

# Stand up, Wayne.

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Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

I didn't make it to Wayne Wicken's farewell dinner. Something of a "pressing and urgent nature" (so much so I can't now recall what it was) caused me to be unable to leave Bowen that night to attend. Only last week did I take down the "invite fax" from the board.

Wayne took early retirement rather than stomach the gruel being dished up by the Ministry in the name of public policy. Like the soup the chicken walked through, there was scant flavour remaining.

For those of you who missed it, go back to May's Country Life and read "Wickens' retirement closes era". It's right there on page 20, identically positioned one page following the "Steady rain upsets manure demo" piece. (Editors have such fun...)

That's really it, though, isn't it? Wayne, leading his brave and oh-so-capable band of hard-working extension personnel, being thoroughly rained out by the last remaining bureaucrat in Victoria who, after all, has got to have SOMETHING to do...

It seems so long ago, but it was really only this fall, that we all waited for the bad news. It was like a death watch. When Hackett went out and Seitz came it, the word "undertaker" fluttered across the lips of Agrologists like the sound of birds shaking their feathers in a night swamp. Sort of a muffled chain. Seitz was seen as the hatchet man, brought back from Ottawa with no background in agriculture and lots of smooth. Lorne knew the ax was falling. We all did. And, incredibly, we waited in silence. As if, by holding our breath, we could delay the turning...

(Problem is, we *all* know some we'd be better off without. You know the ones, the guys that stand around at industry meetings talking only to other suits during coffee breaks. We dared to hope... Even in the face of Zirnhelt's move to Forestry, we dared to hope... )

When the cuts were finally announced (just a few weeks before Christmas, as I recall) and the particularly brutal decimation of the Ministry's extension personnel evident, the first person I thought of was Wayne. I first came to know Wayne when I became active in my professional association upon returning from Ottawa in 1983. Over the ensuing 10 years (until I moved to Bowen and became a hermit), Wayne and I shared many a table. As president and national councilor of BCIA, I sat with Wayne on Provincial Council for 4 years or more, attended five or six AIC conferences with him and had the privilege of following in some of his (very formidable) footprints. During this time, I saw first hand Wayne's passion for extension education and his passion for agriculture. He expressed it through his passion for his profession. And did he ever express it.

"How can Wayne stay" I thought. I remember speaking these words out loud as I listened to the news. And, of course, he couldn't. "The end of an era" claimed the headline. And so it was.

The era actually started falling down about the ears of those who were paying attention some three deputy minister's ago, before Seitz and before Hackett. Way, way back to one Mr. Gordon McEachan. When I first went to Ottawa for an interview, I was given two reports McEachan had submitted and asked to evaluate them. One was on Chicken prices. He had done some margin analysis, taking today's feed prices against today's live weight prices. Margins were jumping all over the place like so many fish on the floor. When you lagged the data, everything calmed down right nicely. McEachan hadn't noticed the error. I got the job. McEachan got the nod.

Imagine my surprise when I came back to this province some 9 years later to find him deputy minister. Imagine the reaction of the province's Agrologists when he told their incoming president, a senior public servant, it was his job with the ministry or his term as president — he couldn't do both. (Having developed a habit of eating, he demurred...)

If little else, McEachan was consistent; he proceeded to remove “Agrologist” designations from top echelon positions and surround himself with people of similar competence and stature (no, Wayne, that wasn’t a punny). British Columbia is still living that legacy. (Just before Hackett was appointed, McEachan left B.C. under a cloud of suspicion over travel account irregularities. Calling in some favours, he displaced a well-beloved DM and took over the ag ministry in his home province of P.E.I. Shortly thereafter, however, didn’t some pesky travel irregularities seem to crop up again. And so off McEachan goes to organize the finances for some world potato conference. Can you say “oh, oh...?”

As you glance at the other headlines on your way to last month’s column on Wickens — headlines like “hazelnut growers go for high density”, “Ginseng heading for B.C. top”, “ginseng growers prosper” and “seed potato grower caters to small operations” — remember that behind every successful crop in this province has very likely been a hard-working extension Agrologist out there making a difference. As opposed to making a career path. Or perhaps a career path of a different sort. Job satisfaction.

Now, the trick is going to be to get Wickens to do the odd guest column in this here publication. You made a difference to the field and a difference to the profession, Wayne. Don’t stop now.