

A sun-warmed, earthy little column for July... July 1998 Column, Country Life in B.C.

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Summertime. Those few welcome weeks in July when you sit back, survey the results of winter's decisions and a spring of hard work, and contemplate the months ahead. If everything goes right, a time when you can breathe a little easier and (maybe) remember why you got into farming in the first place....

And so, a sun-warmed, earthy little column for July. A bit of this, a bit of that. Food for thought. To be savoured in the caress of a shady hammock or other suitably comfortable point of repose. An easy read, pick it up, put it down, pick it up again — no penalties attached... Enjoy...

but first, a last word on Six Mile...

The day Six Mile was approved, I was asked by CBC's Almanac what effect it would have on BC's farm community. Without hesitation, I said I thought it would raise the price of farmland by as much as 25 percent in some regions. Undermining the incentive/capacity of the Abbotsford dairy farmer (already looking East to greener pastures), the Delta berry farmer (thinking about buying that 20 acre piece from his neighbour) and the young couple from Cloverdale (wanting to get into organic carrots) to hold onto or expand their agricultural land base.

Higher farmland prices; another nail in a coffin too soon ready for the spade.

Don't it always seem to go?

Within the last several years, farmers in BC have seen a massive exodus in processing capacity: Companies who have pulled up stakes include Fraser Valley Foods (locally owned till bought by Pattison and resold to Green Giant, a division of UK-based Grand Met Foods, FVF's closed both their Chilliwack and Sardis plants in the 1990's, reportedly cutting up their corn line rather than selling it to area farmers), Foremost Dairy (closed in May 1996), Dairyworld's Ice Cream Division (relocated to Edmonton in 1996), Lucerne's Ice Cream Division (relocated to Edmonton in Jan 1997), Lucerne's yogurt and cottage cheese division (relocating to Edmonton), Royal City Foods (closed 1993, now repacking for Snowcap), Nalleys French Fry plant (relocated to Washington's Umatilla Basin in 1997), Buckerfields Feed Mill (closed in 1997), Lilydale Processing Plant (closing on Vancouver Island in September 1998), Fatt's Fryers (Saanich, closed in early 1990's), both of Buckerfield's Vancouver Island feed mills (recently shut down), Borden's Feed (Saanich mill closed in 1990), MacKinnon's Dairy (Port Alberni, closed in 1992 or 1993).

What were those lyrics anyway? Oh, yeah... ***"Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got till its gone? They've paved paradise and put up a parking lot..."***

Rethinking farm policy in this province...

I went on to suggest that if Six Mile was the sacrifice that got us to fundamentally rethinking how we do farm policy in this province, I could at least feel a little better about it all. CBC's host promptly dubbed me "optimistic". I replied without it, we'd better get used to seeing the backs of our farmers leaving this province 'cause we've made it just too hard to farm. And how foolish it was to be chasing out our land stewards just when they've become world leaders in sustainable farming practices. Poor economic choice...

My generation ate our hamburgers rare...

My generation took for granted that the food we consumed was safe. We ate our hamburgers rare. (In fact, coming from a Scandinavian background, my mother's challenge when making burgers was to try to

stop us from eating it all raw first on hardbread with salt, pepper and onions!) When Legionnaire's Disease suggested North American food could be dangerous to our health, we considered it a frightening but isolated incident.

Today, thanks to wide-spread centralization of food production and processing facilities and the corresponding increase in both scale of operations and handling/storage/transport considerations, health scares and product recalls due to food contamination (e.g. salmonella, coliform) have become all too prevalent. Today, we eat our hamburgers well done or not at all. Steak tartare has all but disappeared from restaurant menus. We diligently peel our vegetables to avoid ingesting chemicals.

Unless, of course, they're BC Grown or Organic...

A recent study of 85,000 women in the United States concluded that women who eat five or more carrots a week have a dramatically reduced incidence of stroke. Five or more carrots. That's easy to do, I thought, and so have correspondingly (and dramatically) increased my per capita carrot consumption. Problem is, I don't really want to peel the carrots. (For one, I've had it drilled into me that many of the nutrients are tucked cozily just under the skin. For another, I prefer to simply grab the carrot from the fridge, lop off a bit from each end and carry it back to my office to munch while working.) So I look first for BC carrots, failing that organic carrots. The last thing I want is imported carrots. And guess what? Poised at the leading edge of the baby boom, I'm the trend-setter here.

Wanna understand future demand? Invite a boomer to lunch...

A la *Boom Bust Echo* author David Foot, as boomers attempt to wrest mortality to the ground and become the first generation to live forever (at least long enough to become a burden to their great-grandchildren — or, according to one compulsive fifty-something I recently ran into: "long enough to teach their great-grandchildren to in-line skate"), the desire to eat healthier is growing by (literally) leaps and bounds. Invincibility is in, and the search for healthy food will ride the crest of that wave. BC's farmers are perfectly positioned to meet that demand. How foolish to be sending them packing just when we need them most...

La Brea Vista

When the dinosaurs wandered into the tar pits, they probably didn't realize they were on their way out. But they surely were, immobilized by the very medium they had grown to trust - "the swamp." So too, many suggest, will large today's giant agri-food conglomerates become immobilized by their sheer size and market positioning as a world too short of resources demands from the marketplace recovery of full input (e.g. fossil fuels) and environmental costs.

Enter the emergence of new and rapidly growing demand for safe, local, sustainably produced food and for all the highly specialized know-how, technology and management associated with its production. And lo and behold, B.C.'s farmers are in front of the pack again. But wait, the pack seems to be going the wrong way.... They're leaving the province... Wait... Stop...

Fade to black.

Think about it... Talk about it... Consider faxing this column to your local paper. If they want, tell them to give me a call at 604-947-2893.

NEXT MONTH: FALLING IN LOVE WITH CUBA...

A special aside to the hecklers in the room...

To those of you who find yourself muttering "What a load of gloom and doom; there's always new opportunities for BC farmers. Look at industrial hemp! It's gonna be the crop that turns around farming in this province..." — Well, don't hold your breath. Or at least quit inhaling. BC's "newest miracle crop" may well be an easy grower, but as they say, the fun stops there. Partly due to the nature of the crop and partly due to a lack of technology, the problems begin with harvest and continue into the market;

despite anecdotal assertions to the contrary, hard analysis suggests claims of high global demand and economic returns are — at present — as overblown and insubstantial as smoke. The future of BC's farmers lies not in the promise of new "miracle" crops but in that tried and true standby — good public policy.

Never having to say we're sorry...

Putting in place food policy based on ensuring the continuity of British Columbia's sustainable farming communities means never having to say we're sorry to consumers wanting the assurance of safe, local, nutritious and unadulterated food choices. Because farming is a *PRIMARY ECONOMIC SECTOR*, it also means continuing to capture the economic goodies thereof — jobs along the production, marketing and distribution chain which are only there because of our farmers. Compared to other land uses, sustainable farming ensures that our air is cleaner, our aquifers properly recharged, our habitat values enhanced, greenhouse gas emissions reduced, and visual amenities/quality of life/tourism values preserved.

In search of policy, not strategy...

From comments received from those around the table, it sounds like BC's recent efforts in the food policy direction could be more appropriately described as a strategic planning exercise. What's the difference? A "strategic plan" gets politicians to the next election. A farm/food policy gets society to the medium term and beyond. A subtle but important difference.