

Grow Your Business:

**A Guide to Institutional Procurement
for Nova Scotia Food and Beverage
Producers and Processors**



Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture
2026

Minister's Message



As Minister of Agriculture, I know that Nova Scotia producers and processors play a vital role in bringing local food into the places where people rely on it most. Your products are being welcomed at hospitals, schools, universities, and long-term care homes across the province.

Over the past year, the Department of Agriculture has built on this momentum by strengthening connections between local suppliers and institutional buyers.

Through the Institutional Development, Expansion and Advancement (IDEA) Program, we committed \$860,000 to help local suppliers access stable, high-volume markets at our provincial institutions, with another \$1 million added to this year's budget to expand the program.

We're already seeing the impact of this work.

Terra Beata is supplying locally made juice to Nova Scotia hospitals. The Station Food Hub has processed more than 120,000 pounds of local potatoes for use in healthcare facilities. And producers like West River Farms are finding new markets for their beef products through institutional partnerships.

This kind of success emerges when we work together – producers, processors, institutions, and government each contributing to a stronger local supply chain.

This guide is designed to help you navigate institutional opportunities and make new and important connections.

I look forward to what we can continue to build together.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Greg Morrow", enclosed within a blue oval.

Hon. Greg Morrow

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The opportunity — Selling to institutions



Selling to small retail stores, at farmers' markets, and at your farm are great ways to build your brand. Public institutions are a cornerstone of the buy local opportunity in Nova Scotia. They offer a unique and powerful way to grow your business.

What are public institutions?

Public institutions include the following:

- hospitals and healthcare facilities
- public schools (pre primary through grade 12)
- colleges and universities
- long-term care homes
- correctional facilities

What are the benefits of selling to institutions?

There are 3 main benefits to selling to public institutions:

Predictable volume and revenue

Institutions order large amounts on a repeat basis. That gives you a cash flow that you can count on.

Year-round relationships

Many institutions need a steady supply of food all year long. In winter, that means root vegetables, proteins, and processed foods. If you can provide these things, you can turn a seasonal business into a year-round one.

Efficiency at scale

When you sell large amounts to a single customer, you reduce the time and money you spend on small packages and on marketing to individuals .

What is the current demand for local products?

The demand for local products in Nova Scotia is reaching an all-time high. In fact, many institutions want to buy at least 20 per cent of their food from local suppliers.

Recent pilot projects show that more than 14,000 meals served in institutions have included the following local products:

- beef
- fruits and vegetables
- beverages and prepared snacks



Buy Local Tip

Start small. Choose one product. Build a relationship with one buyer. Build up your distribution system before you try to supply the entire province.

How is the Government of Nova Scotia helping?

The Government of Nova Scotia set up the Institutional Development Expansion and Advancement Program (IDEA).

It does 2 main things:

- It helps to pay for the equipment you need to supply institutions.
- It helps to pay for several things institutions need to increase the amount of food they can buy locally. These include
 - equipment
 - menu planning
 - development of new supply channels

Are you ready to break into the institutional market?

This opportunity is for you if you are one or more of the following:

- **a farmer** who grows fresh fruits, grains, and vegetables
- **a meat processor** who can fill custom or volume orders
- **a value-added producer** who makes shelf-stable products like these:
 - juices
 - honey and maple syrup
 - snack bars
 - waffle-mix
- **a food hub manager** who takes products from several farms to meet large orders.

You may be ahead of the game if you produce one or more of the following foods:

- | | |
|-----------|------------------|
| – apples | – potatoes |
| – beef | – onions |
| – carrots | – poultry |
| – eggs | – seafood |
| – milk | – sweet potatoes |

Recent pilot projects and current buy local programs show that these are the most popular foods used in institutions.



Buying local – Myth busting for producers



You may think that institutional markets are out of your reach due to price or volume. Here are some common myths about selling to institutions.

The price myth

*I can't afford to sell at wholesale prices.
I'll lose money.*

Prices are lower but **cost of sale** is lower too. **Cost of sale** is what you pay to get your product out the door. These are some costs of sale and how they are reduced when you sell to institutions:

Marketing

When you sell to an institution, you don't have to pay for these things:

- advertising to individual customers
- social media management

Packaging

When you sell to an institution, you ship products in bulk cases. That means you buy fewer clamshells and small bags and save the time and cost of filling them.

