

Building a Better Tractor

Part I of II

By Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.



Ask any farmer what they could least do without and their second answer - the first of course being "my sweetie!" - would likely be "my tractor".

No other farm implement is so heavily relied upon by growers to accomplish the next replant, tend and harvest the crop, and get it to farm gate and beyond.

Because of this, farmers know their tractors well. Cranking it over on a cool June morning, the symphony of engine sounds is like a lover's whisper to the seasoned ear; reasoned slopes are one half of the equation, prompt maintenance is the other.

Occasionally - for a variety of reasons - steeper slopes demand attention. You wait for dry weather. You put on the cage. Still... Every community in the Okanagan is sadly acquainted with times when such acts have had fatal consequence.

Farm accidents are tragic. But the community carries on. What happens when the "accident" befalls the entire sector?

What happens when the post-farm-gate tractor (the "marketing chain" responsible for pulling your product forward to the end consumer) becomes rusty from poor maintenance (collapse of competition; market rigidities imposed by concentrated processors and retailers) and challenged by dangerously steep slopes (a WTO/FTA/NAFTA world; politicization of farm support, loss of sovereignty over farm policy)? What happens then?

What happens when every farm program that has been relied upon for the past century is cast under the red glow of disrepute by Washington, a trading partner whose own farm subsidies, on a per capita basis, increased by 22% in the decade following the signing of the FTA and exceeded the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) levels by 14% by the year 2000?

(This, while Canada's per capita support for farming during the same period fell by 40% and in 2000 averaged 45% below OECD farm support levels and fully 55% below U.S. farm support levels - making per hectare support to Canadian farmers amongst the lowest of all OECD nations. Despite the fact that Canada's farmers contribute 47% more to national GDP than do their U.S. counterparts.)

What happens when only the mandarins know NAFTA well enough to argue it, and only seem to do so when it is against - not for - the interests of Canada's farmers (e.g. Ottawa's failure to invoke NAFTA Chapter 20 to open the border to Canadian beef)? What then? What then indeed.

A former New Yorker (passionately Canadian-and-only-Canadian since 1976), my first introduction to the Okanagan came in 1971, when as a student in UBC's Agricultural Sciences 300 course, I stood on a bluff overlooking the lake at the Summerland Research Station and bit into my first tree-ripened, sun-warmed peach. I was in love.

The affair deepened when - back from Ottawa many years later - I agreed to serve as a Director of the Okanagan Valley Tree Fruit Authority (OVTFA). At one of our first meetings, I recall standing on the deck of Summerland Research Station with fellow Director John Kitson, looking out over much the same view as I had some 20 years previous. John pointed across the lake to Naramata and explained it came from a completely different landmass than the one we were standing on, and how the two plates had collided a very long time ago. I was absolutely fascinated. And that set the tone for my ensuing engagement with the OVTFA and the growers it serves.

As an Agrologist and a British Columbian, the capacity and challenges of this fertile agricultural valley remain as intriguing to me today as they did at the outset.

Much like B.C.'s Fraser Valley, the Okanagan is

one of this province's prime battlegrounds for the future of farming. Soaring prices for farmland quickly convert prime treefruit and vinelands to inexpensive country estates or walled and sterile communities. Restructuring of the ALR has shifted decision-making to local interests. The land is frozen (though that too is changing), but land prices aren't. The urban edge (line separating farm and non-farm use) is spreading like a jigsaw puzzle pattern through what once were strong farm communities.

In many sectors, farm income is also on the decline. Thanks to the work of the OVTFA replant program (which should be continued for at least another five years) and strong industry collaboration in the treefruit, vineyard and winery sectors, growers in the Okanagan are relatively better off. But as farmers know, this could change in a season. Without protection for the economics of farming, much of the productive farmland of the Okanagan will convert to hobby farms in a generation (Holm: ALR Report to BCFGA, 1998).

