Food for thought – an afternoon picnic for a hot August. August 1996 Column, Country Life in BC

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It's finally hot. August hot. So hot, you wonder why you ever longed for this very weather a scant two months ago. So hot things need to be undertaken in manageable chunks. Work some, then come in for a cold tea and make those calls you've been meaning to get to. Sit and shuffle papers when the sun's at it's hottest then go out to do some mowing around seven. Lots of daylight. Lots of sunshine. Lots of time.

A column for an August afternoon, then. A picnic sort of column, tiny morsels of food for thought. A plate of competitiveness cookies washed down with a splash of economic lemonade and followed by a tiny sliver of philosophic pie. Brief, summer reflections to laze around in your mind over the next couple of months in preparation for fall/winter farm meetings.

Competitiveness Cookies

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B.C.'s farmers are amongst the most highly qualified in the world. With our high land and operating costs, nobody can *afford* to farm dumb in this province. When assessing our competitive edge, at the top of our list should be the ability of B.C.'s farmers to both understand and implement the sophisticated production technology required by tomorrow's high-valued, niche-market commodities.

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Did you know, for example, that our very own Fraser Valley is home to one of North America's top witloof operations? Don't know what witloof is? Check it out... You'll be impressed. (Hint: it grows as a tiny ghost plant atop a chicory root and is the darling of the high-end restaurant trade...)

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In the same niche vein, some Delta farmers are getting pretty interested in commercial production of organic processing crops. In the past, major differences in philosophy and approach have separated producers of organic and conventional crops. But as organic goes main stream (e.g. frozen organic corn niblets), things are changing fast. The farmer receives a price for the crop which reflects its very specialized cultivation requirements. In its processed form, handling and shelf life problems disappear. Consequently (and for the first time) organic suddenly becomes competitive with non-organic as a commercial cropping option.

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B.C. seed potatoes offer another example of a high-valued crop with a top-notch international reputation — B.C. is the major supplier of virus-free seed stock to the rest of the world.

(Under the category "what were they thinking?" just how is it that Ottawa can summarily [without industry discussion and reportedly to save a paltry \$100,000 a year] close down this province's key potato virology research lab, ship the lab's top scientists off — kicking and screaming may be considered somewhat harsh but is reportedly reflective — to Lethbridge and Charlottetown, and offer local growers no alternative for new, virus-resistant transgenic plant material save and except "buy PEI" [which has s-virus]? And while we're at it, why did it take almost eighteen months of industry pressure and negotiation — sitting down and explaining it all real slow for the benefit of the Ottawa bureaucrats — to finally craft what appears at press time to be a solution?)

A good example, perhaps, of how the risk of markets (at least predictable) is sometimes exceeded by the risk of government (random acts of ignorance?) The former is mitigatable. The latter criminal...

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A Splash of Economic Lemonade

Economics is nothing more than the physics of capital. Money, as it flows through our economy, moves in response to laws as predictable and immutable as those governing liquids and solids.

When spread out across the land in fine tributaries, money, like water, is a beneficial force. But both have a tendency to gather to themselves, collecting in large, swollen rivers which can leave destructiveness and parched, arid regions in their wake. The role of the state is to ensure, as water/capital flows through our land, that it is spread out in fine tributaries which both irrigate and nurture our communities.

What does this have to do with farming? Plenty. In the United States, close to 90 percent of all food commodities are produced under contract to one or two large-scale agri-food integrators. Few production decisions are left to the farmer. And even fewer profits.

Some sunny day when you want your consciousness raised, take a drive down to the Big Bend area of Washington State and have a look around at this U.S. farming community. Compare it in your mind to B.C. Note the double-wides that serve as farmhouses — sitting squat at the end of a dirt road without benefit of hedgerows and shade trees despite generations of farming. Go into the lunchrooms, sit across from Basin farmers over coffee, look them in the eyes and ask them who they're farming for. And remember that one of the reasons B.C.'s farmers still answer "me" to that question is because they still call the shots. Important distinction.

Of course, independence means nothing more than the freedom to go broke without a strong and viable farm community. And that, in turn, requires some better thinking and support from the non-farm sector.

And a Tiny Little Sliver of Philosophic Pie

international acceptance. Just not in Canada, you say? Pity...

Income models based on the premise that farmers should receive fair compensation for all of the goods s/he produces — including the value to society of the environmental and ecological stewardship arising from good farm management practices, a concept first introduced by leading conservationist Leopold Theobold in 1931 — are now gaining