

British Columbia

Organic Grower



Seed Saavy

BC Eco-Seeds Co-op Launches

Ciderhouse Rules

Sweet Success at Sea Cider Farm

2015 Conference

Flocks, Stocks and a Smoking Good Gathering

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Hard Pressed for Sweet Success

Sea Cider Farm leads Vancouver Island's cider revival.

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2015 COABC Conference

Check out conference highlights and start getting ready for the conference here!

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BC Organic Grower

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On the Cover: Kristen Jordan of Sea Cider Farm. Credit: Hannah Roessler.

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Executive's Report

By Susan Snow

As we move towards the last "Food Holiday" of 2014 and the seed ordering for the new season we can reflect on how grateful we are for the growing period that has past. The rewards of a good production year bring renewed hope for 2015.



COABC as an organization has accomplished a lot over the last twelve months. The provincial government is currently looking at our request to regulate the term "Organic" within British Columbia. We are hopeful that the Ministry of Agriculture will have

solid information by the end of 2015 to proceed with mandatory regulations requiring anyone using the term "Organic" to be certified.

Our crew of staff has again worked tirelessly on our behalf to deliver our mandate across the province. We have completed numerous projects in 2014 that have raised the profile of COABC on the public and industry levels. We couldn't be without our dedicated group of volunteers who make possible the events during the Pacific Agriculture Show and Organic Week plus many other events around the province.

A huge "Thank You" to all those who make our group function so well. Happy Holidays and see you all at the conference in Chilliwack. 🍀



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COABC Office Report

By Jen Gamble

As winter rolls in, at the COABC office we are wrapping up details from 2014 and planning for 2015.



In the last part of 2014, the Vancity Organic Certification and Public Education project concluded. The project piloted the idea of online application forms and increased organic sector outreach and education. The next steps will be considered in the coming year.

Also, the COABC Planning Session held in Abbotsford at the beginning of November saw the Board gather to set priorities for 2015. From the session, a 2015 plan will be created to guide the organization in the coming year.

In the new year, join us for our winter events. At the end of January, the Pacific Agriculture Show is held in Abbotsford featuring everything agricultural. Check out the horticulture short course series and the Kwantlen Small Farm series. Along with these, be sure to visit the COABC booth.

From February 27 to March 1, 2015, the conference will be returning to the Best Western Rainbow Country Inn, in Chilliwack, BC. Every year COABC hosts the BC Organic Conference, so join us for 3 days of information, networking and fun.

Conference planning is well underway with the conference committee and coordinator busy organizing a great line up of speakers. This year, the conference has been extended to 3 full days. An all day session is set for Friday where participants will write their own farm handbook. COABC is pleased to welcome Sara Dent, co-ordinator of Young Agrarians, as the keynote speaker for the COABC 2015 conference.

Register now and save! Early bird pricing will be in effect until January 31, 2015. Find more information about the conference on page 12. Or you can visit us online to learn more. 

Last Quarter Achievements

- COABC Board in-person Planning Session
- Accreditation Board in person meeting
- Completed the Vancity project
- Finalized 3rd Quarter financials



Celebrating 25 Years

Pro Organics is proud to represent BC organic producers and to be celebrating our 25th year of supporting local, organic, sustainable farming.

Today, as it was 25 years ago, our mission remains the same: Promoting the growth and integrity of organics from field to table.



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Editor's Note

By Marilee Peters

As a new year dawns, many of us have our list of resolutions in hand, determined to make changes for the better in our lives over the coming year. And January can seem like the month that establishes whether those resolutions will stick, or die an inglorious death (such as my perennially-doomed resolution to make this the year I take up jogging).



If you haven't yet put together a list of resolutions for the coming year, here are a few suggestions for great changes you can make in 2015, based on the articles you'll find in this issue.

#1: Share your knowledge/Get the support you need. The annual COABC conference is a great opportunity to connect with others in the organic community. Whether you're looking for advice or have experiences to share, the variety of workshops and social events are your chance to build a network of support to sustain you in your efforts over the coming year. Don't miss it! Find the details on this year's event on pages 12-15. The registration form is on page 31.

