

Eating ties us all to the land, but whose?

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It is not news that it costs more to produce food in a province where farmland is priced ten to twenty times higher than our competition (crop farmers in Washington State's Columbia Basin pay \$2,500 to \$3,000 an acre for irrigated land, producers in B.C.'s Fraser and Okanagan valley bottoms face costs of \$20,000 to \$40,000 and more an acre).

It is also not news that it costs more to produce food in a province where water prices are three to four times higher than our competition. Farmers in the Okanagan pay \$25 to \$35 an acre foot for water; farmers in Washington State pay \$8 to \$10 for the same measure.

It is also not news that it costs more to produce food in a province that requires farmers to operate in compliance with some of the toughest environmental regulations in Canada. Not to mention the world. Regulations that are getting more and more stringent every day.

It is also not news that it costs more to produce food in a province that places farmers farm cheek to jowl with the new "we've-just-moved-to-the-country-oh-my-god-isn't-it-beautiful-oh-my-god-what's-that-smell-oh-ok-you-can-spray-but-please-tell-me-first-before-you-do-a-day's-notice-would-be-good-we-have-children-you-know" city folks. Who don't understand that till you sniff the morning air after coffee, even you don't always know when you're gonna spray...

It is also not news that it costs more to produce food in a province that places a value on sustainable families and so ensures that farm workers are paid a decent wage.

It is also not news that it often costs more to produce food on small, sustainable, independent farms than it does on the huge, single-crop factory farms which are quickly dominating world food production.

What is, perhaps, news is that when all costs are fully counted, imported food is the most expensive choice on the shelf. Too bad the BC consumer may not figure this out until it's too late.

The real cost of the food we eat — its ecological footprint — includes the costs of drawing down too quickly the fossil fuels expended in its manufacture and transport, the present and future cost to clean up air and water emissions occasioned in its production, the associated health and social costs to individuals and communities that arise from poor working conditions and exploited labour, the unnecessary production of pharmaceuticals needed to control disease in unnaturally-high animal populations found on factory farms, the societal costs of dealing with disease outbreaks from scale-contamination (e.g. e-coli).

The smaller the ecological footprint, the bigger the gain. Small footprints mean sustainable production, lower overall costs and greater community benefits. If true costs were counted, locally produced food would have far more competitive (daintier) ecological footprints than imported products. Of course full-cost accounting is a long way off. But what a concept! The consumer is increasingly aware of sustainability concerns. Why not incorporate a small green footprint into Buy BC logo? Compete with our (tiny little ecological) feet? Small feet are neat (a message that's easy to swallow?)

But it's a message that had better go out fairly quick.

Without a major shift in consumer appreciation of the importance of agriculture in sustaining communities and a commitment to ask for and buy BC product, many independent farmers in this province will not survive.

The Fraser Basin Management Council, in its report Agriculture and Sustainability in the Fraser Basin, said it first. Award-winning documentary film maker (and Agrologist) Richard Bocking, in his new book MIGHTY RIVER - A Portrait of the Fraser, says it most eloquently:

“A sustainable society can flourish only if it is founded on a sustainable agriculture.’ So writes Lester Milbrath in his remarkable book Envisioning a Sustainable Society. This view carries little weight with mainstream economists, but it is pretty persuasive to ordinary mortals who like to eat. Since eating ties all of us to the land, the more intimate that connection can be, the healthier will be both society and land. So agricultural policies in the Fraser Valley and throughout the basin must reward good stewardship of the land, and sustainable agriculture must be sufficiently profitable that good farmers can survive and pass on their skills. Then we will be assured that the mighty river will continue to flow broad, brown and tranquil through a landscape as productive as it is beautiful. Cattle will continue to graze green pastures, golden corn will greet each new autumn, fruits and flowers will nourish body and soul.”

Referred to as one of the most important works of non-fiction to be published in British Columbia in the 1990's by Vancouver Sun book critic Terry Glavin, MIGHTY RIVER is a mighty good read.

In the words of Richard Bocking:

Farming has to make economic sense if the Fraser Valley is to continue producing food. So everyone, including persons living in the heart of Vancouver, has a stake in the commercial success of agriculture...

Send this column to your local papers (who are often looking for material). Ask them to print it. Tell them its time to get to the WHY behind the BUY BC...