

Reaping the rewards of co-operation.

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To all of you who so generously gave of your time, energy and money to make Phase Two of the BC-Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project such an outstanding success, thank you!

Travelling for three weeks throughout the Province with the 27 member Cuban Delegation visiting over seventy farms and farming enterprises from Delta to Dawson Creek (see insert) was a totally amazing and highly rewarding experience. It was also a blast!

- For many reasons, this project was completely unique. Not only was this the largest delegation of Cubans to ever visit BC but it was also the first time Cuba has sent a farmer delegation to Canada. As far as I am aware, there has not been another project of this nature and scale in Canadian agriculture.
- It is also remarkable because it was undertaken without any federal funding whatsoever.
- Phase One — the 10 day, five province tour of Cuban agriculture arranged for 20 BC farmers by the Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture last January — was funded entirely by the participants themselves with assistance from the Cuban government.
- The \$85,000 in travel, meal and accomodation costs for Phase Two — the return visit to BC by 27 Cuban farmers and policy makers this August — was fully supported through the generous contribution of Canadians with a stake in farming, sustainable stewardship of our foodlands and the development of robust co-operative international economic models (see insert).
- As a result of the productive groundwork undertaken in Phase One and Phase Two, a strong foundation has been laid for the successful launch of Phase Three: the development of meaningful economic engagement — cooperative to cooperative joint venture linkages — between farmers in Canada and Cuba.

STRATEGIC, SUSTAINABLE, ETHICAL, COOPERATIVE ECONOMICS

The opportunity for collaboration is of considerable strategic and economic importance to both BC (and the rest of Canada) and Cuba.

Cuba because to earn foreign exchange Cuba must attract investment capital and increase both the volume and the "made-in-Cuba" value of her exports. With her fast growing tourism sector and vast agricultural soils, international investors and agri-food conglomerates are very interested in Cuba. Problem is, market economies and centrally planned economies dance to a very different beat. Capital always wants to lead. This is not in Cuba's interest, nor in the interests of Cuba's farmers.

BC because in this province (and in the rest of Canada), farmers are denied the policy wisdom enjoyed by farmers in virtually every other OECD country in the world: per hectare payments reflective of the added benefits we all enjoy when farmers exercise sound stewardship practices. Instead, Canada's farmers are being tossed to the market. In BC's highly diverse and still independent farm communities, high land and farming costs and low priced imports create serious challenges for farmers. In the rest of Canada, production contracts place farmers at the short end of a non-competitive market structure dominated by multi-national food conglomerates, driving farm-gate prices for many commodities through the floorboards and jacking farm input costs through the roof.

What to do, what to do....

Well.... Why not — while awaiting political leadership — supplement on-farm income with off-farm income that is still "on-farm"?

Recent regulatory changes increase the access of cooperatives to outside capital. Of course, this can quickly become a double edged sword: the challenge is to keep the reins of authority firmly in the hands of farmers. So why not take some of this newly-available capital and put it to good use in strategically tailored, low risk, government-blessed, farmer-coop-led joint ventures with Cuba?

Why not help Canadian farmers to hold hands with Cuban farmers so they can foray off together in search of international market niches for organic, fair-traded, non-genetically-modified, ethically and cooperatively produced processed food products?

With BC's farmers contributing their knowledge of sustainable farm stewardship systems, value-added expertise, some capital and an international market reputation for quality and ethics, and Cuba's farmers contributing their cutting edge knowledge of organic production methods, an extraordinarily strong agricultural research and extension infrastructure, literate and smart farmers, productive climate, good soils, abundant water and well organized farmer cooperatives, we each contribute strategic advantages that the other lacks. The end result? A perfectly adapted, perfectly competitive international farmer.

As an Agrologist, I know that we are facing the most serious farm crisis of the century. As former Chair of the Board of Trustees of Ethical Funds Inc. I know first hand why well managed stewardship and ethics equates with robust economics; on the most basic level it reduces risk and enhances social benefits. Creating a workable template that sustainably empowers farmers and international cooperative linkages is one I would like to hang my professional hat on.

WHAT'S NEXT

Topping up the coffers from Phase Two (\$10,000 personal shortfall; charitable tax receipts available) and finding the funding for the development of the Phase Three proposal.

THANKS AGAIN

In addition to my warmest thanks to those who so generously provided financial support to Phase Two of the Project, thank you also to my professional colleagues — BCMAFF Agrologists — who accompanied the tour at many points along the way; to Don MacLean, P.Ag. who bought us all homemade ice cream; to Al Van Ryswyk, P.Ag. who travelled with us for two days to put on a wonderful sustainable grasslands tour; and in particular to Niels Holbeck, P.Ag., who travelled with us from Agassiz to Dawson Creek and added his inimitable wit, wisdom, fine provisioning and unparalleled sandwich-making-on-the-bus skills! Special thanks also to CUSO, CoDev and Farm Folk/City Folk for their early and continuous support.

COMMEMORATIVE T-SHIRTS!

Lucky for you, we do have a *few* commemorative t-shirts left! Sporting a Canadian and Cuban Flag and the wording:

BC-Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project
HABANA —> BRITISH COLUMBIA
suelo, plantas, agua y sol: vida
Agosto- Septiembre 99

they are an amazing buy at only \$25 each! Please specify size and colour (soft grey or white) when ordering from: The Holm Team, RR #1, L-25, Bowen Island, B.C. V0N 1G0