#2: Be a seed saver. Thanks to the recent launch of the BC Eco Seeds Co-op (see page 21), seed saving is on the upswing. And with the passage of Bill C-18 late in 2014, it's never been more important to get involved and preserve the right for farmers to save and store seed.

#3: Try something new. Whether it's a new soil amendment (maybe wood ash – Marjorie Harris has the details on page 18), or a new farm companion (see our article on the ultimate farm dog, page 24), we've got ideas to shake up your farming practices!

A very big thank you to all the members of the organic community who contributed to this publication over the past year: thank you for being so generous with your time, your thoughts, and your words. I know I speak for readers all across BC when I say, your efforts are appreciated! I'm looking forward to another fruitful year of great articles, ideas and photos from all of you.

And to anyone reading this who has been mulling over a topic they'd like to see covered in this publication,

and perhaps thinking of writing about it themselves – here's our final suggestion for the coming year:

#4: Get in the Grower. Why not make 2015 the year you finally see your words in print on the pages of the BC Organic Grower? Feel free to get in touch anytime to talk about your ideas: editor@certifiedorganic.bc.ca.

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Making the Organic Switch

By Gunta Vitins

With three new business guides for conventional producers, the OVCRT aims to convince more farmers and processors to get the “Organic Advantage.”

Canada’s organic sector needs to significantly increase its production capacity to keep up with the ever-growing consumer demand for organic products. To help spur growth in the sector, the Organic Value Chain Roundtable (OVCRT) has recently released three new guides targeted to conventional growers that provide a strong business case for going organic. Each commodity-specific guide provides beef, grain and vegetable producers with an overview of the economics, market opportunities, and government/industry resources available to help guide new entrants towards a successful transition.

According to a 2013 report by the Canada Organic Trade Association (COTA), Canadian sales of organic products have tripled since 2006, to \$3 billion. Exports of Canadian organic goods to other countries topped \$450 million in 2012. Yet COTA estimates that about 75% of all organic retail sales consist of imported products. This gap in supply and demand is an opportunity for producers: by transitioning to organic practices, farmers can be part of a sector that is experiencing unprecedented growth – one that aims to triple its market share by 2018.

In order to make informed decisions about transitioning to organic, conventional farmers and food processors need a clear understanding of the investment requirements, economics, marketing opportunities, and available resources. Once producers and processors are aware of the tangible returns possible, they can justify their certification and transition costs.

Through funding support from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the OVCRT commissioned Stoddard Consulting to compile and present market and business information that will inform producers, food manufacturers, and investors about the opportunities and economic benefits of organic farming and food processing. The initiative focused on three key sectors

where there are clear opportunities to scale up production to meet existing and future demand: the organic field crop, beef and horticulture sectors. 

Download the brochures at:

 <ftp://ftp.agr.gc.ca/pub/outgoing/misb-eb/Organic%20-%20Produits%20Biologiques>

For more information on the OVCRT, please visit:

 www.agr.gc.ca/eng/industry-markets-and-trade/value-chain-roundtables/organics

Gunta Vitins of Resilient Solutions Consulting has been spearheading innovative agri-food initiatives in the organic public and private sectors over the past 25 years, across Canada. Her work experiences spans government, academia and the private sector, and includes business development, agricultural production, processing, distribution, sales and marketing.

About the Organic Value Chain Round Table

The Organic Value Chain Roundtable (OVCRT) is an industry-led partnership working collaboratively with government on strategies to address regulations, increase Canadian organic capacity, support development of markets and help guide research and innovation for Canada’s organic sector. Increasing the organic share of domestic retail sales from 1.7% to 5% by 2018 is a key strategic priority for the OVCRT. This will be accomplished through increased production, improved production efficiencies and greater economies of scale.

What's the Organic Advantage?

Excerpts from the Guides

Organic Advantage: Vegetable Production

Less than 25% of the domestic demand for organic vegetables at retail is filled by Canadian producers. In fact, for vegetables such as organic cauliflower, beets and spinach, 100% of the domestic retail demand is met by imports. The guide shows the demand for key organic vegetables and retail price trends relative to conventional, and outlines the market opportunities, economic benefits, and resources to support a successful transition into the sector.

