

What do these farmers want anyway?

September 1994 Column – Country Life in BC

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

"Say, have you heard the one about why they bury farmers only two feet deep? So they can still get a hand out..."

A sick joke offered by a seat-mate on a recent flight upon hearing that my profession was agriculture. A highly insulting image of Canadian farmers all too often encountered as our society moves away from its rural roots.

What do farmers want? Not much, really. Not when you consider agriculture's importance to food production, rural economic development and community stability.

Fair rules that don't change with each political administration. ("Yes, we're going to limit your rights to sell your land under the ALR but in return we will give you Farm Income Insurance. For a while.")

Entrenchment of their right to farm in a sustainable commercial manner without harassment. B.C.'s right-to farm legislation is the worst in the country. Effective legislation — similar to New Brunswick and Ontario — would provide strong support for the agricultural community by establishing their legal right to carry out normal farming activities.

Right-to-farm legislation that is backed up by effective controls on the ability of local government to enact capricious and costly by-laws which raise farm costs and reduce competitiveness *vis a vis* imported goods. Examples of this include recent prohibitions on both aerial spraying and the use of blueberry cannons for bird control in some regions of the Fraser Valley.

Zoning that is fair and consistent in its administration and which recognizes the interests of the farming community. A community plan which acknowledges that agriculture is the highest and best use for agricultural land and actively promotes and sustains agricultural viability must be accompanied by comprehensive and hard-edged zoning to ensure these objectives are met. This includes minimum parcel sizes, buffer zones, and strategies for farm land amalgamation. No farmer should be precluded by municipal zoning regulations from exercising a farming option allowable under the Agricultural Land Act.

Mandatory and active farmer advisory committees at the municipal and regional government level.

Fair and secure tenure arrangements for leased farm land which are long term, affordable and supportive of good farm management practices. Farming on leased land is becoming increasingly common as speculators and hobby farmers drive land prices well above agricultural values. To qualify for an agricultural tax exemption, owners who rent their land to farmers should be required to provide evidence of equitable minimum lease terms which provide farmers with the security needed to properly manage that land. Government must set an example for the private sector in its management of Crown lands.

Fair Trade. The uncertainty faced by supply-management producers due to Canada's failure to entrench in NAFTA our right to apply GATT tariffication provisions to competing U.S. product is completely unacceptable. (Curiously, *MEXICO's* tariffication rights are explicitly *protected* by NAFTA... What *were* our negotiators thinking?) Similarly, look at the beating we will likely take on durum wheat. Or the February 1994 removal of tariffs on U.S. Delicious apples under the Special Import Measures Act (costing the B.C. apple industry \$2 million to date, it has only taken the feds *eight months* to order a dumping probe).

A truly level playing field on issues such as pesticide use and hidden subsidies. It's no news to the farming community that when pesticides available south of the border are banned in Canada, domestic costs escalate. If we want to establish tougher pesticide regulations in Canada, fair enough. But then there must be some *quid pro quo* at the border when product which is produced more cheaply "through the miracle of chemicals" competes head on with more costly domestic produce. Water pricing is a good example of the hidden subsidy issue. While proposed direct water metering and cost-recovery pricing for many agricultural regions of the province makes sense from a water conservation standpoint, it only makes trade sense if we start accurately measuring and pressuring for a elimination of the U.S. farm subsidy for irrigation water. To both ignore the U.S. subsidy while at the same time increasing domestic production costs is lunacy.

Respect. From consumers, politicians and bureaucrats, farmers want and deserve respect for their vital role in both the production of food and the sustainability of healthy rural communities.

B.C.'s farmers are being hit with a seemingly endless stream of new regulations — the Waste Management Act, the Environmental Assessment Act, the proposed Water Act, the new Environmental Protection Act and discussions surrounding protected area strategies, the CORE process, a new Forestry Practices Code and proposed changes governing farm labour, to name a few.

Farm leaders are expected to take time out from their farming operations to participate in the discussion process surrounding all these new regulations. But when this process becomes little more than political window-dressing, the resultant burn-out of good people shortchanges the whole industry.

Given the opportunity to compete fair and square, most of this province's commercial farmers will do just fine, thank you. But it seems that bureaucrats and politicians sometimes have a problem understanding the meaning of the term "fair and square."

No, farmers don't want to have their "hand out." But they sure as heck don't want it tied behind their back by a government so lacking in understanding and vision that they have lost their ability to stand up strongly for agriculture. And a society which allows this to occur.

Next month: In Search of Border Collies

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