Delivery

When you sell to an institution, you may deliver 400 kg to one loading dock. This is cheaper than delivering smaller amounts to several different customers.

The volume myth

I'm too small. I can't provide the year-round volume a school or hospital needs.

You don't have to be a large operation to get started. These are some ways you can meet an institution's needs in a small way and get your foot in the door:

Seasonal products

Many institutions want to feature seasonal produce. Maybe you can fill their need for fresh strawberries in July or squash in October. You don't have to start off with a year-round supply.

Food hubs

You don't have to meet an institution's full demand. You can sell your products to a food hub. They buy from many local producers. They can add your products to those of other producers until they have enough to sell to an institution. That way, you may only need to meet a fraction of the institution's needs.

Start small

Many successful partnerships began with a single product for a single special event meal. See if you can fill the need for part of that meal.

The availability myth

The distributor only buys from the biggest farms.

Some distribution companies act like food hubs because they want to ensure that 20 per cent of their supply is locally produced. But, if a large distributor isn't for you, try the direct option.

Direct option

This means selling directly to a customer. For example, many long-term care homes buy smaller amounts than other institutions. Because of this, they can buy directly from local producers. It helps if you can fill custom orders or offer fresher produce.



Buy Local Tip

Factor in the time you save.

What takes longer?

- a) selling a large quantity in small batches to several customers
- b) selling the same quantity to one large customer

The time you save is money in your pocket.



Understanding the market — Knowing your customers' needs



Different institutional buyers have different needs. They all prefer local food. But their budgets, safety requirements, and menu cycles vary widely.

Types of institutional buyers

Each sector offers a unique opportunity based on your product and scale.

Hospitals and healthcare facilities

These facilities have the highest level of food safety. They must meet strict dietary and nutritional needs. And they must do so consistently, year-round.

Public schools (pre primary through grade12)

Peak demand is from September through June. Schools want kid-friendly, ready-made nutritious snacks.

Universities and colleges

From September through April, these institutions need a lot of food. They like to sign long-term contracts with suppliers. They are also excellent partners for seasonal items.

Long-term care homes

These buyers value loyalty and direct relationships. They are looking for texture modified foods and high-quality proteins. Texture modified foods range from liquids and purées to soft and easy to chew foods.

Correctional facilities

These facilities tend to buy in bulk. The most popular items are beef, potatoes, and root vegetables. Anyone delivering to a correctional facility must ensure a high level of security.

How the buying decision happens

At major institutions, this is how buying decisions are made:

Identification

A procurement manager wants to buy more local products.

Review

They look at who can supply them with local products. They compare buying directly from producers with what is available through their distributor. Comparisons include cost, quality, availability, and quantity.

Testing

The food service team tests your product for quality, yield, and ease of preparation.

Negotiation

You and the procurement manager discuss the price, quantity, and delivery schedule. When you come to an agreement, you sign a contract for a set period of time.

Review

Once a contract is complete, both parties look at how well things went. If all goes well, they renew the contract.

The best time of year to sell your product

Timing is everything in procurement.

Year-round: People want dairy, eggs, greenhouse greens, and meats.

Summer: People want fresh berries, tomatoes, and leafy greens.

Winter: People want longer lasting items:

- root vegetables like carrots, turnips, and potatoes
- frozen items
- proteins

RFPs are a big part of the process

RFP stands for Request for Proposal. This is a competitive bidding process. Large institutions use these to find suppliers. They like them because they can lock in pricing and delivery schedules well in advance.

Things you will find in an RFP:

- the products the institution is looking for
- the amount of products they need
- the amount they want to get from local producers
- how often they need those products delivered
- the amount of product they need at each delivery
- the food safety standards you must meet

When you respond to an RFP and your proposal is accepted, you could have a contract that lasts for years.

You can find provincial government RFPs in the [Procurement Opportunities and Public Notices – Procurement Portal](#).



Buy Local Tip

Find out when the institution you want to sell to sends out RFPs or renews contracts. Make your first call when you know this is happening. You can sign up for tender notifications. These tell you when Nova Scotia public institutions send out their RFPs.

