

# Where is the leadership when the future of farming is on the line?

March 2001 Column, Country Life in BC

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Back on Bowen Island on a six day turn around between Cuba farmer tours, I stand at the counter eating an egg sandwich and sorting thru two weeks worth of mail. Aha! Country Life... I indulge myself with a quick browse to answer my standard queries: "how did Pete title my column?" and "what's happening in BC?"

Two stories catch my eye: CONTROVERSIAL DELTA BYLAW GETS GREEN LIGHT and DELTA FARMLAND PUT ON TREATY TABLE. By the time I finish reading them, I'm livid. As a professional, I feel despair. As a columnist, I feel spurred to action. Taking pen in hand (OK, flipping on my computer...) I contemplate options for Delta...

No matter how long I look out at the bright blue waters of Howe Sound against the snow-capped backdrop of the Tantalus Range, there is only one answer — BC's Agriculture Minister must seize leadership and put his job on the line for this issue and for the future of farming in this province.

## DELTA'S \$23,000 PER HECTARE GREENHOUSE TAX

BC Agriculture Minister Ed Conroy should threaten to resign if Municipal Affairs Minister Jim Doyle doesn't order an immediate review of his ministry's decision to approve Delta Council's \$23,000 per hectare "greenhouse tax" (levied as a Development Cost Charge, or DCC) on intensive agriculture. A tax specifically designed to discourage greenhouse and other forms of intensive agriculture in the municipality.

This by-law catches far more in its snare than just greenhouses... City folks moving to the country and buying all those expensive homes not only don't want to see glass, they particularly also don't want to smell manure. Any kind of manure. Nice, orderly green fields are what they'd like, thank you. Mayor Lois Jackson and her majority TriDelta Councilors promised to do "something" to stop the greenhouses. And so in the stroke of a pen - and with the duplicity of Municipal Affairs - Mayor Lois Jackson signed into law a by-law that will stop farming. No question about it.

## CLOSE TO 1,000 ACRES OF EXPROPRIATED DELTA FARMLAND SACRIFICED TO TREATY TABLE

Over the overwhelming opposition of the community, the Provincial Government has officially put 980 acres of Delta farmland on the negotiating table in an effort to "move forward with a treaty settlement with Tsawwassen First Nation". Land expropriated from area farmers for the Roberts Bank Back-Up Lands. Oh, of course the government has stipulated that land "will remain in the ALR". Right. Some of the highest valued land for development in the province. Remember Tsatsu Shores? The noose around the neck of Delta's farmers tightens another few notches.

## WHY DELTA? WHY NOW?

Isn't it interesting that such an aggressive grab at the future of farming should occur in Delta, where residential and industrial land values are the highest? Residents want nice orderly fields. Developers want farmers going broke enough to become desperate partners in their never-ending bid to remove farmland from the ALR (piece-meal, holus-bolus who cares? but "all at once" will drop the price the quickest, making it cheaper to develop...)

What we need in Delta is good farmers, not rich developers. Good farmers who can economically sustain a good mixed farming community. With proper rotations. Good soil organics. Economic

diversification. Independent farmers who can switch into crops that look good as market conditions warrant. Farmers who are making enough money to continue farming in one of the highest cost farming areas of the province (farming on the edge of urban growth, high land values, high taxes, capricious municipal governments, meetings, habitat enhancements, set-asides, water storage, red tape... The list goes on...).

Instead, we are seeing our farm sector raped on a public policy level. An atrocity no other sector of our economy would have to endure. And adding insult to injury, at the hands of those elected to protect. And those they hire to work on our behalf to construct (or not) good public policy.

Look at what has already happened to farm infrastructure. Companies who have pulled up stakes in the last decade include Fraser Valley Foods (locally owned till bought by Pattison and resold to Green Giant, a division of UK-based Grand Met Foods, FVF's closed both their Chilliwack and Sardis plants in the 1990's, reportedly cutting up their corn line rather than selling it to area farmers), Foremost Dairy (closed in May 1996), Dairyworld's Ice Cream Division (relocated to Edmonton in 1996), Lucerne's Ice Cream Division (relocated to Edmonton in Jan 1997), Lucerne's yogurt and cottage cheese division (relocating to Edmonton), Royal City Foods (closed 1993, now repacking for Snowcap), Nalleys French Fry plant (relocated to Washington's Umatilla Basin in 1997), Buckerfields Feed Mill (closed in 1997), J&L Meats (recently closed its doors in the Fraser Valley, removing the last commercial-scale kill plant from this province) and, on the Island, Lilydale Processing Plant (September 1998), Fatt's Fryers (Saanich, closed in early 1990's), both of Buckerfield's Vancouver Island feed mills (recently shut down), Borden's Feed (Saanich mill closed in 1990), MacKinnon's Dairy (Port Alberni, closed early 1990's).

Erosion too in the farmers voice — from the collective if not always harmonious chorus of the BC Federation of Agriculture to the discordant squawking of battling commodity boards. Erosion of once-strong farmer cooperatives (BC Treefruits Ltd., East Chilliwack Agricultural Coop, the helter-skelter journey of Dairyland to Dairyworld to American mozzarella giant's Saputo Cheese to name a few).

THE MINISTER HAS THE AMMO - DOES HE HAVE THE CAJONES?

Calling Delta's DCC by-law "stupid and insulting, the worst example of municipal bullshit" is far too kind. Through the precedent it sets, the ramifications of Delta's actions - if unchecked by political intervention - will be staggering. Quite sufficient to topple farming in this province.

Surrendering 960 acres in the heart of farming country to the land claims table is equally myopic.

Minister Conroy has in his hands a public report co-authored by one of his best civil servants (Dave Melnychuk, P.Ag., former BCIA Agrologist of the Year) calling for an independent review of Delta's DCC levy based on its precedent setting nature and potential impact on the competitiveness of BC's agricultural industry. It also contested the numbers Delta used to come up with the \$23,000 per hectare levy and says that the DCC could effectively force intensive agriculture to look outside the province to build or expand.

The Minister ALSO has a report that suggests the Government likely doesn't have a leg to stand on putting the Robert's Bank Back Up Lands on the land claim table. (IS ALL CROWN LAND CREATED EQUAL? Holm, March, 1995.)

If the Minister of Agriculture cannot hold any sway at the caucus table over these two keenly simple but imploringly crucial matters; if he cannot convince his colleague in Municipal Affairs to his head a shake and reevaluate Ministry Approval of the DCC By-Law and his colleague Aboriginal Affairs Minister David Zirnhelt to take land expropriated from Delta farmers off the treaty table, then he isn't worth spit in the wind to the farm community and should resign.

This is not a partisan issue.