Questions for a lazy summer afternoon.

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July. A time when many farmers in this Province get to kick back just a bit, look over the results of a springful of hard work, and contemplate harvest. Time when you can pay attention again to one or two things that got way from you for a while. Like the BC-Cuba Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange! In just a few short weeks, the Cubans will be here! So grab some lemonade in the shade and listen up! Six questions for a lazy summer afternoon...

#1 WHAT *EXACTLY* IS HAPPENING IN AUGUST?

On August 21, twenty Cuban farmers and ten accompanying scientists, academics and specialists from Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture will arrive in BC for a three week tour of this province's agriculture sector. The visit is the return portion of the 1999 BC-Cuba Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange; in January 20 BC farmers visited farms in five Cuban provinces at the invitation of the Cuban government. Our Cuban visitors will be travelling through the Province until their departure on September 10th.

#2 WHAT WILL THE EXCHANGE ACCOMPLISH?

For two very different reasons, Cuban and BC farmers stand together on the frontier of agricultural stewardship and sustainable farm management practices. BC farmers operate under some of the toughest regulations in the world. Cuba is a large scale, high quality producer of organic products. The Exchange will profile sustainable agriculture in BC and identify BC farmers as sustainable stewards on a global stage. It will also create the "firmament" between BC and Cuban farmer groups that will enable cooperative economic relationships between our farm communities down the road.

#3 WHAT'S IN IT FOR BC?

Sustainable agriculture is a fundamental pillar of the economic, social and environmental health of BC's communities. But BC agriculture is also a sector at serious risk. Over the last 10 years, farm costs have escalated and returns plummeted, meaning margins of many farmers have shrunk dramatically. Some of the reasons behind this are:

- Elimination of farm subsidies (in BC, the most significant program cut was farm income insurance).
- Dilution of crop disaster mechanisms.
- Increased competition from low priced imports.
- Reduced commitment to defend farmers against dumping (Canadian Import Trade Tribunal).
- High-cost farming. Urban pressure from rapid population growth combined with BC's valley bottom topography - prime farmland and prime development land are one in the same - has resulted in highly speculative prices for prime farmland (at $35,000 to $50,000 an acre, orders of magnitude above farm prices) and farming costs which reflect the higher costs of farming in close proximity to non-farm neighbours - e.g. the requirement to give notice of spraying.
- Compliance costs to satisfy environmental regulations that are among the highest in the world.

- Provincial legislation (Agricultural Land Commission Act) that does not protect sustaining use of farmland. (Large "holes" are quietly developing in the reserve as large "country estates" replace farm use of BC's prime agricultural soils.)

- Over the past decade, much of BC's processing capacity (feed mills, vegetable processing, dairy processing, slaughter-houses) has disappeared - shut down or moved to Alberta.

- Canada supports its farmers less per capita, per hectare or per full time farmer equivalent than any other OECD nations with the exception of Australia and new Zealand. The rest of the world is quickly moving to replace old-style market distorting subsidies with environmental subsidies - green subsidies - which support the positive externalities of sustainable farm management practices.

- With the exception of a few commodities (e.g. greenhouse) the above factors have caused many many farmers in British Columbia's traditional crop and livestock sectors to feel very discouraged and to hold the belief that "it's only a matter of time" till commercial agriculture is finished in BC.

Without some major shifts in the thinking of BC/Canadian politicians and consumers about sustainability as it relates to the production of the food we eat, BC's farm sector as we now know it will be gone in a decade.

The BC-Cuba project stimulates that thinking: it profiles sustainable agriculture in BC and BC farmers as sustainable stewardship superstars on the global stage; by developing the architecture for cooperative engagements with Cuban farmer coops, it creates a template for BC farmer cooperatives to develop investment and co-development enterprises for the cultivation, processing and marketing of sustainably produced organic crops (international cooperative linkages), enhancing market scope/access/penetration/returns for farmers in both countries.

#4 WHAT'S A FARMER-TO-FARMER, COOPERATIVE JOINT VENTURE MODEL ?

Let's consider a couple of hypothetical examples:

Let's say for argument's sake that a group of BC farmers decide to explore with Cuban farmers the development of a strategy for the commercialization of organic malanga — a tropical root vegetable renowned for its benefits for infants and the elderly — for emerging Canadian and European markets. Let's say the BC farmers decide to fund the science — undertaken by research institutes visited by Cuban farmers in August in collaboration with Cuban research institutes visited by our scientists in the coming months — that finds malanga is one of the most easily digested and nutritious of vegetables and is of particular importance in the diets of infants and the elderly. The BC farmers might then fund a study that looks at market potential for value added organic malanga products (e.g. organic malanga baby food, organic banana/malanga "boost" type drink for seniors, organic malanga snack chips, diced frozen organic malanga, perhaps down the road a special line of products for hospital and institutional use etc.) and what it would cost to build processing capacity in Cuba. If the benefit/cost is attractive, BC farmers may then decide to provide the technology and capital to assists Cuban farmers in the co-production and co-marketing of Cuban malanga to international markets.

