

## B.C. loses its ag minister

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To the rest of the provinces, BC is a coastal Lotus land with warm weather and wacky politics. Canada's very own California. Sometimes, we struggle against it. Sometimes, we just shrug and agree.

Living in a province with no political opposition — the Liberals holds 77 of 79 seats and refuse to grant the two New Democrat MLA's party status in the Legislature—makes the bizarre even more so. The whip is cracked from the Premier's office, deals and flim flam abound and its all cozy wozy till the inevitable leaks occur and government's game of "find the scapegoat" begins.

In early February, that scapegoat was BC's Agriculture Minister.

When it comes to politics, BC farmers, like farmers in the rest of Canada, generally try to keep their heads down and their communication lines open. Skitterish as fallow deer, politicians can be tamed if handled a lot, but the investment in time is costly. When you have one who not only understands farming issues but also goes to bat for the farm community (as distinct from "did that, failed at that, gonna be a politician...") everyone can breathe a bit easier.

Until he stepped aside over a fisheries matter, BC's Agriculture and Fisheries John van Dongen was such a Minister. A dairy farmer before entering politics in 1995, John brought some 20 years background on farm organizations to his portfolio, including BC Dairy Foundation, Dairyland Foods — now AgriFoods International Cooperative — and the Farm Debt Review Board.

Farmers in BC respect van Dongen and were disappointed to see him go. I called John the other day to ask what he felt his greatest accomplishments were.

According to van Dongen, moving the Ministry into the role of advocacy for agriculture — both in its relations with other ministries and with other levels of government (federal and municipal) - has been central to his work as Minister.

"The burden shouldn't fall on farmers to have to be the advocates for agriculture," says van Dongen. "Farmers have enough things to keep them busy."

So Van Dongen focused on making connections at the Ministerial, Deputy Minister and Departmental level between agriculture and labour, forestry, environment and fisheries and oceans to facilitate an atmosphere of respect so that the impact of regulations on the farming community can be better understood and accommodated.

van Dongen successfully pushed for the Cabinet Committee for the Economy and the Environment, where agriculture regularly sits down with energy, mines, water, land, and forestry to discuss departmental issues.

In a time of dramatically slashed budgets, van Dongen is pleased with continued government support for supply-managed commodities, ongoing funding for the Okanagan's orchard replant program and improved farm labour conditions in the Fraser Valley.

As for new directions, van Dongen feels more attention should be paid to BC's mainstream commodities. For the past decade, the policy mantra in BC has been diversification. And with our microclimates and niche markets, BC has developed a highly diversified farm sector. But van Dongen worries some of the mainstream commodities are getting lost. For example, BC's comparative advantage in forage

production (pasture, hay, silage) is an important driver of our provincial cattle sector (from \$165 million in 1996 to \$266 million on 2001), suggesting more policy support is warranted.

On the disappointment side? Having to step down 4 days before the federal provincial ministers meeting to hammer out an Agriculture Policy Framework for the next 5 years. “We were starting to hone in on the final decisions, starting to move from the public servant level to the ministerial level. BC has a lot of respect at the national table. Up for discussion were the future of crop insurance and NISA, both priorities for BC farmers. I would have liked to have been there to represent those interests.” (In a double whammy, BC’s experienced Deputy Minister of Agriculture was – also in January – transferred to Fisheries and was unable to attend the meeting.)

Also on the disappointment side for van Dongen is not making better progress on municipal attempts to block greenhouse vegetable production in the lower Fraser Valley.

According to van Dongen, “The direction has to come from the top. It has to come from the Minister. You have to get in there and fight for farming.”

John van Dongen. A farmer who went in to politics and tried to make a difference because he knew first hand where the problems lie.

Good on’ya, John. We hope to see you back!

John van Dongen studied agricultural economics at the University of British Columbia. He and his wife and two children have a dairy farm in Abbotsford.