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Surrey North Delta Leader

Farming experts say they won't be muzzled

By Jeff Nagel - Surrey North Delta Leader

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A group of B.C. agrologists are fighting what they say are limits on their ability to speak freely against controversial land developments that would sacrifice farmland.

Nine agrologists are protesting as a "grave injustice" the decision of the B.C. Institute of Agrologists to discipline agrologist Susan Ames, who in 2007 urged Delta council to be cautious in changing the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) to allow a golf course and housing development proposed for Tsawwassen.

Ames wasn't directly involved in analyzing the application – which Delta ultimately passed — but her letter warned it could fuel land speculation and add pressure to develop the ALR.

Another agrologist who was working for the developer complained to the BCIA, which ruled agrologists can't offer opinions unless they've performed or supervised the work in question.

Agrologist Wendy Holm, one of the nine defending Ames, says the decision as it stands leaves agrologists muzzled by their professional body.

"We are very, very concerned," she said. "We consider it to be a very grave and serious problem."

The group is tabling a discussion paper urging a new direction and also intends to launch a resolution at the BCIA annual meeting next May.

"It's tremendously important for the community to have agrologists stand up and defend the public interest and the preservation of agricultural land," Holm said.

"Those people cannot be fettered or be perceived to be fettered by their professional association from

doing so."

BCIA executive director Don Rugg said the issue was clarified earlier this year, allowing agrologists not directly involved to speak provided they conduct their own due diligence to ensure accuracy.

"If you're going to make statements you need to be able to back them up," he said.

But Holm said the censure of Ames has not been lifted and agrologists are still questioning how their actions will be judged.

She fears city councils will end up hearing only the voices of "the agrologist representing the interests of the developer."

Holm is herself now the target of a disciplinary complaint for speaking publicly on the issue and has hired defence lawyer Joe Arvay.

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