Creating a different future built on empowered

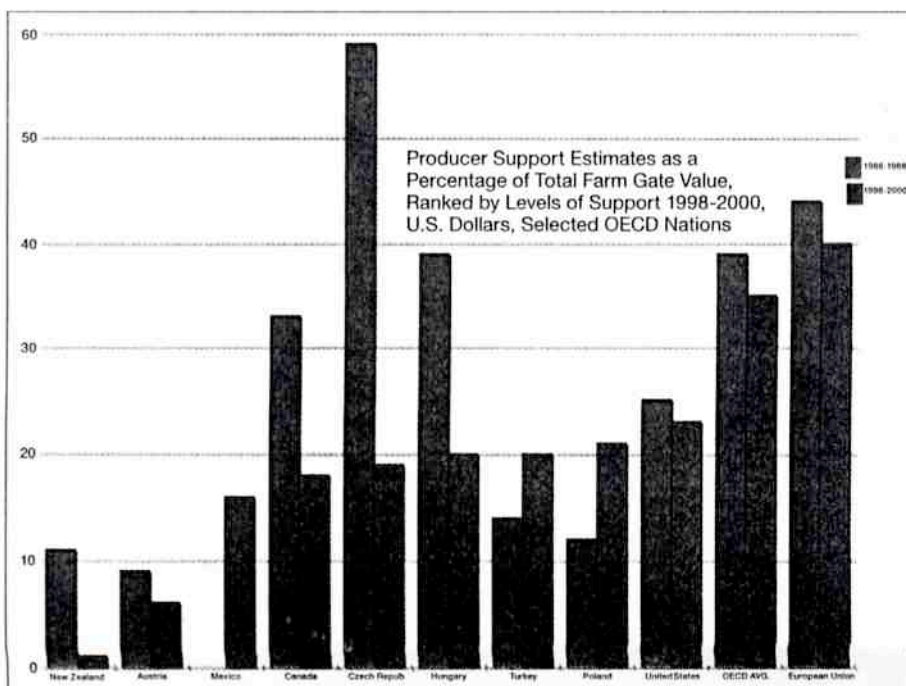
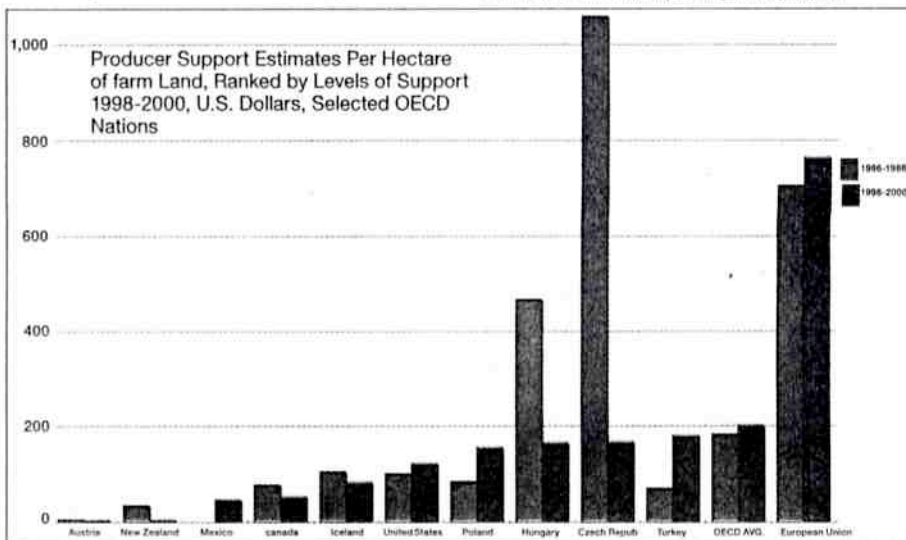
farming communities, enthusiastic farm youth, and strong farm incomes requires solutions to ensure both the economics of farming and the sufficiency of voice necessary to carry the message of Canada's farm sector forward to communities and politicians.

Farm accidents are tragic. But the community carries on. When the "accident" befalls the farm sector, the entire community falters.

There is a need to build a better post-farm-gate tractor. Luckily for us, some hot new designs are on the market!

PART TWO: Cranking 'er over and testing 'er out - looking at some cooperative trade options that may make good sense for B.C.'s wine and treefruit sector. (See Aug/Sept 2004 Growers Journal)

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charts prepared for B.C. Tree Fruits by Wendy Holm