Scaling for success — Knowing if selling to institutions is right for you



Selling to institutions is a big change from selling directly to consumers. Before you invest in new equipment, find out if your current business model can meet the needs of one or more of the following:

- a hospital or healthcare facility
- a public school or family of schools (pre primary through grade 12)
- a college or university
- a long-term care home
- a correctional facility

Comparing the markets

Even though there are pros and cons to getting into the institutional market, it's a great way to secure new revenue streams. When you sell to an institution, you need to think about volume and margins in a new way. Use the table below to see how selling to institutions differs from selling directly to consumers.

Feature	Selling directly to consumers	Selling to institutions
Volume	Variable and unpredictable	High and predictable
Pricing	Premium and retail rates	Mid-range to wholesale rates
Effort	Direct marketing and booth setup	Procurement and distributor relationships
Planning	Flexible and seasonal	Strict availability and contract requirements
Paperwork	Minimal	Detailed food safety records and traceability



Buy Local Tip

Be realistic. Selling to Institutions takes commitment. In return you get stable, predictable revenue. This lets you focus on what you do best: growing great food.

How to know if you are ready to sell to an institution

Answer these questions to find out if you are ready.

Can you scale? Can your farm increase production to meet a large contract? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Are you certified? Do you currently hold food safety certifications? If not, are you working on getting them? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Is your transport reliable? Can you commit to a consistent weekly delivery schedule using refrigerated transport? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Are your systems professional? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Can you provide digital invoices, accurate allergen information, and traceability records?
See Trace your product and Keep records on page 14.

Are you in it for the long haul? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Are you interested in building a multi-year partnership rather than a one-time sale?

Scoring your results

If you've answered 4 out of 5 with yes, then you're ready to start the roadmap to readiness on page 17.

If you didn't, and you are still interested in pursuing institutional markets, please contact the appropriate staff.



Meeting the standards — Setting your business up for success



Institutional buyers want 3 things above all else:

- food safety
- consistency and reliability
- professionalism



Food safety

To prove that your food is safe, you need to do 4 things:

Trace your product

Start using lot codes. Lot codes are unique numbers that link a product to its production batch. These codes let you track batches. If a quality issue arises, you know exactly where the product came from.

Keep records

Keep written records of the following:

- harvest dates
- storage temperatures
- water testing

These records prove that you have a system in place.

Get certified

Get CanadaGAP certified. GAP stands for Good Agricultural Practices. CanadaGAP is a food safety program for businesses that produce, handle, and broker fruits and vegetables. It certifies suppliers who meet its standards and show that they will continue to do so. Many Nova Scotia institutions now expect CanadaGAP certification. It is up to you to apply for this certification.

Have your food inspected

You can arrange this through one of 2 bodies:

- The Canada Food Inspection Agency (CFIA)
- The Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture (provincial inspectors)

The following products must be inspected either by the CFIA or a provincial inspector:

- processed foods
- meats
- products coming into or leaving Nova Scotia

It is up to you to arrange an inspection of your products.

Consistency, reliability, and professionalism

Show the institutions that you want to sell to that you are serious. Have these 4 systems and protections in place:

Product specifications (spec sheets)

Chefs in institutions plan their menus far in advance. They need to know exactly what you are delivering. Your spec sheets should show the following:

- **Size and weight:** Be specific. Instead of writing “one unit,” write “one 9-kilo case.”
- **Grade:** This tells your buyer the quality of your product. You can find out how to grade your products on the [Canadian Food Inspection Agency \(CFIA\) website](#). See *Grades for food*.
- **Preparation:** Tell your buyer what state your food will arrive in. Is it raw, pre-washed, or diced, for example?

Cold chain integrity

If you are delivering food that spoils, always keep it at a safe temperature. Institutions may check the temperature of your delivery vehicle when it arrives. Keep a refrigerated transport temperature monitoring log.

Labelling

Make sure your food labels include the following information:

- the common name of your product
- the producer’s address
- net weight or volume
- lot code and packaging date
- allergen warnings
- Nutrition Facts table

You can find out more about product labelling on the [Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#) website.

