

Provincial Interest Report a winner but...

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Stakes in the Ground, UBC Agriculture Dean Moura Quayle's hot-pink-covered report submitted to Corky Evans in late September, opens with the following statement:

Agricultural land is scarce in British Columbia. Of the land in British Columbia, less than 3% is capable of supporting a range of agriculture; just over 1% is considered prime agricultural land, and less than 0.01% is capable of producing the tree fruit we associate with "Grown in BC" pride. Agricultural land is sensitive and precious. Fertile soil and the physical and environmental conditions for agriculture are unique and irreplaceable resources. ...Prior to the creation of the Agricultural Land Reserve in 1973, government figures estimated 6,000 hectares (15,000 acres) of prime agricultural land was lost to urban non-agricultural development each year. Population growth is rapid in British Columbia and, historically, agricultural land has been developed because it is one of the easiest places to build. There is no indication that this development pressure will diminish. The following recommendations are based on the belief that the preservation of agricultural lands is critical to the future of the province, particularly in relation to sustaining a safe and secure food supply.

From there, Quayle goes on to present her four main recommendations. Recommendations #1, 2 and 3 should be quickly adopted by the Provincial Government. Recommendation #4 should be gutted or scrapped.

By and large, Quayle took on a tough task, did a good job and should be commended: Coming from a landscape architecture background, Quayle scrambled up a steep learning curve and produced a good piece of work through some good process: her Provincial Interest Report is a thoughtful and balanced consideration of the issue that comes down solidly in favour of farming: "*The preservation of agricultural lands and the promotion of agricultural purposes is in the Provincial Interest.*"

Given the obvious balance that went into the first three recommendations, one wonders — when reading Recommendation #4's call for amalgamation of the "Agricultural" and "Forest" Land Commissions and a sweeping review of Class 4 and 5 ("so-called marginal") lands — how and why Quayle got so far off track.

When Corky Evans held his October 1 media conference with farm journalists to discuss Quayle's report, the first question off the top was "Would the Minister care to comment on why the cattlemen are upset with the report?" Evans expressed surprise and asked the reporter for more details. She had none other than "rumours" and the issue was dropped. Yet upon close reading of Recommendation #4, concern on the part of the cattlemen would certainly appear warranted.

Much of this province's grasslands and prime haylands fall within soil/climate classifications Class 4, 5 and 6. With another new "hi-country-ranch-theme-park-destination-resort" proposal popping up every month or so, Quayle's call for a broad-based review of all Class 4 and 5 lands will increase speculative pressure on rangelands, effecting BC's cattle industry directly.

The effect, of course, is not limited to rangeland. In the Fraser Valley, virtually all of the cranberry land and much of the blueberry land is Class 4 and 5 land. Both cranberries and blueberries are crops with significant investment and strong international market competitiveness. Quayle's call for a review of Class 4 and 5 land will immediately raise the price of berry land, seriously eroding the competitiveness of this economically important farm sector.

"Super, Speculative B.C."

Stump Lake Ranch, some 4,000 or more deeded acres sitting in approximately 80 individual titles in the picturesque north end of the Nicola Valley, was recently purchased by a developer. Another theme park proposal is moving forward for the outskirts of Merrit. Landmark Entertainment Group of North Hollywood (a developer counting amongst its shareholders a multi-billionaire Saudi Prince and pop star Michael Jackson) is closely eyeing land in the Fraser Valley for a movie studio-hotel-resort-casino complex. Coming as it does on the heels of and in response to the Six Mile Ranch affair, Quayle's call for a province-wide review of all Class 4 and 5 lands slaps "Super, Speculative B.C." labels across fencelines from here to there and back again. Can we say McRanch?

(Do not confuse this with a hard-edge, "not-one-acre-should-be-let-go" position. But the ALC already has underway a very credible process which allows it to sit down with local governments on a municipality by municipality basis and discuss planning for agriculture. The ALC has neither the staff nor the budget to handle the province-wide onslaught that review of Class 4 and 5 lands will produce. The pressure will not only be from developers, many farmers could also make a good argument for lopping off a residential lot or two of Class 4 or 5 land. While this may be viewed as popular by financially stressed — or "finally disgusted" or "facing retirement" — farmers, it is not sustainable from a policy perspective and stands to increase dangerously the rural/urban interface perimeter. Not to mention the "who gets to play?" conundrum: e.g. "how come my neighbour gets his land out and I don't...")

