

# Canary in the Mine...

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Delta is the canary in the mine for BC farmers. Cheek to jowl with Vancouver and under more urban-edge pressure than any farm community in the province, Delta is an expensive place to farm.

In the past 30 years, Delta farmers have experienced a loss of economic crops (the Columbia Treaty provided irrigation water to half a million acres of land in the US Columbia Basin, all but destroying BC's potato industry), a loss of processing capacity (peas, beans, corn and potatoes) and mounting environmental compliance costs.

Delta is also one of the most important agricultural areas in the province. Carved out by dykes from the rich delta soils over a century ago, Delta's favourable climate conditions (sunshine units, moderate temperatures, early springs), longer growing season, highly productive soils and flat topography (which allows for mechanization and effective drainage and irrigation) gives the area the capability to produce a wide range of crops. This combined with proximity to near (GVRD) and distant (via air, rail, ship and truck) markets, ranks Delta's agricultural capacity within the top twenty percent of agricultural land in the province.

You would think, wouldn't you, that this would mean Delta agricultural policy would be first and foremost in the minds and hearts of politicians at both the municipal and provincial table?

In 1992, the Delta Agricultural Study – commissioned by the Delta Farmers Institute, the Corporation of Delta, the Agricultural Land Commission, BCMAFF, and AAFC, - identified a 10-point strategy to sustain this fertile Fraser Valley delta community, each accompanied by practical initiatives to implement the strategy.

1. reduce land speculation and conversion
2. reward good soil management
3. address economic concerns
4. improve drainage and irrigation
5. prepare a comprehensive agricultural transportation system
6. inform the public of the needs of farmers
7. maintain the security of the ALR
8. resolve agriculture and waterfowl management issues
9. improve environmental, soil and water quality
10. provide opportunities for non-soilbound agriculture

Ten years down the road, where are we?

During the course of a long and very enjoyable evening at Delta Farmland and Wildlife Trust's June fundraising bash in Noel and Val Roddick's heritage barn on Westham Island, I had the chance to put this question to some of the farmers I'd interviewed way back when for the Delta Ag Study.

To describe the atmosphere between farmers and Council as acrimonious would be an understatement.

Top of the list? Transportation, probably. Seems it wasn't that long ago I heard the story of some neighbours who'd moved down the road from Lower Mainland Vegetable Distributors and began complaining about farm trucks on "their" roads. Silly me, I'd chalked it up it as "pesky newbies" who'd get told, right smartly by Council, that they lived in a farm community and vegetables didn't travel to market

on bicycles. Well, apparently, I was wrong. Council must think that; they installed barriers along the road in question that only a bicycle or small car could negotiate their way around.

As it stands now, not only must ALL of Lower Mainland's farm traffic be diverted but the blockage of this major transportation corridor is causing difficulties for many area farmers. Surely, the municipality had better options than to use a physical barrier to implement a policy aimed at 10+ wheel transport vehicles?

Putting "rights of first refusal" on the treaty negotiating table for certain Brunswick Point lands with high recreational value only worsens the problems this land has suffered at the hands of the province: expropriated in 1969, managed by bureaucrats for some 30 years, the Roberts Bank Back Up Lands have only recently been sold back to area farmers. Giving the aboriginal community rights of first refusal on arms-length farm sales is tantamount to putting those and adjoining lands back on year-to-year leases.

After their failed attempt to use zoning to restrict greenhouse development (the province intervened) Delta Council dissolved their farm advisory board, a fact few farmers mentioned ("Aw, they never listened anyway..." muttered one) but this unilateral silencing of the one voice capable of providing sound and sober articulation of the concerns and priorities of the farm community is shocking.

As far as farm ownership goes, there are six ways from Sunday for off-farm capital to gain ownership and speculative control of farmland. And if you were a farmer facing all the above, taking on a silent partner and sending the kids off to become doctors might not look so bad... Particularly if you could farm till you were ready to retire and then get bought out.

Farming is a central, anchor piece in the mosaic of community.

Delta is the canary in the mine for BC farmers. What happens to farmers in Delta happens to all of us.

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