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Chilliwack Progress

Farmland defender under fire

By Robert Freeman - Chilliwack Progress

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A farm scientist who stood up for a fellow agrologist “muzzled” after publicly opposing removal of farmland for a housing development is now the subject of a similar ethics complaint.

“It’s no fun to be on the point of the spear,” Wendy Holm told The Progress during a telephone interview.

The complaint against Holm, an award-winning agrologist and former president of the BC Institute of Agrologists, was filed after she spoke to the Tye magazine last month about the “muzzling” of fellow agrologist Susan Ames.

The complaint made by Bob Holtby stems from comments Holm made during the interview about his chairmanship of the Institute’s ethics committee.

But Holm told The Progress she has already apologized to Holtby for the comments she believed were off the record, and that they have since been removed from the publication.

“It feels like a SLAPP to me,” she said, referring to what’s called a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation aimed at silencing critics by burdening them with legal costs.

High-powered defense lawyer Joseph Arvay has been hired by a group of agrologists who have formed the Farmland Defence League to defend Holm and others.

Last April, when The Progress first reported on the issue, Institute officials denied any attempt to muzzle agrologists.

“If the individual stays truthful and factual and has done due diligence, there’s nothing to stop them”

from taking a public stand, executive director Don Rugg said at the time. "It happens all the time, but always using science to do it."

But defence fund organizer Herb Barbolet insisted that the freedom of agrologists to speak out publicly against farmland removals - although they may be supported by other agrologists hired by the developer - is at stake.

"It appears the agrologists' association has let it be known that any agrologist that's not working on a project can't criticize that project or any other agrologist that's working on it," he said. "We want to question why only developers' employees or contractors can speak on farmland issues."

Richmond City Coun. Harold Steves, who is not an agrologist, but a well-known ALR defender, said most agrologists work for municipal governments or developers, so they can't speak out publicly against requests for farmland removals.

"It's a very small group that can actually speak out," he said. "We need agrologists to give other points of view. We need that second opinion."

Holm said over 10,000 acres has come out of the land reserve in the past five years - and 7,500 acres put back in the northern part of B.C.

But the statistics give a rosier picture than what's actually happening to the province's ability to feed itself, she said.

"We're taking land out of the most important food-producing areas of the province ... and replacing it with grazing land in the north," she said.

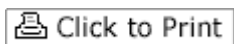
She said more than one agrologist has told her they have "sat on their hands" rather than speak out against farmland removals because of fear of censure by the ethics committee.

"We need to clear out the closets and make this a very open process," she said.

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