You can get help creating a Nutrition Facts table at [Perrenia.ca](#)

Professional liability insurance

To sell to a public institution, you will likely need liability insurance to protect against foodborne illness claims. Find out if the institution you want to sell to requires this. If so, find out how much insurance you need.

We're here to help

Preparing to sell to an institution takes time and investment. Perennia and the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture are here to help. Check out these 2 programs:

- [Institutional Development and Expansion Advancement \(IDEA\)](#)
- [Food Safety Supplier program](#)

Through these programs, you can get help with the following:

- training
- internal audits
- cost-sharing for certifications



Buy Local Tip

Making sure your food is safe is something you have to do all the time. Budget for annual staff training and periodic audits. This will help you keep your status as a preferred supplier for years to come.



Roadmap to Readiness — 8 stops on your way to your first sale



It's a huge move to go from selling directly to consumers to selling to institutions. Before you invest too much time, imagine you are going on a road trip. Each step, you make a couple of stops.

At the end of each step, you come to a checkpoint. If you answer **yes** to the checkpoint question, you continue your road trip for another step. If you answer **no** to the checkpoint question, focus on what you need to do to get to yes before moving on.

Roadmap to Readiness



Step 1

Internal prep – Getting your house in order

Checkpoint 1:

*Can I guarantee
consistent quantity
and safety right now?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

1 Know your capacity

Find out exactly how much you can reliably produce and when you can deliver.

2 Audit your safety

Be realistic about your current food safety status. Use lot codes. See page 14. Keep records that show the path your product took from your farm. If the product didn't originate with you, your records must show where it came from.

Tip: Don't overpromise. Give the institution an amount you know for a fact that you can deliver. Chefs rely on your delivery. If your order is short, they may not be able to make up the volume.



Step 2

Research and support – Mapping the market

Checkpoint 2:

*Do I know who my
potential customers are
and what they need?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

3 Get expert support

Contact [Perennia](#) or the [Department of Agriculture](#) to review your readiness. See section 10, *People and resources – You're not alone* on page 28.

4 Target your ideal buyer

Choose 3 to 5 specific institutions whose scale matches your capacity. Think realistically about the amount of food you can supply. Is it enough to meet the needs of a major university? Or is it more in line with a long-term care home? Staff at Perennia can help you find your match.

Tip: When researching buyers, look at their menus to see if your product fits their current needs.



Step 3

The audition – Pitching and piloting

5 Develop your professional pitch

Your professional pitch must include 2 things:

- a producer profile.
See section 8, Marketing – Telling your story on page 24.
- accurate product specification sheets (spec sheets)

6 Make contact

Reach out to procurement managers and distributor representatives.

7 Run a pilot test

Start with a small trial order. This will prove 2 things:

- that you have a high-quality product
- that you can deliver on time

8 Discuss feedback and adjust

Check in with procurement managers after the pilot to find out how it went. Do you need to change the product or packaging to make things work better? Can you make those changes?

Tip: Your most important marketing tool is the “spec sheet,” see *Food safety on page 14*. Institutions base their purchasing decisions on the following:

- pack size
- grade
- consistent yields

Tip: Give them a brief introduction to your business and what you can offer them. Offer samples.

Tip: Treat the pilot test like an audition. Make sure you get these 3 things right:

- your product is perfect
- the delivery is on time
- the invoice is accurate

Checkpoint 3:

Did my product perform well in the institution’s kitchen?

☐ Yes ☐ No



Step 4

The partnership – Signing contracts

9 Cement the relationship

Set up regular ordering schedules and payment terms. Put these in a supply agreement and sign it.

Tip: Keep your buyer informed. If weather is going to affect your harvest, for example, tell the buyer right away. They value advance warning almost as much as the product itself.



You have reached your destination: Consistent revenue



Buy Local Tip

Every 3 months, go back to the Roadmap to Readiness on page 18. Use it as a checklist as you plan your business. Are you stuck at a checkpoint? Work on being able to answer yes to the checkpoint question before you move on.



Distribution options – How do I get my product to the institution?



Choosing the right distribution option depends on 3 things:

- how much your farm can produce
- the kind of delivery equipment you have or any third-party delivery companies that can be used
- how much time you want to spend on planning, coordinating, and carrying out deliveries.