Combining the ALC and the FLC

Similarly, Quayle's call to combine the ALC and the FLC is also concerning. Much of the FLC is patterned after established processes of the ALC. They already share a common administrative and support staff. But is this a reason to combine the Commissions (the table of Commissioners, similar in function to a Board of Directors)?

Farming is consistently losing arguments to forestry over the use of Crown Lands - ask any rancher. The ALC has a much stronger history than the Forest Land Commission, which in part is why it is currently able to stand up in defense of farm priorities. (Witness its strong and positive role in the Six Mile Ranch affair. How much have you heard from the Forest Land Commission lately?)

Opinion polls convey overwhelming public support for both the ALR and this province's farmers. The public connects the two in one image, evoking/permitting strong communication and support by ALC Commissioners. Under a combined FLC/ALC, things quickly "fuzzify" — here's betting that if the two get into bed together, it's the FLC that comes out on top because of the continued politics of forestry in this province. This is not good for farming.

The Sound of One Hand Clapping

Little in Quayle's Report acknowledges the fact that the farmland is only half of the equation; without the farmer making a decent living off the land, there is no agriculture. In "Land Equity Reparation," the only section of the report that deals with the economics of farming, Quayle notes: "the effect of preserving agricultural lands appears to have had the unintended effect of expropriating the potential for return on investment. The result is unintended hardship through loss of equity for financing, and loss of flexibility for families and retirement."

The suggestion that "return on investment" has been denied by disallowing the recapture of speculative profits from the sale of farm land is wrong-headed. As the fruit grower's report on the ALR documented, farmers are facing economic hardship in this province because BC supports its farmers less than any other province in Canada, and Canada supports its farmers less than any other OECD nation in the world (aside from New Zealand; and I'll do a column on that failed experiment some time...)

Invisible Superstars

In response to GATT/WTO sanctions, virtually every other OECD nation in the world has developed "green" subsidies which recognize the "positive externalities" of sustainable stewardship. And our

farmers — world leaders in sustainable farm management systems, micro-irrigation/fertigation technology, water and waste management technology, greenhouse technology, agri-shade systems, specialty crops, agri-biotechnology and small-scale marketing, value added and processing systems — are superstars in that regard. Invisible superstars...

Sweet Dreams

In my dreams, the Quayle Report would have concluded (and our provincial agri-food policy document should begin) with the following sentiments:

The ability to farm commercially is a scarce skill amongst British Columbians. Of all the residents of British Columbia, less than 0.55% are capable of producing food from the land; just 0.26% are considered "farmers" and less than 0.17% are capable of producing the commercial food crops we associate with "Grown in BC" pride. The relationship between the farmer and the land is sensitive and precious. BC farmers, with their crop knowledge, sustainable farm management practices and commitment to stewardship are unique and irreplaceable resources - they keep both the land and the community in good heart... Following the creation of the Agricultural Land Reserve in 1973, government figures estimate the number of farms under 10 acres increased by 35% from 4,844 to 6,539; much of this represents a loss of prime agricultural land to hobby farm and country estate development. Population growth is rapid in British Columbia; because farm land is one of the easiest places to build, more and more farmers face escalating production and management costs due to urban-shadow pressures. At the same time, traditional supports to farming have been dismantled and competition from low priced imports has increased. There is no indication that these pressures will diminish. British Columbia's provincial agri-food strategy must be based on the belief that ensuring the economic viability of British Columbia's farmers is critical to the future of the province, particularly in relation to sustaining a safe and secure food supply. The Province should look to the 1998 BCFGA ALR Report for the policy models in use around the world to accomplish this.

Stakes in the Ground or Writing on the Wall?

As every farmer knows, stakes in the ground are moveable - particularly by those with low ethics and high self-interest. It takes an iron bar set deep to properly hold a line against future movement. The communities of this province and the farmers upon whom they depend deserve nothing less.