

GREEN STAMPS

September 1995 Column, Country Life in B.C

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Now that the B.C. Fruit Growers Association and the B.C. Vegetable Marketing Commission have joined together in a coordinated approach to securing agriculture's share of downstream benefits under the Columbia Treaty, it is perhaps time to explore options for how the proposed Competitiveness Fund might work...

How would the money be allocated? Who would get to play the game? How much would government be involved (if at all)? Who would drive the process?

Ah, sounds like another job for the trusty TIME-O-RAMA.

It's been quite a while (a year this November to be precise) since we've hauled out this particular device to explore the potential outcomes of an issue. So pull up a comfy chair, relax back, put your feet up, close your eyes and *welcome to the one, the only, the amazing Time-O-Rama Reader Ride.*

You're shown to your seat as the lights begin to dim. A disembodied but altogether pleasant voice speaks to you from what seems to be the centre of a large, blank screen in front of you. You are told to enter the year you want to visit through the keyboard on your right armrest.

Wanting to see how this downstream benefits issue turns out, you mentally add "a year and a bit" for organization, put two more years under its belt to work out the kinks and punch in the year 1999.

Surprise, surprise, it seems *there were a couple of possible outcomes!* Two doors appear on the screen before you. You must choose one to start the ride. You pick *Door Number One..* It slowly swings open.

You see yourself and your partner sitting down at what appears to be your kitchen table. You are browsing through some sort of a catalogue and talking in an animated manner.

You put your headset on and — in so doing — find yourself seated at the table holding *1999 Competitiveness Fund Project Catalogue*

She: Oh, look. This year's Category One projects includes *field chilling equipment for leafy vegetables*. Jack'll like that.

You: Yeah, and with his operation, he'll probably have enough points to consider doing it this year. That'll really help his quality. Keep his co-op happy too.

She: How are we going to spend our Category One points this year?

You: I think we should start seriously looking at doing the same sort of land consolidation thing that Jeff and Anne are doing — swapping those parcels with Art, redrawing the property lines, maybe looking next year at the sale of an agricultural covenant on title for those two 5 acre parcels...

She: Hang on, you mean where the right to build a house on the property is purchased back from the owner over a 10 to 20 year period? I agree, down the road, but before we do that I think we should first look at getting that...

As you listen to your partner's entreaties, the look of optimism that positively lights up her face catches you off-guard. For a moment, your mind drifts back to when you were both young and

foolish and optimistic about farming. It's been way too long, you think to yourself. Giving your head a shake, you look over at your Guide. "O.K. Explain this to me. What's happening here?"

"They're deciding how to spend their 1999 Competitiveness Points."

Apparently, according to your Guide, the DSB money producers got in '96 was placed in a producer controlled and administered fund. Each farmer was assigned "points". The number of points depended on a bunch of things, including whether your commodity had been injured by the first thirty years of operation of the Columbia Treaty. Once a year, after harvest, each farmer sits down to decide how they want to "spend" these points from a catalogue of approved projects. Commodity associations are involved in coordination. Some of them hold grower meetings in late fall to discuss options.

Category One is the "on farm" category — individual farm projects which enhance competitiveness at the farm level.

"Category Two is government projects that they want farm support for" says your Guide, pointing to a proposal in the catalogue by the ministries of environment and agriculture for farmer support for a study on the economic effect of air pollution on greenhouse production in the Fraser Valley.

"Government used to try to guess at defining competitiveness. Now, government looks to industry. Only those government projects that get the nod from farmers are undertaken" says your Guide, with a wink. "Sure tuned up some rusty thinkers..."

"What's Category Three" you ask? "Private sector partnerships" your guide replies. "Like the guy who wants to dry manure in Abbotsford and haul it to the Okanagan. Or the grain growers in the Peace who want to undertake a study to support investment in an ethanol plant. Or the coop in Vernon that wants to build a washing and grading facility."

"So how do we get there?" you ask, your mind dancing with a few projects you'd like to tackle this year, and then a few you wouldn't mind undertaking next year...

Your guide presses a small key into your hand with the words "*We're Number One*" emblazoned across an old, faded football logo. "Don't forget which door you got here through." she said. And don't even *think* of looking behind door Number Two!

With that she is gone and the scene shifts. You are back in the theatre. The disembodied voice tells riders to exit left through the gift shop for an obligatory 15 minute visit before leaving the ride. (The ride has been privatized since our last column.) Sitting in a dim corner recess of the room, you watch as the door shuts behind the last person leaving the theatre. Thinking "what the heck, I gotta see what's behind this other door, purely so I can avoid it!" you dial in the year 1999 and, as the screen is activated, move quickly to Door Number Two, open it, and walk through.