Many successful Nova Scotia producers use a mix of distribution options at the same time.



Buy Local Tip

When shopping for delivery equipment or looking to hire third-party delivery vendors, be sure to get estimates from several vendors before settling on one.

Option 1: Direct sales to institutional buyers

You sell and deliver directly to an institution. For example, an elementary school or long-term care home.

Pros:	You are in charge of the price. You build a direct relationship with the chef or procurement manager.
Cons:	You are responsible for all delivery logistics: • invoicing • keeping the food at a safe temperature at all times
Best For:	• producers located near institutions • producers who can deliver custom orders

Option 2: Selling through distributors

You sell your product to a large distributor. They then sell it to their network of institutional clients.

Pros:	You reach many institutions at once. The distributor handles the delivery.
Cons:	Pricing may be lower because of the distributor's costs. You must meet strict volume and safety requirements.
Best For:	Medium to large producers who can offer 2 things: • a consistent, high-volume supply • competitive pricing

Option 3: Regional food hubs

You deliver to a food hub that adds your product to those of other small farms to fill large orders. See page 7.

Pros: Hubs handle marketing and logistics. This makes it easier for you to sell to larger customers.

Cons: Pricing may be lower due to the hub's costs.
You have less control over the brand than if you sold directly to the customer.

Good news: Food hubs throughout the province are expanding so they can distribute to institutions.

You can find out more about food hubs from [The Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture](#).



Buy Local Tip

No matter how you choose to sell your products, make sure they bear the Nova Scotia Loyal logo. You can apply the logo yourself or ask the distributor or food hub to do it for you. The logo helps buyers find your product more easily.



Marketing – Telling your story



You have researched the market. You know what you want to sell. You know how much you can deliver. You know who you want to sell to. And you know how you will distribute your product. Now, you must convince institutions to buy from you.

You need professional marketing materials

Have a professional marketing kit prepared for you. You should have this kit ready to send to any procurement manager. It should include the following:

Producer profile

A one-page summary of your farm's history, food safety practices, and mission.

Spec sheets

You need one sheet for every product you sell. Each sheet includes the size, grade, weight, and shelf life of your product.

High-quality photos

You need professional images of the following:

- your farm
- your team
- your products in their final packaging

Social media page or website

Somewhere customers can find out about you and your products.

Nova Scotia Loyal branding

Use the Nova Scotia Loyal logo on all your materials and packaging. This is useful for buyers who want to increase the number of local products they serve.

Let your materials tell your story

Institutional buyers want more than a product. They want a partner they can trust and a story they can share with their clients. Include the following information in your marketing kit.

Who are you?

Are you a multi-generational family farm, a young farmer, or a local entrepreneur? Tell your customers how and why you got into farming.

How do you grow your food?

Talk about your commitment to quality, sustainability, and the Nova Scotia environment.

Why should institutions buy from you?

Remind buyers that every dollar spent with you stays in Nova Scotia.

Keep in touch with your customers

Institutions plan their menus in advance. Even if you have already secured a contract with a buyer, it helps to keep them up to date on your production. One useful tool is a seasonal calendar. This tells buyers when your crops will be available.

**Buy Local Tip**

Become a Nova Scotia Loyal partner! As a producer, you can use the [NS Loyal](https://www.nsloyal.ca) portal to download branding assets, stickers, and digital tools. Put these on your packaging and marketing materials. They tell institutional buyers, at a glance, that your product helps them meet their targets for buying local.

Success stories – Celebrating partnerships

The following are stories about Nova Scotia producers and processors. You'll see how they have adapted to meet the needs of institutions. This allowed them to create stable revenue and strengthen our local food system.