Organic Advantage: Grain Production

North America represents nearly half (48%) of the global demand for organic products, but currently has only 25% of the world's organic grain and oilseed production acres. While organic yields may initially be lower than conventional crops, better prices for organic crops result in higher margins. Combining lower production costs with price premiums, the result is a healthier bottom

line. According to the 2014 projections for hard spring wheat, durum, oats, barley and flax :

- Average operating expenses per organic acre were 32% less than conventional production.
- Average gross margin per acre was 300% higher in the organic crops.
- Maximum gross margin advantage was 840% (oats) and minimum gross margin advantage was 189% (brown flax).

Organic Advantage: Beef Production

There is significant room for growth in organic beef production – only 0.4% of the U.S. cow herd is certified organic, and Canada's percentage is far lower. Producers who are contemplating organic beef production may be surprised to know that the transition is easier than they think. Tapping into the existing knowledge base, new research, and taking advantage of government programs will help provide a smooth transition.



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The graphic features a central illustration of various organic produce including corn, tomatoes, and leafy greens, set against a background of a farm scene with a cow and a sun.

SEA CIDER FARM

Hard Pressed for Sweet Success



Credit: Hannah Roessler

AS KRISTEN JORDAN OF SEA CIDER FARM CAN ATTEST, BUILDING A FARM BUSINESS IS NEVER SIMPLE. PLANNING, PREPARATION AND PLAIN HARD WORK ARE THE MAIN INGREDIENTS IN HER RECIPE FOR SUCCESS.

By Hannah Roessler

“Cider is a humble beverage,” says Kristen Jordan, the owner of Sea Cider Farm and Ciderhouse. We’re sitting in the cidery’s grand tasting room, gazing out over acres of orchard apples reaching to the Salish Sea. The rows of glorious apples in deeply blushing reds and warm yellows, bathed in sparkling dew, invite you to frolic barefoot in the grass, sampling sweetness in luscious appleform as you skip along.

It’s a gorgeous setting for this “humble beverage.” And for Kristen Jordan it’s been a long journey.

FINDING HER WAY TO THE GARDEN

In the early 70’s Kristen’s parents bought a waterfront orchard property at Eagle Bay on Shuswap Lake. They spent summers enjoying the land and eating apples, but managing the orchard wasn’t a priority. When Kristen’s father passed away, the orchard was left to her. Away at university in Wales, Kristen would some-

APPLES ARE CATEGORIZED IN 4 GROUPS: SWEET, SHARP, BITTER-SWEET AND BITTERSWEET.

times think of her orchard as she drank cider at a pub, but meanwhile the forest grew over the property.

In the 1990s, married and with children of her own, Kristen moved back to BC with her family to run the orchard, intending to build a legacy she could leave for her children, just as her father had for her.

“We had the idea, oh yeah, I’ll just start a cidery with this orchard, how hard can that be?” laughs Kristen, “My ex-husband and I thought, okay, he can make the cider and I’ll sell the cider, and that’s all we’ll need.” Not everything went according to plan. The old orchard on Shuswap Lake eventually had to be abandoned as



Sea Cider's orchard is home to many unique heritage cider apple varieties. Credit: Hannah Roessler

a growing site. “It was this beautiful hidden orchard dream, but it didn’t work out for us,” says Kristen.

In 2003, Kristen and her husband bought the site of the Sea Cider Farm on the Saanich Peninsula. It had been a sheep pasture, and prior to that a loganberry farm producing berries for the first commercial winery in BC. Kristen planted 1000 trees over 4 acres of the 10 acre property, leaving the rest as forest.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Though she took chances, Kristen did not jump into the cider-making business blindly. She went to “cider school” at Washington State University, which ran a

cider-making course through their extension office in Mt. Vernon. Her teacher was Peter Mitchell, an English cider guru. “He had a big influence on me in my early years of cider making,” Kristen remembers. “His course was very extensive, and it took us through everything from organoleptics, [taste, smell, etc.] to industrial design, to biochemistry.”

