

Dear Catharine... open letter to B.C. agriculture's brand-new deputy minister

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Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

Dear Catharine;

Congratulations on your appointment as B.C.'s new Deputy Minister of Agriculture! It's high time the Ministry's top posting was held by a strong and capable woman... High time because, like the foster child who falls through the cracks of bureaucratic bungling, the sustainable potential of B.C.'s farm sector is being tragically squandered by a lack of wise and compassionate nurturing at the public policy level. And nurturing is something we women are often particularly good at...

There are any number of priorities that many of us with a long history in the sector would love to help you tackle. But you lead a Ministry decimated by staff cuts. You must set some realistic priorities or you will be quickly swamped.

Were you to attempt to resolve even a quarter of the many and varied issues placed before you by the farm community over the next little while, you would soon be tempted to expand the size of the Ministry.

Please don't. Too much government has hurt the farm sector as much if not more than too little government. In these days of market differentiation, increased specialization, value added and niche orientation, there are some areas — e.g. production and markets — which farmers understand far better than government. Sometimes they may need help in removing roadblocks, most often they simply need to be allowed to get on with it. But there are other areas — such as land and water policy, trade equity and community support for food policy — which farmer's understanding cannot control. In these areas, the Ministry must be more proactive.

WATER

First up is water. With endorsement by the cattlemen at their Penticton AGM in May, all farm groups in this province have now supported the resolution given life (ironically) at BCFA's final AGM calling on the provincial government to protect the sustainable water rights of farmers by requiring (through inclusion of appropriate wording in the upcoming water legislation) that regional water boards manage supplies consistent with the long term, sustainable needs of B.C.'s farm communities.

This is a very important public policy issue. As noted by Iona Campagnolo, high-profile Chair of the newly-constituted Fraser Basin Council: "Sustainable agriculture is important to the overall health of the Fraser River System and the entire social, economic and environmental well-being of the Fraser Basin." Campagnolo made her remarks when releasing the report [Agriculture and Sustainability in the Fraser Basin](#), one of the "final words" of the former Fraser Basin Management Board. The study, released at the cattleman's meetings, was funded under the Canada-British Columbia Greenplan for Agriculture. (*NOTE TO READERS: for your free copy, phone the Council at 604-605-3450.*)

If sustaining agriculture is fundamental to sustaining communities, entrenching water rights is the first and critical step in that direction. Fish have legislated water rights, so do properties zoned residential and industrial. Why not farmers?

LAND

The Agricultural Land Reserve was part of a public policy prescription written by government in the 1970's to preserve the public interest in agriculture. Over the past two decades, many of the other ingredients in that prescription have been removed. In today's climate, preserving the land is clearly not sufficient to ensure sustainable farm communities. Other jurisdictions which (perhaps) more clearly recognize the importance of retaining an economically strong and independent farm sector are taking creative steps to accomplish that. The ALR is part of the answer, but it is not the sole answer. To ensure the sustainability of farming, B.C.'s public policy prescription needs to be rewritten to meet the needs of today's patient.

TRADE

British Columbia must "pull out all the stops" in its dealings with the federal government to ensure that rumoured removal or dilution of the Special Import Measures Act — which provides some protection to local farmers from unfair trade practices (dumping) by foreign suppliers — is stopped in its tracks.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT - BUY BC

The Ministry must enhance its support for the BUY BC program by explaining to the consumer the "WHY" behind the BUY BC message. Without consumer support for B.C. agriculture, many components of our farm community are not sustainable. And, as Campagnolo points out, without sustainable farming, there can be no sustainable communities.

Best of Luck!

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

Catharine Read, B.C.'s new Deputy Minister of Agriculture, was promoted to that position from Assistant Deputy Ministry in the Ministry of Transportation and Highways. Prior to this, she worked as Associate Deputy Ministry of the Land Use Coordination Office, a Crown Agency created in January 1994 to "define a corporate vision for land use planning in British Columbia and to oversee, coordinate, evaluate and report to Cabinet on ministries' work to deliver the provincial land-use strategy." Prior to this, Ms Read was Assistant Deputy Minister of the Community and Regional Development Division of the B.C. Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture, responsible for regional and community economic development initiatives, small business and equity capital programs and the Government Agents.