Button Brook Farm – Annapolis County

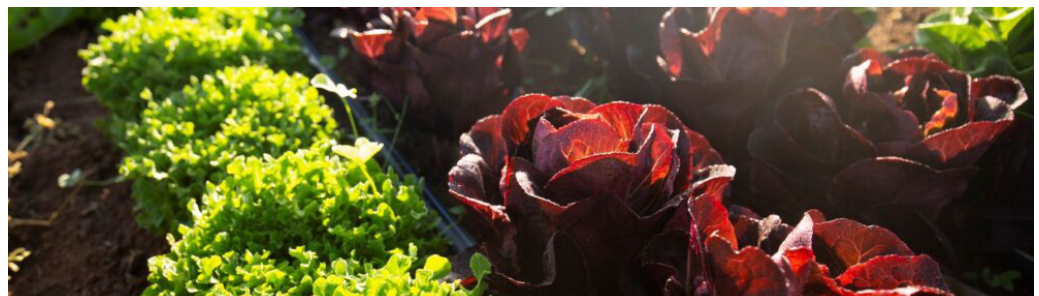
Button Brook Farm's vision is to cultivate local prosperity by providing meaningful employment and healthy food to Nova Scotians. They specialize in salad green production for retailers, restaurants and institutions in Nova Scotia. Their mission is to become a substantial, local and ecological alternative in markets dominated by conventional imports. Having their food safety program certified under CanadaGAP has allowed them to access institutional markets through distributors with large established networks, expanding their scale and reach as they work toward the goal of supplanting imports with food grown at home.



Buy Local Tip

Be a local champion!
Successful producers
do 3 things:

- Commit to a product.
- Build a relationship with the buyer.
- Stick with it.





Comeau's Seafood Ltd. – Digby County

Since 1946, Comeau's Sea Foods has been a cornerstone of the Canadian seafood industry, earning recognition as a leader in the harvesting, processing, and global distribution of premium fish and seafood products.

Today, the company's diverse operations serve loyal retail, foodservice, and institutional customers through integrated activities that include harvesting, processing, bottling, and distribution. Comeau's Sea Foods is known for delivering consistently superior products, guided by strict quality standards and a commitment to environmental responsibility.

Celebrated for its innovation and great-tasting seafood, Comeau's products are staples on institutional menus across Nova Scotia, with popular offerings including fish cakes, salt cod, scallops, and haddock.



La Casita Kitchen – Halifax

La Casita Kitchen is a Halifax based producer specializing in Latin American-inspired frozen handheld foods. Over the past four years, they've grown from local markets to supplying grocers, cafés, and institutional partners across Nova Scotia.

A signature product in the institutional space has been their empanadas, which have been successful due to their consistency, ease of preparation, and ability to fit seamlessly into high-volume food service operations.

Entering the institutional space has helped push toward higher food safety and operational standards, including advancing HACCP readiness.





People and resources – You're not alone



If you need help with any part of the process there are people and resources ready to help you.

People

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Nova Scotia Loyal Distribution Specialist

Perennia Food and Agriculture Corporation

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Resources

Perennia

Perennia offers a wide variety of services for food producers. Here are some examples:

- food safety consulting
- training
- business development support

Perennia also administers the Institutional Development Expansion and Advancement Program (IDEA).

<https://www.perennia.ca/>

Nova Scotia Loyal

Nova Scotia Loyal makes it easy to identify Nova Scotia products. You can apply to become a Nova Scotia Loyal partner. Partners get brand packages that they can use to promote their products.

<https://nsloyal.ca/en>

<https://nsloyal.ca/en/directory/>

Department of Agriculture

The Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture offers a number of services including the following:

- business development
- inspections
- insurance
- loans

Regional Agricultural Representatives and Business Development Officers (Regional Services)

<https://novascotia.ca/agri/programs-and-services/regional-services/>

CFIA and CanadaGAP

The role of both the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and CanadaGAP is to ensure the safety of Canada's food.

The CFIA inspects food, describes how to grade products, and issues food recalls among other things.

CanadaGAP focuses on fresh fruits and vegetables. It offers certification that is often required by institutions.

CFIA main page: <https://inspection.canada.ca/>

CFIA food grades: <https://inspection.canada.ca/en/food-labels/labelling/industry/grades-food>

CanadaGAP main page: <https://www.canadagap.ca/>

RFPs

Find out when the institutions you want to sell to are looking for new suppliers. You can do this in 2 ways:

- Visit this website often: Procurement Opportunities and Public Notices – Procurement Portal.
- Sign up for tender notifications.

<https://procurement-portal.novascotia.ca/tenders>

<https://www.novascotia.ca/sign-tender-notifications>

