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BCIA 'muzzling' members, says past president

By Robert Freeman - Chilliwack Progress - April 09, 2008

T:

A leading B.C. farm policy expert will charge tomorrow that the BC Institute of Agrologists is "muzzling" members with the aim of "breaking the back" of the agricultural land reserve.

Wendy Holm, a past president of the institute, says an agrologist was threatened with disciplinary action and forced to withdraw a letter opposing a proposal to "hive off" a portion of a Delta golf course in the land reserve for a housing development.

"This is a huge problem that affects the rate of removal of land from the ALR," she said, citing an 80 percent approval rate of removal applications by one of the Agricultural Land Commission's regional panels.

"It undermines the public's right to good information from professionals," she said.

The issue is also linked to the ALC's review of subdivision approvals in Chilliwack following the public furor over a development at Rosebank Place by former mayor John Les. He resigned as B.C.'s Solicitor General March 28 after learning a special prosecutor was looking into his land deals while he was the mayor of Chilliwack.

Holm said the ALC was a "strong organization until it was broken up into the regional" panels, which led to a "significant weakening of the public interest" in removal applications.

"It made it easier for developers to team up with municipalities and push forward removal applications," she said. "This is made worse by the muzzling of professional agrologists who could speak against these withdrawals."

BCIA and ALC officials were not available for comment yesterday. However, the issue of public advocacy by agrologists was highlighted in the February BCIA newsletter.

The president's column cites a lawyer's opinion that professional agrologists can take a "limited" advocacy position, but there are "no explicit provisions in the Agrologists Act that confer an advocacy role to its members."

The act "does not specifically preclude" members from taking a limited advocacy role as long as it "does not cast doubt on the integrity or objectivity of the BCIA" or its members.

Holm said she expects "fireworks" when she raises the issue at the BCIA's annual general meeting Friday morning in Abbotsford.

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She called on other agrologists to join her and “voice your concern over this unacceptable muzzling ... that strikes at the heart of our professional right - some would say obligation - to provide balanced public policy input on matters affecting agriculture and the public interest.”

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