

What's in a name when it's (Dear <<name>>)☺

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A couple of months ago I appealed to readers to send Catharine Read (B.C.'s Deputy Minister of Agriculture) a \$10 cheque "in trust" to "do something about the CITT decision on onions".

In short, the CITT decision on onions was a bad one. According to Jim Alcock, P.Ag. — the civil servant who serves as MAF's "witness" at such proceedings — last spring's CITT ruling disallowing a continuance of anti-dumping protection against onions from the U.S. was about the worst he'd seen in some 20 years of appearances before such Tribunals.

The onion producers appealed the CITT decision through the only avenue available them under the Special Import Measures Act: the Supreme Court. The legal appeal alone cost onion producer's over \$50 grand.

In less than a morning's session, the Court heard the appeal and ruled they couldn't second guess the "experts".

Two unfortunate panels — a poorly-constituted one in the case of the CITT and a "lazy" (with all due respect) panel of judges at the Supreme Court level— and there you have it. Poof. Onions are "gone" as an economic rotation crop for many BC farmers, particularly those in the Fraser Valley and on the Island.

(For more background on this one, read my December 1997 column. For most producers, this is a familiar tune...)

If government can't or won't uphold the regulation producers are operating under in this province OR entirely revamp the way we "do public policy" for farming and (a la the rest of the world) construct a substantial "green subsidy" program (see the BC Fruit Growers Association report on the ALR, recently released by BC Agricultural Council) to support the benefits of sustainable farming practices, then let the land go, lads... Just let it go.

Cause otherwise it just becomes a race for the door. (That was precisely the point of the Six Mile Ranch story.)

The point is also this: if government can get away with ignoring its trade commitments to onion growers, they can easily do it to other commodities. Like apples. And potatoes. And supply managed commodities.

In response, some 75 producers heard this message and sent \$10 cheques to Catharine. In trust. Many of them were presented to her personally at a recent dairy industry meeting. From the floor. In a very public way.

Those farmers who took out their cheque books and wrote a \$10 cheque to the Deputy Minister of Agriculture to "do something about the ruling on onions" took a unique step. They were looking for something equally unique from government in return: creativity.

Instead, they got their cheques returned. Accompanied by a letter from the Deputy Minister which suggests their message was completely misinterpreted.

Curiously, these letters were "cc'd" to me... And so each and every one of them — some 75 or so copies of the same form letter — also arrived in my mailbox.

My own copy (Dear <<name>>:) arrived from the Ministry by fax some eight days subsequent to the date appearing on the letter to growers. A handwritten note (presumably) from the Deputy Minister appearing across page one of the form letter enthused: " the *CITT report on onions was interesting!*

We remain puzzled, Catharine. Something fundamental has been misunderstood here.

There was (is) so much more you could have done...

Like demand from the federal government an appeal process that is fair and equitable to B.C.'s farmers to backstop the public policy risk of poor panel decisions.

And — in the interim — insist that the information placed before the CITT last spring on onions be revisited by a panel capable of understanding the information set before them. And their mandate in that process...