

# All aboard! – we're pulling away pretty quick. July 1995 Column, Country Life in B.C

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"Jeeze, do you mean to say we're still *talkin'* about this one? For God's sake, let's just get on with it and do it!"

That was the unanimous response of vegetable farmers across the province who attended a series of small grower meetings to discuss agriculture's rightful share of the next thirty years of downstream benefits under the Columbia Treaty.

Organized by the B.C. Vegetable Marketing Commission, the meetings were held in Vernon, Nanaimo and Langley over the past several weeks to:

- i. bring producers quickly up to speed on the downstream benefits issue (the nature of irrigation benefits conferred to American farmers under the Treaty, past and future implications for B.C. farmers, where we are in the Treaty negotiation process); and
- ii. develop a strategy to protect agriculture's interest in both the determination and allocation of benefits paid by the U.S. over the next 30 years of Treaty operation.

As a result of motions passed by growers in attendance at these meetings, the B.C. Vegetable Marketing Commission is now moving quickly on a number of fronts to address grower interest in this issue. These include:

- i. Investigating the development of linkages and/or strategic alliances with groups identified as potential affinity partners in this endeavor. These include, in order of priority:
  - a. B.C. apple producers
  - b. other B.C. commodity groups
  - c. municipal councils and regional districts
  - d. consumers
- ii. Stepping up pressure on the International Joint Commission (IJC) to intervene in the Columbia Treaty dispute by placing in abeyance Article 7 of the Treaty (Determination of Downstream Benefits) and commencing public hearings to determine how the full range of benefits to Americans under the Treaty — power, irrigation, fisheries, environment, transportation/navigation, tourism/recreation — should be appropriately calculated. The intention behind this initiative is twofold: to raise public awareness of agriculture's position on the issue and, if successful, to increase the value of benefits paid B.C. by Americans under the next thirty years of Treaty operation. (Regardless of the success of this initiative, B.C. farmers will continue to look to the provincial government for agriculture's share of downstream benefits funds.)
- iii. Meeting with politicians of all parties to secure support for agriculture's entitlement to a share of the next 30 years of Columbia Treaty downstream benefits (holding government accountable for undermining — however unwittingly — the competitive positioning of B.C. agriculture).
- iv. Actively raising the community profile of agriculture's position on this issue.
- v. Beginning a process to identify and quantify past and future damages to the competitive position of B.C. vegetable producers as a result of irrigation benefits

conferred to American farmers under the Columbia Treaty. (It is anticipated that a similar initiative will be undertaken by BCFGGA with respect to apples.)

- vi. Investigating a structure under which a producer-driven Competitiveness Trust — endowed through agriculture's entitlement to its share of the downstream benefits — could finally begin to level the playing field in British Columbia's interest. For all farmers. Regardless of their commodity group. (At this stage, it is envisaged that the Trust would be built on monies contributed in compensation for past and future damages to potatoes and apples as well as for general, land-based damages to the sector overall.)

I have been asked by the Commission to spear-head this effort. We have already put in place a four-member grower committee to oversee project direction and steer the strategic planning process.

You are a fundamentally important part of that strategic planning. The more commodity groups behind this initiative, the more likely it is to be quickly successful. And beyond the "success" of a brand-new, grower-driven Competitiveness Trust fund there is the larger issue: agriculture could use a big win right now.

Oh, its not that we're "competitiveness weaklings" or anything like that. We have all sorts of strengths. Good soils, favourable climate, skilled farmers, an independent farm sector, a productive, protected agricultural land base and proximity to rapidly growing domestic and international markets, to name a few. We also have our weaknesses, which vary from region to region. These include instances of urban/rural conflict, agricultural land prices well in excess of farm values, farm fragmentation, uncertainty of tenure on Crown and or private leased lands, low entrance rates for new, young farmers and, in many instances, unlevel playing fields with our trading partners. All of these are challenges which can be remedied with opportunity.

Get behind this one. All the work has already been done. A credible issue, perfect timing, its dead easy.

But if you want to board this train, you'd better hurry cause it feels like we're going to be pulling away from the station pretty quick! If your commodity group would like to join in this initiative (have your interests represented and included as part of the overall thrust and direction taken during the next several months), please call me at 1-604-947-2893. All aboard?