

# For the record.

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The words used by Stan Hagen in mid-January to describe the effect of government's restructuring, deregulation and regionalization of the ALR were telling: it would "expand permitted uses" to allow for "more flexibility for non-farm uses and sub-division", a "transfer of authority to the regions" and a "delegation to local government" of what is now provincial decision-making.

Finally, the other shoe drops. Back in 1973, when the ALR was put in place, the government of the day clearly committed to ensuring both the preservation of agricultural land and the economic health and sustainability of the farm sector.

For the record, the words of Dave Stupich, then-Minister of Agriculture are quite clear

*...in addition to the preservation of the land itself, provision must also be made for the economic well-being of those who derive their livelihood directly from it.*

"Message from the Minister", The Honourable David Stupich  
1973 Annual Report, B.C Minister of Agriculture

*We said when we introduced the legislation to save farmland that the next step would be to make it possible for farmers not to go on subsidizing the consumers as they have in the past. And that's the way these subsidies worked, Mr. Speaker — it's not a case of subsidizing farmers; its farmers who, through their long hours of work, their hope that someday they might get something out of it, who are the ones that have been subsidizing cheap food for the consumers in this province, in this country and often throughout the world. Mr. Speaker, we promised in the spring session, when we said we would save land, that the time had come when the farmer was going to quit doing the subsidizing, that it was the responsibility of the community as a whole to make sure that farmers also had a right to a decent standard of living, and that their ability to earn that decent standard of living should not depend upon the possibility that one day they might be able to sell their land off for subdivision.*

Hon. Dave Stupich, B.C. Minister of Agriculture, Hansard, September 24,  
1973

The government clearly let down its side of the bargain.

Starting in the mid 1980-s, federal and provincial government cuts to agricultural support policies were dramatic; sharper and faster than any other OECD member nation, as a matter of fact. Cuts so deep that for the past six years Canada has ranked dead last (or close to it) in the OECD's bi-annual Measurements of Government Support for Agriculture (and that's on a per capita, per full time farmer AND per hectare basis). The latest OECD stats – analysed for BC Tree Fruits last fall – confirm that the Canadian farmer is falling farther and farther behind his/her international counterparts. At an accelerating rate.

In the meantime, suppliers and buyers became more and more concentrated, capturing margins which legitimately belong inside the farm-gate. Today, infrastructure once owned and operated by and for the farmers is controlled by multinationals with their own agendas and precious little invested in the community.

For farmers, it has increasingly become “How many more acres can we add?” Or “How many more cows can we milk?” Or the one that hurts the most: “How long can I watch my kids winning ribbons in the show ring and know in good conscience I can’t recommend that they farm?”

For farmers, government’s unbundling of the ALR (for that is what it is) overdue: if you’re not going to give farming the policy respect and support it deserves, then at least let us know that when we decide to quit, there’ll be enough to retire on with some left over to help the kids out.

The government’s promised and now delivered “destructuring” of the ALR no doubt caused many checkbooks to come out in many ridings in the past election campaign, lining the coffers of MLA’s who now sit in mute witness of this final breach of public trust.

Was it really only a few short years ago that the public furor over the provincial government’s exclusion of Six Mile ranch caused the government so much trouble? And prompted a government study on the provincial interest in the ALR? And didn’t UBC Agriculture Dean Moura Quayle say there was one?

But that was only half the answer. The question that should have been asked and never was is: “is there a provincial interest in the farmers?”