Sea Cider opened its doors to the public in 2007 after 3 years of learning and development. Initially, 90% of the business was from walk-in customers. “I remember when someone would drive up to do a tasting, and we’d all be down working in the orchard, so someone would have to run up the hill, wash their hands, and do the tasting,” Kristen laughs.

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From top left: The fermenting tanks are called “Grundies” and “Porter Lancastrians”, originally made in the UK. The bottling machine (bottom, left) is German, built in 1961. Above, many bottles of sparkling, delicious hard cider ready for shipping. Credit: Hannah Roessler

The initial 1000 trees were mostly English bitter-sweets and bittersharps. As luck would have it, Kristen found a hobby grower in Langley with 1000 whips of English cider varieties. Because of all she had learned from Peter Mitchell, Kristen was convinced that BC would fall in love with English cider.

“English cider is very tannic and very phenolic, which means it’s got a lot of minerality, a lot of appleyness on the nose. Compared to Growers Cider – it’s night and day,” notes Kristen. “I also wanted to grow varieties that I wouldn’t have access to on the market. No one is selling yarlington mills, dabinetts, or brown snouts, so that’s what I wanted to grow.” Today the orchard has nearly 1500 trees, and over 60 varieties of apples.

SUCCESS THROUGH EXPERIMENTATION

“You make the cider that you like and you just do lots of experiments. We made a lot of funny ciders by ac-

cident... for example the Rumrunner cider,” recalls Kristen with a smile.

For Rumrunner, Kristen sourced Winter Bananas and Stayman’s Winesaps from the Similkameen valley, and aged the cider in a rum barrel. She called the Newfoundland Liquor Corporation and asked them to send used screech barrels, where she let the cider sit for 1.5 years. It came out a beautiful colour, with a lot of flavourful depth; Rumrunner is now a staple Sea Cider product.

Another lucky accident happened when a member of the BC Fruit Tasters Association called to say they had found a Perry orchard in North Saanich.

“Perry pears are very tannic, inedible, really astringent,” explains Kristen. “But if you grind and ferment them, those tannins drop out, and you are left with this softly tannic, slightly off-dry pear drink which is called Perry.” Kristen began experimenting with different yeasts, fermenting the brew in oak barrels, and soon produced a beautiful Perry cider.

Even before she planted her first trees, Kristen was experimenting with brewing cider. She kept 30 carboys of cider on the go, using different yeasts with different apples, and she took notes religiously. She learned a lot about different varieties: which were good growers, which were good fermenters, which worked well with particular yeasts. She envisioned the final product she wanted to create, the taste and mouth-feel of the cider, and worked towards this idea. Kristen admits it hasn’t all been easy: “We made a lot of mistakes. It came down to these big three: how to grow apples,

how to make cider, and how to sell cider – that last one is huge.”

Navigating the regulatory world of cider sales involved a daunting learning curve, but Sea Cider is now selling in Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and the Yukon, as well as Washington, Oregon, Chicago, Northern California and New York.

“In the beginning, liquor stores would be excited about our product, but also a little confused.

“They would say things like: ‘there’s Mike’s Hard Lemonade and Growers, do we put you between the two of these? And you’re in a champagne bottle, not a big plastic bottle?’ It was like trying to introduce a whole new concept into the cider category.”

THE CIDER WORLD TODAY

In the last few years much has changed in the cider industry. Today, the market for cider is exploding, and big companies are getting into cider production. While craft-beers have long been holding court for foodies and connoisseurs, cider is squeezing its way into the picture, and being accepted with open arms as more people become aware of the differences wild yeasts and bittersharp can make in ciders. Cider is taking the world by storm.

But there are some downsides to this popularity. Cideries are now forced to compete for the best apples for cider making. This makes Kristen especially grateful that Sea Cider, a BC pioneer in cider-making, grows old English varieties that always make a good cider.

