

Where chicken farms are as common as magnolias...

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The article in the Vancouver Sun newspaper read "*In the southern United States, where chicken farms are as common as magnolias, billions of birds are processed annually — 12 billion kilograms will be packaged for sale this year. Seven billion cartons of eggs — by the dozen — will be sent to market in 1996.*"

That's roughly equivalent to 400 kilograms of chicken and 2,800 eggs per Canadian per year.

The article went on to explain that one Arkansas company, Tyson, controls 40 per cent of the U.S. market. And they are about to construct a new facility within the next two years which has a capacity equal to the total annual production of every chicken producer in every province of Canada.

"*They've got economies of scale in the United States*" continues the article. Maybe. But they've also got one shitpile full of agricultural waste. Literally. And I wonder just how they go about handling it.

B.C. consumers are offered products which are produced under some of the most stringent environmental regulations in the world. Bound by the Code of Practice for Agricultural Waste Management and subject to Best Farm Management Practices guidelines under the Farm Practices Protection (Right to Farm) Act, B.C. farmers place on the market food which has been produced in an environmentally sustainable manner.

(A very non-partisan three cheers for Agriculture Minister David Zirnelt for getting this and so many other priorities accomplished for B.C. farmers these past several years...)

Because B.C. food is produced locally in a sustainable manner at the hands of independent farmers who still call the shots on farm decision-making (for example, voluntarily banning BST, thereby allowing the community to influence farm production technology), B.C.'s farmers provide the consumer with "ethical" food alternatives.

We need to make these points more effectively.

Agriculture should be insisting on proper consumer labelling of products — of genetically-manipulated potatoes and other products, of BST in milk should the corporate agenda prevail and it be licensed for use in Canada (*Buy B.C. - it's BST FREE!*) .

B.C. consumers need to understand that B.C. leads Canada in organic production, and our greenhouse industry is nearly pesticide free. Instead of allowing zealots to split organic and conventional farming into two camps, agriculture should be promoting *sustainably-produced* as a niche market to be supported and expanded — organic farming is certainly one of agriculture's strong suits in indicating its willingness to function sustainably.

B.C. consumers need to understand that sustainable farming activities in reasonable proximity to urban centres are a fundamental and vital component of the regions ecological footprint. Our reliance on farm lands for the recycling of municipal wastes (irrigating with sewage effluent and municipal composting programs to capture and recycle organic material back onto the land to rebuild soil structure), fibre production (e.g. hybrid poplar, hemp) and, in the longer term, fuel (e.g. Jerusalem Artichoke, oilseeds; experimental Volkswagen prototype that runs on canola oil) can only increase over the next 50 to 200 years as our current cheap energy policy depletes fossil fuels and we run out of old growth forests.

Getting Back to Basics

Traditionally, farmers provided the anchor and sense of identity to rural communities. They were the keepers of heritage and social values and, as such, were key contributors to the health and sustainability of the community itself.

We perhaps need to re-establish this image of agriculture in our communities.

People must feel that agriculture is open and transparent in its relationships with the public. Once the public is assured that agriculture is for them (not trying to put something over on them), once they grow to recognize farmers as environmental and community stewards, then the farming community can effectively call on the public for support for priority farm issues and fully expect that that support will be forthcoming.

Doing the Coke-Pepsi Thing

Maybe it's time B.C.'s farmers got into the Coke — Pepsi thing.

Maybe when the new Tyson chicken plant opens in Arkansas, we should load a few Agricultural Environmental Protection Council and Enviralert Peer Advisors on a plane with some videotape and send them down to check out how Tyson measures up against B.C.'s waste management regulations.

And then tell the consumer.