

# The rites and the signs of spring.

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April. Such an optimistic month. The start of a new season. Fields buttoned tight since last fall under coats of rye and winter wheat finally plowed down and broken open to the bright spring sky. Limbs made strong from last year's pruning thrust new buds outward as an orchard-ful of growth courses upward from the (warming) winter soil. This year's calves tumble all over themselves to mix the warmth of mother's milk with the sweet/spicy taste of cool spring pasture.

And all waiting optimistically for the dance; the chance to do again what it and the farmer do best - combine rich soils, good climate, sustainable farm practices, good market knowledge and good farming instincts to produce a product needed and valued by society to feed its communities.

But what's this? In the orchards, the sounds of chain saws — autumn sounds — are heard in the Spring. In the high country, ranchers shake their heads as theme park proposals pre-occupy (and divide) the minds and hearts of their communities. In the lower mainland, crop and dairy farmers battle markets and weather, farming with one eye on the urban edge and another on the speculators walking up the driveway with suitcases full of cash. On Vancouver Island, images of mills and processors shutting down, production quota transferring off-Island and trailer-loads of live animals jostling with tourists for space on Mainland-bound ferries have become farming's new petroglyphs - the writing on the wall of history that will tell us tomorrow what both farmers and politicians know all too well today:

The communities that eat the food our farmers produce,  
— and the politicians who govern them —  
do not value farming enough to ensure it is given  
the proper policy respect needed to survive...

And so, instead of standing at the edge of Spring, optimistically contemplating a season of hard work and a good strong harvest, many BC farmers are scratching their heads and wondering whether they can justify "doing this" for another year... Overhanging the minds of many is the black choice of a quick death (hit the right speculator and the funeral's paid for, get that retirement place somewhere, too bad we can't help the kids with that land but honestly it's hard to really encourage them anyway given what's happening to farming...) or a slow one (death by a thousand cuts; as painful as it sounds).

Farmers are feeling very undancey indeed.

What went wrong here? And can it still "go right"? Is this the end of farming in BC or the beginning of the turning of the tide that saves farming in BC? Does farming have a future? Consider the following SIGNS OF SPRING;

SIGNS OF SPRING #1  
GORDON MACEACHERN, BC's FORMER DEPUTY MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE  
FOUND CRIMINALLY GUILTY OF  
EMBEZZLEMENT, FRAUD AND BREACH OF TRUST...

Gordon MacEachern was BC's Deputy Minister of Agriculture from 1983 to 1988. Although British Columbian's will remember MacEachern, if at all, for the considerable notoriety he attracted over the falsified expense accounts scandal, Agrologists remember BC Deputy Minister of Agriculture Gordon MacEachern for a much larger and more enduring scandal: poisoning the well in Victoria and embezzling the public interest in sustainable farm policy in this province.

Agrologists remember MacEachern as the Deputy who struck the requirement of "Agrologist" from the job descriptions of senior Victoria bureaucrats and who told a respected member of our profession — at the time both a senior civil servant and incoming President of the B C Institute of Agrologist's — to choose between his Presidency and his job.

Although MacEachern - a Peter Principle graduate — didn't much like Agrologists, he perhaps should have feared accountants more. In 1988, following an RCMP investigation, MacEachern was publicly fired by the province for filing false expense claims and embezzling taxpayers money. In March 1989, he was convicted, given a suspended sentence and six month's probation.

Somewhere across the Prairies, MacEachern managed to shed his cloak of disgrace, returning to his home province to become PEI's Deputy Minister of Agriculture (bumping an apparently well-liked female Deputy to do so) and President and Director of the World Potato Congress.

Within a few years, the same-old, same-old: MacEachern was fired in March 1994 for embezzlement, this time by the PEI government. He stayed on (connections *are* connections!) as head of the World Potato Congress until the fall of 1995. In 1996, following a two year RCMP investigation, MacEachern was ordered to stand trial in PEI Supreme Court on four charges of fraud and breach of trust for defrauding the Province (false receipts, fabricating expense claims, diverting airline tickets) and the World Potato Congress (false receipts and claims). This February, MacEachern pleaded guilty on three of four criminal counts and returns to Court May 28 for sentencing.