Sea Cider is also pioneering community-building initiatives. The farm partners with the Lifecycles Project Society, a non-profit that promotes food security and urban agriculture, working on the Victoria Fruit Tree Project – an initiative to harvest apples that would otherwise go to waste in urban back yards to brew a cider created from a blend of local King apples and Sea Cider’s English Spies. The farm has also launched a “Canadian Invasion” series of ciders: proceeds from sales of the cider support efforts to combat invasive species in sensitive ecological areas.

Although much has changed for Sea Cider over the years, they’ve remained true to their original vision. As Kristen says, “We built this space as a place for community and a place for gathering. It was meant as a place where you could raise a glass of cider together. And you know cider is a humble drink. You don’t ask people to pay attention to it if they don’t want to, they

just want to sip on it and enjoy the company that they are in. “

“We don’t need to go into the phenolic character and the minerality, you know, we just enjoy the drink. The fun thing about cider is that it is a very approachable drink, you don’t have to be a wine snob, you don’t have to know anything to enjoy cider.” Kristen pauses, then adds “...I wanted to create a space where the experience was not just about the specifics of the cider, but an experience that you are sharing with friends and family, where you are enjoying a beautiful setting at the same time.” 

 www.seacider.ca

Hannah Roessler has farmed in Nicaragua, Washington, and BC on permaculture farms, polyculture cafetals, organic market farms and a biodynamic vineyard. She has an MA in Environmental Studies and her research is focused on climate change and small-scale organic farming. She currently farms on the Saanich Peninsula on Vancouver Island.



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Make plans to attend COABC's 2015 Conference!

You'll discover a wealth of educational and networking opportunities at COABC's upcoming annual conference in Chilliwack, BC. Whether you're a new organic farmer, already well-established, or simply keen to learn more about the world of organic farming, you'll find inspiration, education and invigorating new ideas at this year's conference.

Dive into our diverse selection of presentations and workshops. A variety of sessions are offered, covering a wide range of interests pertinent to the dynamic functioning of farm operations. Learn and connect with others who share your passion for organics at these engaging sessions:

Livestock Sessions will explore a range of issues such as feed, pasture management, beef research, slaughter facilities, and standards interpretation.

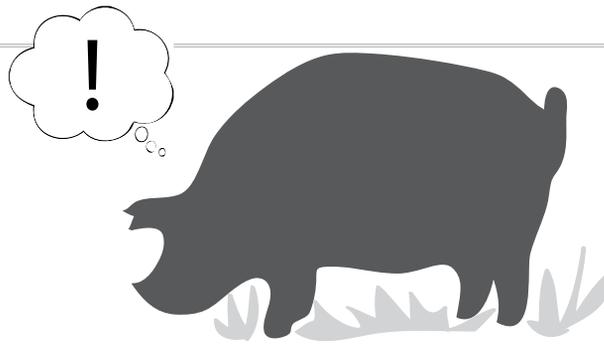
Business Structure & Supports Sessions will focus on components of running a business that make a big difference in the success of your season. We will look

into human resources strategies particular to hiring, creating your own business handbook, using co-operatives to meet shared business objectives, farming with family, and crowd funding as a revenue source.

At the Technical Information Sessions we'll get into the nitty-gritty details of farm work. We will explore pest management (earwigs and wireworm), growing tree fruit, addressing individual concerns and questions through open consultation with industry experts, soil health and integrating seed saving into your practice.

Land Stewardship Sessions will delve into the importance of taking care of this land for generations to come. Join in thought-provoking sessions on indigenous land use, succession planning through a land linking workshop, and permaculture design for small to medium scale farms.

See the inside back cover for the registration form (p.31).



Conference Highlights

1 NEW Friday Workshop!

Creating an Employee Handbook for Your Farm Friday, February 27, 2015

For the first time, we are hosting a full-day pre-conference workshop. Join Kevin Koopmans (Community Futures South Fraser) and Dr. Lorne Owen (Project Consultant, BC Agriculture Centre of Excellence, University of the Fraser Valley) for this day-long workshop to help farm owners and their managers create their own farm-specific employee handbook.