Or, on a more conventional level, let's say BC fruit growers and Sun Rype decide to increase grower returns by expanding their international juice market by including an organic line. And so they enter into a co-processing and co-packing agreement with a farmer cooperative in Cuba to ship certified organic grapefruit and grapefruit/papaya/banana juice blends into lucrative European and Asian consumer markets.

The question is: Will such positive and equitable economic outcomes "evolve" of their own accord? Or can a framework ("the model") be created that provides the template and facilitates/fosters the "bridge" to such cooperation/collaboration opportunities?

When we speak of developing a coop-to-coop joint venture model, we are really talking about answering the questions:

- Can we create an infrastructure, define a framework and facilitate the development of mutual economic linkages between farmer cooperatives in Canada and Cuba?
- Can the development of a model — a path or door thru which farmer-initiated joint ventures might be undertaken — entice such ventures to occur?
- Can ethically constructed, farmer-based international cooperatives give multinationals a run for their money by being quicker and faster in the new organic, non genetically modified marketplace?
- Can such a "model", once developed, make it easier for hypothetical scenarios like the above to occur?

#5 IN SUMMARY, WHAT'S THIS PROJECT ABOUT?

What this Project is "NOT about" is inferring that all of BC's farmers should or could become organic. The clear focus and priority of this Project is sustainable farm stewardship. And from BC's perspective, profiling BC farmers as sustainable superstars on a global stage.

Some BC farmers are already pursuing commercial-scale cultivation of organic products for fresh and processed markets, and the profile created by this project will undoubtedly fuel further interest in this regard. Little wonder, given that international sales of certified organic products — increasing by better than 20% per year for the past decade and approach $10 billion annually — are identified as the fastest growing sector of the agri-food industry worldwide.

But the prime thrust of this initiative is to create the template to enable BC farmers to enter into cooperative and sustaining economic partnerships with Cuban farmers to produce, process and market commercially produced organic products to rapidly growing and highly lucrative European and Canadian markets. Under a label identifying it as having been produced by an ethical farmer-based initiative, guaranteeing an important competitive edge in the new global marketplace.

#6. WHAT'S NEXT? HOW CAN I HELP?

Contact your commodity group or local Farmers Institute to update them on the tour and encourage their support (e.g. maybe helping organize a BBQ for the Cubans and local farmers as we pass through your community). I can offer them some suggestions to maximize the public profile for local farming and sustainable agriculture.

We still need money. It costs roughly $3,000 to sponsor each of our Cuban visitors. Commercial sponsorship of the tour offers strong profile for community and agri-business groups. Charitable tax status is available and trust accounts are being set up with several area Credit Unions. For further information please contact me at 604-947-2893 or via email at "holm@pinc.com".

Pass on your suggestions for "must see" tour stops and ideas for local (hopefully inexpensive!) accomodation (we would like to billet them all in one place).

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BACKGROUND

The August visit by Cuba's farmers is the return portion of the 1999 BC-Cuba Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange; in January, at the invitation of the Cuban government, 20 BC farmers visited farms in five Cuban provinces.

For entirely different reasons, BC and Cuban farmers find themselves standing together on the threshold of sustainable farm management practices and organic agriculture.

Prior to the late 1980's, Cuban agriculture was characterized by “modern” large scale, high input monoculture; close to seventy five percent of Cuba's farmland was planted to sugar and some fifty-seven percent of her food supply was imported. When the Soviet Union collapsed, so too did Cuba's pipeline for feed grains, pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, tractors, farm machinery, equipment and parts. Faced with a triple crisis — a 50% drop in domestic food supplies, closure of its primary export market (sugar) and the complete collapse of Cuba's conventional agriculture sector — Cuba embarked on the largest conversion to sustainable farm management practices ever attempted. This transformation from monoculture to alternative, low-input, sustainable organic agriculture was supported by a highly skilled and educated workforce, a well-developed system of research, technology and extension, a national priority on nutrition, a beneficial climate and a series of economic and policy reforms that supported increased productivity at the farm level.

Today, Cuba's farm sector is based on sustainable farm management practices — composting and vermiculture (earthworms); reduced tillage, organic soil amendments, biofertilizers, green manures and crop rotations; intercropping; pest and disease monitoring; biological control programs; waste recycling and intensive use of human and animal labour in farm production systems — and Cuba is a large scale, high quality producer of organic products.

As Cuba's farm sector evolves, there will be significant opportunities for the supply of sustainable farming technology and farm management systems. Joint venture opportunities. Partnerships in the development of organic markets and infrastructure. Assistance in meeting the challenges ahead. Americans, for now, are shut out of this market, but that won't last forever — some estimate that within 5-10 years, Cuban trade sanctions will be dropped. The 1999 BC-Cuba Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange is the first step towards ensuring that BC farmers and agri-business concerns are first in line to develop sustainable, cooperative partnerships which will enhance the priorities of both regions.

BC companies currently active in Cuba include tourism, mining, light manufacturing, meat products (dark chicken meat and mechanically deboned chicken meat is BC’s largest export to Cuba), paper products, transhipment services, communications and ancillary services. Canada is Cuba’s most important trading partner.