

Time to update lobbying skills for the 90's.

December 1995 Column - Country Life

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A column-on-the-fly this month. A collection of unexplored thoughts, some of which *may* reappear as future columns. A little update on progress in the Columbia Treaty down stream benefits matter. And a few closing words for the year on the future of farm organizations.

On Profile

Slowly but surely, the importance of ensuring healthy domestic farm communities is beginning to surface in the minds of consumers and politicians alike.

Those who haven't seen it should check out *Speculating on the Future - Will B.C.'s farmland survive the squeeze of urban sprawl and political pressure*, by Martin Dunphy, a full-length feature article appearing in the October 26 - November 2 edition of the Georgia Straight. This must-read piece on B.C. agriculture reflects the increasing consumer interest in farm issues.

In a similar vein, the Knowledge Network recently aired the 60 minute tele-documentary *Promise in the Land*, a co-production of UBC Access and the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, University of British Columbia. By extending this partnership to include *Agriculture in the Classroom* and *VanCity*, this excellent video will soon be distributed, complete with teachers materials, to secondary schools throughout the province as part of the Grade 11 curriculum.

On the Politics of Food

I heard it said on CBC radio the other day that "food has finally become political". If food is so political, why are farmers — the people who produce that food — so politically disempowered? If society wants to achieve community objectives with respect to safety and security of our food supply, communities better start realizing that support for commercial agriculture is fundamental to achieving that objective.

On the Politics of Empowerment

Part of the responsibility for improving their political clout falls squarely in the laps of farmers themselves. Agricultural leaders must quickly tune up their lobbying skills to meet the new realities of the 90's. The "golden days" of the 70's, when Gene Whelan was the darling of caucus and Canadian agriculture got pretty much what it wanted (arguably, far less than it deserved) are long over, yet we persist in using the same old bag of tricks.

Farm groups must realize that strong ministers are "built," not appointed, that all politicians come with an instruction book, and that to create an Minister with the clout required to carry his/her caucus on agricultural issues simply requires strategic lobbying — applauding the minister in public and saving the brass knuckles for the private, closed doors sessions. (For some B.C. farm groups, the reverse of this strategy is too often followed — wimping out in private and puffing up in full-blown indignation and entitlement as soon as the cameras roll. Having systematically undermined the politician's ability to deliver anything which requires caucus support, farmers continue to express surprise when agriculture priorities are overlooked.)

On Circling the Tractors - 1990's style

I stood on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in the mid-1970's and watched as angry Quebec dairy farmers encircled the Hill with farm machinery and placards. Eyes widening with the appearance of each new tractor, the farmers had the complete attention of the federal politicians.

Circling the tractors in the 1990's means linking together commodity groups, communities and agricultural professionals to stand together on key issues.

Progress on Down Stream Benefits Issue

Good progress is being made on this front. Through an initiative which (to this point) has been funded entirely by B.C. potato and onion producers, commodity associations now solidly behind the call for an industry-wide Competitiveness Trust funded from a portion of the Columbia Treaty down stream benefits include:

- Association of B.C. Grape Growers
- B.C. Coast Vegetable Co-Op Assn.
- B.C. Llama and Alpaca Association
- Cloverdale Lettuce and Vegetable Co-Op
- Fraser Valley Egg Producers Association
- Interior Vegetable Marketing Agency Co-Op
- Island Vegetable Co-Op Association
- Lower Mainland Vegetable Distributors Inc.
- Mainland Dairymen's Association
- Port Potato Company Ltd.
- Vancouver Island Produce
- Western Greenhouse Growers Co-Op Association

A call for support was sent out to the Chairs/Presidents of close to 100 commodity groups and associations across the province. If you don't see your commodity represented in the above list, get in touch with your farm leaders and remind them to return the fax cover sheet sent them in the package.

With a provincial election not likely until the fall of 1996, we now have the time to circle the wagons and fine-tune our response to this critical farm issue.

On Farm Organizations

The big question is, who speaks for farming in this province? Who will provide the focus for bringing all the elements together on issues such as DSB's? Despite a resolution to last year's AGM resolution to investigate ways to secure DSB benefits for all of agriculture, BCFA has said that they may be able to give DSB's "15 minutes" on their December agenda.

We have seen how easily good decision-making can slip away in the wake of bad politics. Farm organizations are obviously not immune to such difficulties. Perhaps its time for a new approach. A way to create *virtual farm organizations* to undertake specific tasks and then disappear when the job is done.

Does the potential and urgency of the DSB issue provide impetus for the creation of such an approach? Time for some serious New Year resolutions.