A well-crafted handbook can effectively communicate the benefits and responsibilities of working on your farm, as well as foster a fair work environment and help your employees identify with your business values. The workshop material is based on the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture Guide to Developing a BC Agriculture Employee Handbook.

2 Keynote Speaker: Sara Dent

We are thrilled to welcome Sara Dent, who will deliver this year's keynote address. Sara is the BC Coordinator and Producer of Young Agrarians, a network and capacity building project for the next generation of small-scale, ecological farmers in BC.

Young Agrarians, which connects new farmers with experienced farmers and builds community for new farmers, has been phenomenally successful in BC in the short time it has been active. Since its start in January 2012 as a partnership with FarmFolk CityFolk, the program has doubled in size and participation annually in response to a very real need for new farmers to network and build community-based 'extension services.'

In her keynote address, Sara will examine the challenges that new farmers face in start-up, the story behind the growth and success of Young Agrarians, and take a look ahead at the ideas that are propelling YA forward.

3 Saturday Entertainment: Blackberry Wood

Blackberry Wood has been described as "a wonderful, secret and magic combination of alt-country-gypsy-circus music. They play a high-energy cabaret spin on dreamy old musical styles adding big juicy modern flavours like jumpin' ska, rock and roll, blues, bumpin' hip-hop, gypsy punk 'n many other irresistible body shakin', foot stompin' sounds. They've kicked up dust in towns all over Western Canada, the United Kingdom and parts of the United States."

Other Highlights

- ★ Friday evening reception with beer, wine, and spirits sampling, as well as hors d'oeuvres
- ★ Trade show and poster presentations will provide a marketplace of products and ideas to inspire you
- ★ Organic Feast on Saturday night will feature a collaboration between Chef Dan Cool (Rainbow Country Inn), Chef David Colombe, and his students at Seabird Island College. This will be a meal to remember!
- ★ While the Feast is being staged, you can check out the Seed Exchange, the Young Agrarians Mixer, or the Hospitality Room
- ★ COABC AGM on Sunday – come and hear about the extraordinarily full year we've had and consider getting involved

 certifiedorganic.bc.ca

Conference Program

Location

The 2015 COABC Conference will be held at the Best Western Rainbow Country Inn Hotel & Conference Center at 43971 Industrial Way, Chilliwack, BC. If you require specific transportation arrangements, please contact the conference organizers at conference@certifiedorganic.bc.ca.

Accommodation

The Best Western Rainbow Country Inn is holding rooms at a rate of \$101.99/day (single/double occupancy) + tax. To reserve, please call the hotel at 1-800-665-1030 and ask for the COABC rate. For other accommodation options and maps, please visit the COABC website: www.certifiedorganic.bc.ca

Silent Auction

Our silent auction is one to be reckoned with – you will find an amazing array of items to place your bid on: clothing, art, books, art, food, wine, tools, seeds and so much more. If you would like to donate an auction item, just bring it with you to the conference. Auction items will be on display on Saturday afternoon until bidding closes at 9 PM on Saturday.

Trade Show

The COABC conference features an exciting trade show. Located in the lobby adjacent to the meeting spaces, it's a great spot to discover new resources and products that could be integrated into your farm operation.

The trade show runs from 9 am - 4 pm Saturday. **Register directly at:** <http://goo.gl/ujTzgS>

Poster Sessions

Free space is available for poster presentations related to livestock, business models, technical information, or land stewardship. Email conference@certifiedorganic.bc.ca with your poster idea to book space.

Workshops & Presentations

For complete workshop descriptions, visit: www.certifiedorganic.bc.ca

LIVESTOCK SESSIONS

Feed Panel Discussion

*With Paul Kelly and Rod Reid, In-Season Farms
Moderated by Corey Brown.*

Slaughter Panel Discussion

With Andrea Gunner, North Okanagan Poultry Processing, Gillian Watt, BC Association of Abattoirs, Anne Macey, Salt Spring Island Agricultural Alliance.

