

# The roots of the ALR point a way to its future

Cooperation and collaboration are needed to protect farmland and farmers

Fifty years ago, the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) began its operations in the spirit of cooperation. Despite serious debates and legitimate

A key issue for the ALC during this time was the future of unfarmed and underutilized properties within the ALR: "What about the properties inside the ALR that are not used agriculturally, and the owners have no intention to use them agriculturally?"



**Viewpoint**  
by MEAGAN JOAN CURTIS

concerns around its beginnings in the run-up to the initial freeze on subdivision on December 21, 1972, a collaborative spirit emanated from within the ALC outwards towards other provincial departments, regional districts, the general public and last but not least, the farmer. In 1975, the commission wrote, "It was only through the spirit of cooperation which emerged from joint efforts of the general public and local, regional and provincial governments that the ALR was established in so short a period of time. The Commission will continue to encourage such participation in the ongoing administration of the ALR."

This spirit was made possible through a belief in the value of listening, understanding, appreciating differences, and non-adversarial problem-solving. During these formative years, the approach of the ALC was grounded in a belief that truth and fairness is found through an authentic dialogue that allowed it to adapt its position to make way for new understandings of how best to serve farmers. At the centre of its work were food producers, who the commission viewed as "essential to the long-term success of agricultural policy in British Columbia."

Is this socially useful? Are we trying to preserve farmland, or farmers, or both?"

It was a rhetorical question. Its 1977 annual report noted, "Recognizing that the land base is but one aspect of a stable agricultural industry, the Commission views the preservation of the expertise of the farmer and the health of the farm community as an integral part of its prime objective." To preserve "the expertise of the farmer and protect the sense of identity, self-confidence and vitality of the farm community" were deemed of equal importance to preserving the agricultural land resource.

Preserving farmland was pointless without preserving farmers.

"They are so few as to cause us concern," the commission wrote. "The loss of farmer skills in the population is serious."

In its early years, the ALC was given \$25 million to buy land it could then lease back

to farmers "in order to stabilize farming in British Columbia by reducing the exodus of competent farm families from the industry." It was positioned as a "buyer of last resort" for sick or retiring farmers, spending \$13.5 million to acquire nearly 22,000 acres of land in its first five years.

Farmers were never incidental because food itself was not. Bill 42, the Land Commission Act, was presented as necessary for the province because of two primary reasons: 1) farmland loss was increasing and had been for some decades, and 2) provincial food sufficiency (the ability of the province to feed itself from its own production) had to be secured. These two foundational reasons were inseparable – they form the logic of the ALR's existence and are why many agreed to work on its creation.

The ALC's first annual report in 1974 states, "In 1946, food consumption in the province required a net import of 3%. By 1955, this deficit had risen to 29% and remains above this level. Dependence on external food producers could pose several long run problems for the province. It will be highly vulnerable should external political, economic market

competition, or physical factors cause a reduction in the reliability or availability of imported agricultural products, or drastically raise their prices."

Our situation has worsened. Today, our import rates are higher and the province is more vulnerable to external supply chain disruptions. As Mary Rawson, an original member of the ALC, wrote in 1976, "The prospects for continuing, let alone improving, the quality of urban life are intimately tied to the pattern and prospects of agriculture. Have a care, urban intruders. Have a care, or we will starve tomorrow."

**Fused**

Land and food are fused within the ALR. This is why other uses of farmland have always been acceptable provided they do not diminish future agricultural possibilities. Today we stand at a crux – a point of difficulty and choice. As we make choices that will shape reality for the next generations, we carry with us the words of those before us and the legacy with which they left us.

When the ALC was created, our food circumstances were felt to be dire. In 1975, the ALC wrote, "we must act soon,

for if we do not, as Sir Julian Huxley wrote, 'Man will become the cancer of the planet, destroying its resources and eventually his own future self.'"

In those years, the ALC said it found itself both contemplating the growth of cities and standing in the farmyard. From this vantage point, Rawson wrote that they glanced back with Oliver Goldsmith's poetic words in mind, "Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, where wealth accumulates, and men decay."

Nothing has changed. Our 'saved' farmland sits within the hands of many who do not produce for the community or act in the spirit of co-operation. Much of this land also lies idle, facing a questionable future.

For the past 50 years, farms, farmers and local production have continued to be lost. But if we choose to embrace the ALC's formative roots of cooperation and dialogue with farmers, ensuring the commission works with them rather than against them, it may finally deliver the sustenance we need to grow upright.

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