

On Round Tables, Square Pegs, and...

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ROUND TABLES:

In early December, I participated in a B.C. Roundtable Meeting on *Agriculture and Agri-Food In the New Economy* hosted by federal Agriculture Minister Ralph Goodale. If he was listening (and one can only assume from the process in place that day that he was...), the day was worthwhile. The proof of the pudding will be whether or not Ottawa acts aggressively on the options placed before him by B.C.'s farm leaders.

First of all, kudos to the organizers from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada for a very impressive format. The farming community was there to provide input and direction. Which they did. Farm leaders, their ranks supplemented by the odd consultant and a few outstanding municipal politicians such as Delta's *Wonderful Wendy Jesske* (italics added), wore white name tags which allowed them to actively participate in animated discussions during the break-out sessions and place final rankings on priorities arising.

The bureaucrats, sporting blue tags and carrying pen and paper, were there to "actively listen" only. Which they did. Minister Goodale remained for the duration, attended break-out sessions, and took lots of notes.

And what did the federal Minister of Agriculture hear from B.C.'s farm leaders? In approximate order of priority, action statements at the end of the day included: Be vigorous and aggressive in defense of Canada's agricultural products, market shares and farm policy at the international trading table. Create a level playing field. Reduce the deficit. Streamline government and reduce/eliminate the duplication of government services. Harmonize the regulatory environment within which farmers must operate with that of Canada's major trading partners. Improve public awareness of agriculture. Equalize power across government ministries so that agriculture has equal clout at the table. Focus on the development of Pacific Rim markets. Support research and technology partnerships and technology transfers. Involve farmers and/or farm organizations in senior-level agricultural policy setting processes. Resolve barriers to inter-provincial trade. Continue to support supply management. Increase agriculture's access to Green Plan funding. Equalize freight costs for domestic and export grain. Set up a process whereby trade barriers can be reviewed with producers and agribusiness. Invite Americans to join Canada in a joint reference to the IJC to value more accurately the full range of downstream benefits to Americans under the Columbia Treaty.

Interesting list. Lots of good, solid direction on what the feds *can* do to assist the priorities of the agriculture and agri-food sector. Obviously, a bottom line that says to government "facilitate, don't orchestrate".

Now, what can the farm sector do for itself?

SQUARE PEGS:

Getting B.C.'s farmers to act collectively in their own self-interest is somewhat akin to the classic dilemma of trying to coax the square peg into the round hole. All too often, an attempt is made to whittle away at the corners. In actual fact, the best answer is often simply to widen the circle.

We tend to be a sector of whittle-away-ers. Fragmentation of farm groups is actively supported by our unique brand of West coast partisan politics, which seeks to reduce the power of

constituencies. It is also supported by some bureaucrats, who hate having their agenda changed by farmers.

Widening the circle means bringing others on-side to support common directions. Forging strategic alliances. Being inclusive, not exclusive, in farm lobbying efforts.

We still have a long way to go on this one.

DRAINAGE BASIN GOVERNANCE MODELS:

The recent emphasis on drainage basin governance models may afford one opportunity to forge strategic alliances and strengthen community support for agriculture.

The communities nestled within the drainage basins encircled of B.C.'s mountain ranges share many commonalties — climate, transportation systems, common air drainages and water supplies and a certain sense of physical distinctness from communities in the next basin. Look, for example, at the Fraser Basin as compared with the Okanagan, the Peace, and the Kootenay basins. Each is a distinct region with distinct characteristics.

Part of ensuring that agriculture gets the public policy respect it deserves as a sector is to strengthen support for agriculture at the regional level. This, in turn, requires that communities understand better the critical support which agriculture provides other sustainability priorities within each drainage basin.

To accomplish this, the questions which must be asked include: Which sustainability values does agriculture protect in the drainage basin? Which (if any) does it threaten? What is being done by the sector itself to address these concerns? What progress has been made? What challenges remain? What are the key issues in maintaining healthy, viable farm communities? What threatens sustainable agriculture? What is the prognosis?

There is an old African proverb which states:

It takes an entire village to raise a child...

As we are just beginning to understand, it takes an entire community to protect a drainage basin. The question is, are B.C.'s community's up to the challenge?