They say that with justice comes healing.... An optimistic thought... MacEachern stole more than taxpayer's money, he stole the public trust in a civil service imbued with a passion for good farm policy and the rights of farmers in this province to benefit thereof. Perhaps with his criminal conviction, Victoria's policy well can also begin to heal, flushing out the brackishness of incompetence and replacing it with the sweetwater of professionalism and ethics.

SIGNS OF SPRING #2:  
AGROLOGIST'S ADOPT PROCESS TO SAFEGUARD PUBLIC INTEREST

The following resolution was overwhelmingly endorsed by (an apparently record number of) Agrologists attending the BC Institute of Agrologist's 52 Annual General Meeting March 20th in Vernon, BC:

*RESOLUTION ON GOVERNMENT BLACKLISTING*

*WHEREAS an Agrologist is professionally required to exercise integrity, competence and objectivity in the fulfillment of their responsibilities to the public and the profession, including the defense of sound and balanced public policy consistent with the principles of agricultural and food sustainability;*

*AND WHEREAS this may, at times, require an Agrologist to take positions or raise for public discussion matters which are not consistent with the positions and/or priorities of government;*

*AND WHEREAS protection of the right to raise issues of professional concerns without fear of reprisal or economic sanctions is fundamental to the practice of Agrology;*

*THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that if allegations of blacklisting and/or professional reprisals are brought to the attention of the Institute by a member Agrologist, and confirmed by at least one other Agrologist, Council be required to refer the matter to the Ethics Committee for formal investigation;*

*AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee, if they find evidence that the Member is justified in their assertion, be given the power to recommend to Council a range of actions up to and including formal censure of government and referral to the Ombudsman for further review.*

SIGNS OF SPRING #3:  
FARMING A CAUSE FOR APPLAUSE AT VANCOUVER BOARD OF TRADE!

During the March 17th Vancouver Board of Trade breakfast for Cuban Trade Minister Ibrahim Ferradaz, I told assembled business leaders I was there on behalf of BC's farmers — who for very different reasons stood toe-to-toe with Cuban farmers on the frontier of sustainable agriculture and commercial organic production — to present to Cuba's Minister of Trade the very first deliverable under the 1999 BC-Cuba Farmer-to-Farmer Project: BC's certified organic inspection and certification system (plus Spanish translation) and the assistance to implement a Made in Cuba certification program. And that BC farmers felt the joint-capacity-building relationship being developed between BC and Cuban farmers to identify and support sustainable farm management practices and collaborate in the pursuit of value-added markets was what "constructive engagement" with Cuba was all about. When I finished speaking, THE ROOM BROKE INTO SPONTANEOUS AND SUSTAINED APPLAUSE, the first accorded a comment from the floor that morning.

SIGNS OF SPRING #4:  
FARMERS ACROSS CANADA WANT TO HEAR  
RECOMMENDATIONS OF BC FRUIT GROWER'S REPORT

This Winter, at the invitation of farmers in Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, I traveled across Canada several times (to Saskatoon, Perth-Andover and Charlottetown) to present the findings of the "Holm Report", ([B.C.'s Agricultural Land Reserve - Refitting the Policy Prescription for the Okanagan](#), BC Fruit Growers, January 1998, a report that has received scant attention from BC politicians or the press) on "green" policy measures put in place by other OECD member nations to strongly support their farm sectors and why Canada, by comparison, is abusing its farm sector. This Report has recently been requested by several MP's in Ottawa and has traveled to Washington DC in the arms of Nettie Wiebe, former head of the National Farmers Union. Call your MP and make sure they have ordered a copy from BCFG (250-762-5226). Tell them to ask for the full report, a bargain at \$20.