

Blacklisting, and how it affects us all...

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December. A month of lists if there ever was one! Shopping lists. Gift Lists. Guest Lists. Greeting Card Lists. Party lists. Lists of things to pick up, to drop off, to start, to finish... The list goes on and on, as lists are wont to do... And at the end of the month, a little time off with the family. To catch your breath. To get through some reading. To think about the upcoming year. And maybe — if you are a traditionalist — to make that one last-but-not-least list: "Things I resolve to change in the New Year."

Yup. It's that time. Resolutions. Things that need fixing. Like stopping smoking. Being less judgmental. Getting more exercise. Spending more quality time with the family. Cutting down on unproductive meetings. Lowering stress. Blowing the whistle on blacklists. (Say what? Blacklists? Sad but true...)

Victoria's "black list" — like the "black lace" of her (racier) namesake — is deserving of a good strong whistle: it is flimsy, transparent and quite shameless... But the similarity/fun stops there. Rather than fanning initiative, blacklists kill it. Rather than empowering, blacklists demoralize. Rather than engaging passion, blacklists suppress creativity and engage distrust. A form of bureaucratic cancer, blacklists suffocate the ethics and integrity of the civil service and eat away at the public trust 'til there is nothing left to defend.

And so, in the Spirit of the Season, my contribution to "what needs fixing" in 1999: unmasking Victoria's Secret - government blacklists and their effect on public policy.

IT STARTED WITH HEMP

Last July, the Boundary Economic Development Commission (BEDC) unilaterally cancelled — two weeks prior to it's completion — a Report they had commissioned back in February to develop a commercial strategy for industrial hemp. (The BEDC wanted me to "beat the drum", I assessed the crop objectively as a professional; the BEDC tried to direct the research, I said no; the BEDC repudiated the contract, I was stuck with an unpaid bill of \$10,000.)

This is not good for my cash flow. But more importantly, BC farmers lost the benefit of an objective report on industrial hemp. This is not good for farm decision-making.

A QUESTION OF ETHICS

At an August birthday party for a mutual colleague, I found myself in conversation with the Chair of B.C. Institute of Agrologists' Ethics Committee. In my opinion, I had been dropped from the hemp study because I refused to compromise my professional ethics and told him so. For background in case it came up. Several days later, I received a call from the B.C.M.A.F special crops Agrologist asking what stage the report was at and under what conditions it might be finished for the Ministry.

I provided him with a copy of the draft submitted to the BEDC, we talked, and he in essence communicated the following message to his superiors within the Ministry:

I've read Holm's draft; it is one of the few pieces of objective and balanced research I've seen on the crop. I am being called by farmers daily asking questions on hemp that I can't answer; I need the information in this report to do my job. Holm is more knowledgeable and up to speed on industrial hemp than anyone in the province; I can have her Report in two weeks. At \$10 grand, its a good deal for the taxpayer. I'd like to have Holm finish her Report for the Ministry. Please.

"ANYBODY BUT HOLM"

In response, the word came down that the budget was there, but not for Holm ("anybody but Holm"). A blacklist. Confirmed by three independent peers. Obviously, not in my professional interest. Moreover, not in the public interest.

What to do? What to do? I wrote to Deputy Minister Catharine Read expressing my concerns but received no reply save and except a three line "don't-call-us-we'll-call-you" response from BCMAF policy ADM Gordon Macatee: *"We will keep this information on file in the event that we wish to consider acquiring the information at any time in the future."*

(I am not alone in this, there are other respected members of our profession who are similarly "blacklisted" and I am aware I have been on a blacklist for some time. Although I continue to believe it's origins lie with the bureaucrats, not the politicians; ultimately, politicians are responsible for the actions of their bureaucrats...)

SQUANDERING THE INTERESTS OF B.C.'s FARM COMMUNITY

On a professional level, blacklisting of respected Agrologists has overarching implications for our profession, for individual Agrologists, and for the public interest in a sustainable agriculture.

On a personal level, being prevented from practicing my profession in B.C. is difficult — at this point in my career, life in the wake of a Ministry blacklist is not my idea of a good time.

On a fiscal level, it is a sheer waste of taxpayer dollars. But the damage doesn't stop there. In squandering the legitimate interests of B.C.'s farm sector, it also fundamentally undermines an essential pillar of community sustainability.

As an Agrologist bound by a Code of Ethics to practice my profession with integrity, competence and objectivity and who is responsible - first and foremost - to the public ("membership is a right granted by the public to the member to practice Agrology in such a way that the public interest is served"), I have brought this matter to the attention of B. C. Institute of Agrologists' President Geoff Hughes-Games and will be requesting it be added as an agenda item for discussion at our 1999 BCIA AGM.

I sincerely fear that if Agrologists fail to take a lead position on this, we will become — as have other professional societies in this province — disemboweled of professional integrity and weak and ineffective in our ability to champion both the rights of our members and the public policy interests of society.

And, if we cannot do that, what then is there of us?

My very best wishes to all my readers for a safe and warm holiday season!

PS: In early January I will have the extreme pleasure of accompanying a group of 20 BC farmers/farm couples (Abma, Chong, Colwell, Commandeur, Harris, Husch, Malenstyn, Manarin/Gilboe, Kicey, Steidle, Witzke and - maybe - Horn!) on the first leg of the 1999 British Columbia-Cuba Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange— an 8 day tour of Cuba's farming regions the objective of which is to explore the opportunities for strategic collaboration on sustainable agriculture priorities. Watch January's column for STORIES FROM THE FRONT: Raising Funds and Profile in Support of a Good Idea!