bank handling and distribution realities

By addressing these operational constraints upstream, surplus product becomes usable inventory rather than excess waiting for a destination. The result is a **scalable, repeatable pathway** that turns previously unusable surplus into viable food supply.

From Workarounds to Working Systems

None of these pathways emerged overnight. Each required coordination, investment, and a willingness to rethink how surplus fits into the supply chain. But together, they've helped make food recovery less reactive and more routine. Rather than treating surplus as an exception, Streef's experience shows what happens when recovery is built into normal operations. With the right partners and infrastructure, keeping food in the system becomes part of how the business runs—not an extra step at the end.

The Takeaway for Industry: “Not Marketable” Does Not Mean “Not Edible”

In the produce industry, product often leaves the commercial stream for reasons that have little to do with food safety or quality. Size falls outside a spec. Appearance doesn't meet a buyer's expectations. A pack format no longer fits an order. Demand shifts faster than product can move.

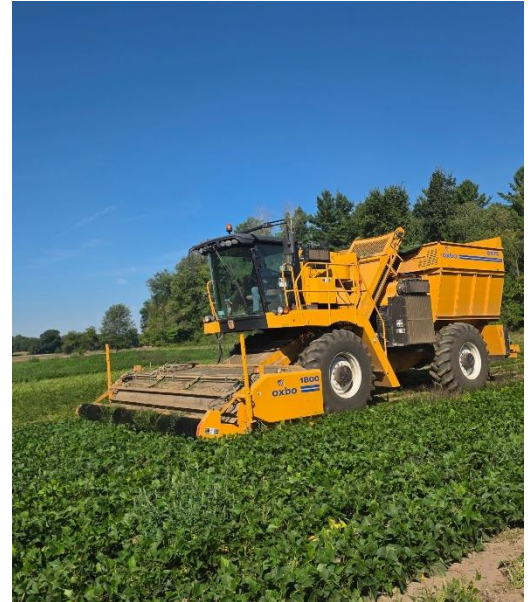
What Streef's experience makes clear is that these moments don't have to mark the end of the road. Through collaboration with partners like Food Banks Canada, these products are redirected in ways that create environmental, social, and economic value for producers and communities alike. That redirection doesn't depend on goodwill alone—it depends on systems that work in real operating conditions.

A few practical realities stand out:

- **Specification-driven loss is often solvable.** Product that misses a commercial target can still meet a real need when alternative pathways exist.
- **Packaging and format matter as much as volume.** Recovery only scales when product arrives in forms that downstream partners can move efficiently.
- **Food banks and food rescue organizations can function as reliable channels, not just emergency outlets.** When coordination and infrastructure are in place, they behave much more like complementary markets than donation endpoints.
- **Small operational investments can unlock large impact.** In many cases, the difference between loss and recovery comes down to logistics, timing, and coordination—not growing more food.

As food recovery networks continue to evolve, approaches that were once considered workarounds are increasingly becoming part of standard practice. For produce businesses, this creates more opportunities to build on existing operations with greater flexibility.

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The opportunity for producers is to lead when supported by systems like Food Banks Canada's that make surplus recovery practical and scalable.

“For us, it comes down to doing what's right. Yes, keeping good food in the system makes business sense, and it's good for our community. But at the end of the day, we don't want to see food go to waste when it can feed people. That's always been our bottom line.”

— Nathan Streef, Streef Produce