

Water – the other half of the ALR covenant.

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At their December AGM, the B. C. Federation of Agriculture unanimously endorsed a resolution by Island Farms Dairies Cooperative Association calling for guaranteed access to water for all ALR land.

Originating from the Saanich Peninsula's farm community in response to water rates some ten to 15 times higher than other regions of the province, the progress of this resolution warrants close attention by all farm communities.

The specific wording of the resolution was as follows:

WHEREAS ALR land has a legislated farming use; and

WHEREAS many crop lands require irrigation to achieve economically viable production;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that discussion be initiated with government to legislate the short and long term availability of economically priced irrigation water for crop lands in the ALR.

The background on this one is interesting. The provincially-appointed Perry Commission (*Special Commission on the Conservation and Protection of the Greater Victoria Water Supply and In the Matter of the Governance of the Greater Victoria Water District*) had just filed its report.

As far as the farm community was concerned, guaranteeing farmers a secure and affordable supply of irrigation water was central to that discussion. And they'd said as much in their submission to the Perry Commission:

Land on the Saanich Peninsula is of high value for food production because of its extremely long frost free periods and high sunshine units... It is characterized by a mix of larger, commercial farms and small-scale agriculture.

Farmers on the Peninsula pay the highest irrigation rates in the province. And the magnitude of difference is staggering. Rates in Osoyoos of 14 ¢/1000 gallons compare with \$2.25/1000 gallons on the Peninsula. Put another way, an acre foot (enough to cover an acre of land a foot deep in water) costs a farmer \$38 in Osoyoos and \$365 in Central Saanich. In North Saanich, the price is over \$600 an acre foot...

If the ALR reserves the land for present and future agricultural uses, it clearly must also reserve the water. For without water, there is no agriculture.

Given population growth, prevailing land prices considerably in excess of farm values, new trading regimes and the withdrawal of traditional safety nets, Peninsula agriculture must seek high-valued niche markets to survive. Specialty markets for kiwi fruit, organically-grown meat and produce, exotic livestock for the restaurant trade, specialty vegetables, berries and nursery stock, herbs and medicinals, milk produced without BST and greenhouse crops produced without pesticides.

But these high-valued crop options require irrigation. At affordable rates comparable to those paid by farmers in other regions of the province...

Clearly, adequate water for irrigation is "part of the package" one anticipates will be included in ALR designation.

...Without the competition provided by local supplies, the price of food from outside the [Capital Regional District] would undoubtedly increase. Rapid population growth, climate change and energy cost increases will make imported food much more costly. This, combined with the ability of local, niche producers to respond positively to consumer signals related to food quality, safety and health make locally sustainable food production an increasingly competitive public policy priority.

This, in turn, will require us to increase our present utilization of agricultural lands to maximize sustainable productive potential.

Protecting agricultural land from development is only half the equation. For the productivity of that land to be realized, it must have secure and affordable access to water for irrigation. In perpetuity.

WATER AND AGRICULTURE: PRIORITIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Submission of the
Agricultural Strategy for the Saanich Peninsula Steering Committee
September 12, 1996

Not rocket science.

Special Commissioner David Perry, in his final report to the Province, acknowledged the public interest in adequate and affordable supplies of water for irrigation:

"The Special Commission heard extensive representations on providing a subsidized tariff for agricultural users... Under the current pricing structure supervised by the Comptroller of Water Rights... wholesale and retail prices for water cannot be discriminatory, nor can the cost of providing water for other purposes... be passed along to consumers. Agricultural users made strong arguments that there is a regional good in preserving agricultural land. If the cost of irrigation were more affordable for farmers, this would make farming more economically viable and reduce development pressures on agricultural land. This may well be a policy that has region-wide support, yet the current Greater Victoria Water District lacks the legal authority to consider it... Given their importance to the quality of life for the entire region, I urge the Regional Water Commission to consider creation of an agricultural tariff.

Enter the bureaucrats. "You farmers need to take this issue beyond the Saanich Peninsula" they said. "See if there is provincial support for a guaranteed supply of water to farmland, and then maybe we can introduce some changes to the new water act to make it happen."

Bringing a resolution before the BCFA was the first step. From there, it went before the B.C. Horticultural Coalition and then on to the B.C. Fruit Growers Association at their February AGM.

With the anticipated endorsement of the cattlemen, province-wide commodity support will be complete.

Then what? Presumably, all we need do is simply bring it back to the bureaucrats (and the politicians) so they can "make it happen".

Watch this one carefully. It will be a bell-weather of the provincial government's commitment to sustainable farm policy in this province.