
OPINION-EDITORIAL

AGRICULTURE IS VITAL TO OUR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

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(735 words)

British Columbia's agricultural lands play an enormously positive role in the high quality of living we have in this province. It's no secret that a profitable, viable agri-food industry is dependent on the availability and security of high-quality farmland. The Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) is the foundation upon which this industry, and the positive benefits the sector brings, is built. To be perfectly clear, this government continues to strongly support the ALR and the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC).

We know that British Columbia's diversity of landscapes and soils provide for a wide range of agricultural opportunities. Our farmers benefit from fertile lands and favourable climates and produce some of the highest quality agriculture and food products in the world, despite only a small portion of B.C.'s land base being suitable for farming. The shortage and pressures on good farmland is why B.C. has preserved our best agricultural lands within the ALR.

One of this government's primary goals, and the basis for the improvements we made to the regional panel system started by the previous government, has been to ensure the ALC is structured in a manner reflective of regional needs, while providing the support commissioners need to make informed decisions. The ALC plays an important role in our ongoing efforts to bridge urban/agricultural issues and improve the dialogue between groups – particularly between residential and agricultural areas.

Earlier this year the David Suzuki Foundation released a report containing several excellent suggestions that we are reviewing to further protect our agricultural land. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the report commissioned by David Sands and written by Andrew Petter's University of Victoria's Environmental Law Clinic. We have serious reservations about the methodology of this report: it cites only four hand-picked cases over the two years the researchers covered, yet in that time the ALC reviewed over 2,000 applications. The report also fails to compare these to any cases from before 2002. Reporting concerns regarding four out of 2,000 cases reviewed does not fairly represent the ALC's work.

Your readers should know that over the first four years of this government's mandate the entire amount of land that came out of the ALR was on par with the amount in the year 2000 under the previous government. Overall, the quantity of lands coming out of the ALR is down substantially – despite the pressures on the ALR driven in part by the growth occurring in the province.

Our Agricultural Land Reserve is the envy of many jurisdictions around the world. Some are looking at implementing the B.C. model to protect their farmland.

I have asked the ALC chair to look into the recommendations from the Suzuki report, and I will be meeting personally with the Suzuki Foundation to discuss their ideas. There are improvements

that we should look at, including better defining the term 'community need' to ensure the ALR is maintained at the highest possible level. The system governing the ALR has been improved substantially under our government and if there are things we can do to better protect our agricultural land, we are open to them. The recent decision not to exclude Barnston Island from the ALR confirms that an independent panel can weigh the facts and render a decision that protects high valued, productive farmland. Community growth around the province places incredible pressure on the ALR, and the ALC has done an exceptional job in withstanding those pressures.

Agriculture is a very dynamic industry, with global markets, weather uncertainties and cost pressures - the very nature of agriculture is changing and we must learn to change with it. To enable continued supply of locally produced food, our government has committed to provide farmers with programs to stabilize incomes for circumstances beyond their control. We continue to review and adjust these programs to make sure they are responsive to legitimate business needs and affordable from the taxpayers' perspective. At this point, B.C. has budgeted more combined financial assistance to the agriculture sector than ever before.

We continue to work closely with the federal government, industry, and all other stakeholders to find innovative ways to compete in world markets and here at home. Our vision for agriculture is a long-term vision and with input from British Columbians from all corners of the province – which is being collected through the Agriculture Planning Committee led by Parliamentary Secretary Val Roddick – B.C.'s agriculture industry will continue to grow and prosper.