

---

## OPINION-EDITORIAL

### **B.C GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS FRUIT GROWERS**

**By Pat Bell**  
**Minister of Agriculture and Lands**  
(690 words)

B.C. apple growers are understandably frustrated by low prices for last year's apple crop, which dropped to a point where growers sold their fruit for as little as 10 cents a pound.

However, it is not accurate for apple growers to claim that the B.C. government is not helping.

The B.C. Ministry of Agriculture and Lands cares a great deal about the future of orchardists and fully supports B.C.'s fruit growers who produce products known for their excellence around the world.

The depth of our concern can be measured by the \$60 million worth of support programs extended to the industry over the years. These programs range from the massive orchard replant program representing more than \$50 million to help growers meet market demands, to the \$10 million sterile insect release (SIR) program that has had considerable success fighting codling moth, the enemy of the apple orchard.

Fruit growers also have access to funds under the CAIS (Canadian Agricultural Income Stabilization program) and Production Insurance. The early estimates are that growers would qualify this year alone for between \$7 million and \$9 million under CAIS. An estimated \$3 million to \$4 million will be paid out in Production Insurance claims as well.

In total, our orchard industry has received an average of 30 per cent of the direct payments from Government in the last few years, despite the fact that the industry represents just three per cent of the farm gate sales in B.C. I believe this indicates a clear and unequivocal support of our orchardists.

Despite the fact that CAIS is a federally delivered program (jointly funded by the Province), I have had Provincial staff working hard to help growers apply for CAIS payments. These efforts include the following:

- Staff contacted between 250 and 300 individual tree fruit producers regarding the CAIS program.
- Five CAIS workshops were held during July in the Okanagan with approximately 125 participants in total.
- Throughout July and into August, MAL continued to make contact with growers.
- In September there was a push to give applicants help on the paperwork required.
- Production insurance representatives gave assistance to about 40 producers in Oliver.
- Kelowna and CAIS staff worked one-on-one with about 120 growers to fill out their forms and responded to another 150 to 200 producers on the phone.

We have taken steps to make it easier for producers to receive payments in 2003 and 2004 without making any deposit payment. We have eliminated the deposit requirement and have had the deadlines extended to make participation easier.

A voluntary interim payment process is available for farmers to get an early payment; funds are usually in the hands of farmers in less than 60 days and – anticipating heavy tree fruit demand because of low prices – the CAIS administration set up a process specific to tree fruits and established a specific verification team.

To suggest that the situation faced by apple growers is similar to that faced by our cattle ranchers during the BSE-related border closure would be inaccurate. Our apple producers have access to all international and domestic markets in an unconstrained manner and while the issue of alleged “dumping” on the part of Washington State growers is a serious matter, it does not compare with the loss of the major market that our cattle producers faced. While allegations around “dumping” by Washington State growers remain unproven at this time, I support the industry plans to present its case to the federal government under whose control international trade falls and I am willing to help the industry in this area.

Certainly, apple prices are not where the industry would like them to be. This is a market reality that all commodities face from time to time and that is why the CAIS program was established. I am concerned about the long-term health of our apple industry and to this end I have requested the association to come back to me with a plan to create a sustainable, profitable sector. I am eagerly awaiting the BCFGAs submission.

I look forward to seeing their long-term plan when we meet again in two weeks.

Pat Bell  
Minister of Agriculture and Lands