We the undersigned.

May 1997 Column, Country Life in B.C.

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

In March's column (*Why are they planting all those potatoes?*), I suggested that British Columbia's ability to continue to produce food locally and sustainably has been placed at some risk as a result of market concentration at the processing, wholesale and retail level.

I went on to suggest that large-volume head office buying by large retail chains, combined with the coincident flight of processors (e.g. Fraser Valley Food, Foremost) from the province, was threatening to shut many farmers out of traditional markets.

I asked readers whether they wanted to be signatory to a letter to the Director of Investigations and Research, Competition Act raising concerns about the effect of central buying practices and wholesale/retail concentration on the economic survival of independent farmers in this province. And asking him to look into this on their behalf. (By statute, The Director is obliged to begin a preliminary inquiry if he receives such a request from Six Citizens.)

The following letter to Mr. George Addy — signed by a few more than six of our readers — will be sent off shortly:

> Mr. George N. Addy
> Director of Investigation and Research, Competition Act
> Competition Bureau
> Phase I, Place du Portage
> 50 Victoria St.
> OTTAWA, Canada K1A 0C9
> Fax (819) 997-0324
>
> Dear Mr. Addy
>
> We the undersigned Canadian citizens, based on the facts asserted in the accompanying affidavits, have reason to believe that the degree of market concentration in the food processing and retailing sector is prejudicial to the interests of independent farmers in British Columbia. We believe this is also prejudicial to good public policy as it relates to food safety and health, nutrition, resources, the environment and the socio-economic well being of our communities.
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> We further believe that this situation could not exist were there an adequate level of competition in the marketplace, and we further believe that this situation is evidence of a Reviewable Practice envisaged under the Competition Act.
>
> Accordingly, we respectfully request that you institute an inquiry under the Competition Act with a view to requesting that the Competition Tribunal order appropriate relief.
>
> Yours sincerely;

BRAME, DAVE	TELKWA
DAY, ROBERT	SMITHERS
GLASS, GINA	TELKWA
HEER, MATTHAIS	TELKWA
HEER, PIA	TELKWA
HIDBER, KARIN	SMITHERS
HOLM, WENDY	BOWEN ISLAND
KING, HAROLD	OLIER

LANOUE, LARRY	SMITHERS
MANN, ELIZABETH	OLIVER
PORTER, W.F.	ABBOTSFORD
REUS, PETER	ABBOTSFORD
SHANNON, TERRENCE	PORT ALBERNI
VAN EEKELEN, RIA	ABBOTSFORD
VANDENTILLAART, SUSAN	SALMON ARM
WILCOX, JOHN	SALTSPRING

If any other readers would like to be a signatory to this letter, please fax me by mid-May at 604-947-2321. Please affix your signature to the fax and indicate your mailing address, phone, fax and e-mail.

On the advice of a long-time colleague (he and I worked together at the Bureau of Competition Policy in Ottawa in the 1970's), we will also be including with the letter a few affidavits to add strength and weights to the assertions. I would therefore greatly encourage any farmers who believe they have been negatively impacted by concentration in B.C.'s food processing and retailing sectors to provide me with a simple statement to that effect — briefly describing how you believe your access to traditional farm markets has changed and what this has meant to the economic viability of your farm. I will then discuss them with my colleague and we will select two or three to turn into affidavits accompanying the letter to the Director.

There will, of course, be no costs involved in any of this. From our side, that is.

From the government's side, they must take this letter seriously. By statute, it will trigger at least a preliminary look into the workings of the market. Presumably, this might also provide a platform for broader public discussion.

Clearly, its not as simple as the "good guys" (farmers) versus the "bad guys" (retailers). Not by any stretch. But when retail buying is increasingly being done by "head office", it also becomes increasingly persuasive to "bring it all in on one truck". (Sadly, B.C.-based retailers such as Thrifty Foods, who have a strong policy of buying local — and are presumably rewarded by their customers for doing so, else why would they continue this as a pillar of their corporate philosophy — thus far only operate on Vancouver Island.)

Local farmers suffer when local product cannot get access to shelf space. So do local consumers. And so, too, do local communities. For those of you who haven't yet seen it, the Fraser Basin Management Program's report on Agriculture and Sustainability in the Fraser Basin, which will be released in final form by mid May, is "must read" material for municipal councilors, provincial politicians, environmental groups and anyone who wants to better understand and assist farming as a fundamental component of sustainable communities

Consumers can't support BC farmers by buying BC product if it isn't on the shelf. It's an easy one to raise. And (as with all things) the more the merrier. Go do your affidavit! Please.