

# It is 2030 A.D.- urban sprawl buries farmland...

## November 1994 Column — Country Life in B.C

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Welcome to Time-O-Rama — the new, virtual reality time travel ride. You're shown to your seat as the lights begin to dim. A disembodied voice tells you to enter the year you want to visit through the keyboard on your right armrest. You're a farmer. Like many, you face considerable uncertainty. Not surprisingly, you decide to visit the future. Your children's future, to be precise. The year is 2030. The curtain rises.

Two doors appear on the screen before you. According to your guide, each one represents a different "outcome". You must choose one to start the ride. You pick door number one. It slowly swings open.

You're standing on the land your family has farmed since the late 1800's, but something's very different. You look around dumbfounded. Where did the neighbouring farms go? Where did your farm go? The land is still here. It's still green. But, according to a highway billboard ("Prettiest Darn Little Country Estate Community in all of Cascadia."), it's now *Fraser Valley Estates*.

How could this occur? Luckily, here comes a "virtual guide" to explain things.

Apparently, the pressure on farmland only increased. With most Canadians already grouped like fine, rich silt along our southern border, B.C.'s geography (thin ribbons of communities along the 49th or oriented north-south in fertile valley bottoms) and new in-migration conspired to place farming and residential growth on collision paths.

When farmers themselves became divided on farmland preservation, even the ALR could no longer protect it from conversion.

It was not a pretty story. With speculation driving the price of agricultural land to levels 8-10 times above farm value, non-farmer owners called the shots. For many farmers, security of tenure was dictated by leases not worth the paper they were printed on. And sometimes the offending landlord was government. Senior bureaucrats playing chicken with public policy objectives exacerbated the problem.

Across the line, things were quite different. No pressure on land in eastern Washington. They had land to burn. Like most desert communities, the limiting factor to growth was water. The exact reverse of B.C.'s situation, land was cheap and water expensive.

Apparently, the agricultural by-product didn't really hit the rotary air circulation device until fish replaced farmers in the minds and hearts of U.S. politicians.

Bumping down a jurisdictional pecking path the complexity of which only arises for a commodity as valued as water, "junior" water rights were cut back drastically to supplement in-stream uses. In some cases, rights in existence for over 60 years were suddenly and unexpectedly at risk. Scrub sagebrush and speargrass land with secure water rights became *brown gold*.

Ah, the economic dilemma. The U.S. with better uses for water in Southern California than crops. B.C. with lots of water and no affordable land. Washington State with unlimited cheap land and no water. Enter the continentalists and their shiny globalization-machine. Obviously, if we can't move the land, we can move the water. And so they did.

"Funny" the guide said, "by the time people figured out what had happened, it was too late."

By that time, farmers' confidence in the future had become so undermined (removal of safety nets and trade buffers but no leveling of the playing field) their attitude had deteriorated to one of "No and Hell, No (take your pick)". Without young farmers entering the industry, it didn't take long for it to die off. Smaller farms needed to be smarter farms. And without the new technology brought about by keen farmers with competitive dreams and secure tenure, stagnation and frustration became endemic. The sector languished. Dissension arose from within. Farm organizations broke down in the face of it. Politicians smiled (it's always so much easier to "do in" a sector when that sector itself doesn't think of itself as a cohesive unit) and proceeded to recite the continentalist's mantra.

The scene shifts. You are now standing in a field in Agriville (formerly Yakima), North Cascadia's FSZ (food supply zone). The FSZ Coordinator is addressing a crowd of reporters. "Yes, we will be cutting back on supply, and yes, this will raise prices. But we have transferred the irrigation water to a more highly-valued use." A microphone emblazoned with a tiny maple leaf shoots forward from the crowd. "Can you tell us, please, Sir, this water you sold — oh, sorry Sir, you're right, *transferred* — wasn't this B.C.'s water to begin with? Isn't much of the irrigation capacity coming from the operation of storage dams in Canada?" "Yes, small but earnest CBC reporter, you're correct. Next question?"

Nightmare material. But wait. The lights come up. It's not 2030. It's 1994. There is another door.

Next month: *Door Two Please?*