Grazing is Greener

Learn how managed grazing is better for cash flow, soil and the environment. *Presented by Andrea Lawseth, AEL Agroecological Consulting, Tristan Cavers, Golden Ears Farm, Darcy Godrich, Health Benefits of Organic Beef Presented by Dr. John Church, Beef Chair at Thompson River University.*

Health Benefits of Organic Beef

New and relevant research findings on the health benefits of organic beef. *Presented by Dr. John Church, Beef Chair at Thompson River University*

Standards Interpretation

Presented by Anne Macey, Salt Spring Island Agricultural Alliance.

BUSINESS STRUCTURE & SUPPORTS SESSIONS

Cultivating an Employer Brand to Improve Hiring & Retention

Essential steps for creating an online culture that communicates your employer brand. *Presented by Barbara Ashton, Ashton Associates.*

Using Co-operatives to Achieve Shared Business Objectives

Discover resources to start and grow co-operatives in BC. *Presented by Chris Bodnar, Close to Home Organics.*

Crowd Funding for the Organic Sector

Get the latest and greatest on the changing landscape of crowdfunding. *Presented by Gunta Vitins, Resilient Solutions Consulting, Chantal Schauch, Junxion, Anne Macey, Salt Spring Agricultural Alliance.*

What About Farmers Markets?

Panel discussion on why and how to consider this time-honoured way of selling produce. *Presented by Andrew Arkestyn-Vogler, Crisp Organics, Paige Dampier, Close to Home Organics, Susan Davidson, Glorious Organics.*

Farm Story: Getting Along in the Potato Business

Learn about building soil health, managing potato crops, equipment selection, marketing and more. *Presented by Doug Helmer and Anna Helmer.*

TECHNICAL INFO SESSIONS

Pest Management in Tree Fruit and Garlic

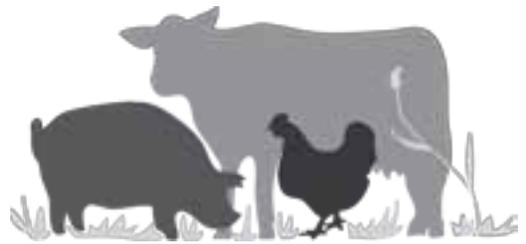
Spotted wing drosophila management, rosy apple aphid strategies, and pest surveillance in garlic fields. *Presented by Tamara Richardson, Cornucopia Crop Consulting.*

Progress on Organic Methods for Wireworm Control

A review of methods for wireworm control. *Presented by Todd Kabaluk, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.*

How to Make a Living as an Organic Tree Fruit Producer

Panel discussion on experiences, challenges and successes with different fruit crops. *Presented by Linda Edwards (apples), Anita Fletcher (apples), James Calissi (cherries), Molly Thurston (peaches).*



Open Consultation Time

Submit your questions in advance to conference@certifiedorganic.bc.ca. *With Rochelle Eisen and Susan Smith. Bring your questions and conundrums to be discussed with these two industry experts.*

Diatomaceous Earth

Learn about regulations, and how to use it to improve outcomes. *Presented by Barry Baker.*

Integrated Seed Saving Practices for Farm Business

An overview of the various benefits and challenges of seed saving. *Presented by Mel Sylvestre, UBC Farm.*

LAND STEWARDSHIP SESSIONS

Indigenous Land Use

Presented by Sonny McHalsie, Stó:lō Research & Resource Management Centre, Dawn Morrison, Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

Land Linking Workshop

Tools and tips to get new entrants onto land from an agricultural succession perspective. *Presented by Sara Dent, Young Agrarians, Richard Enns, Compass Law Group.*

Restoration Agriculture: Permaculture Potential and Challenges in Temperate Climates

Scaling up: from herb spirals to long-term sustainable (or regenerative) agriculture. *Presented by Susan Cousineau.*

Connecting to Community through Farm to School

New ideas, tools and resources to engage in BC's Farm to School movement and connect with local schools. *Presented by Vanessa Perrodou, Provincial Manager, Farm to School BC.*

A Conversation with Sara Dent

Young Agrarians Coordinator and Upcoming COABC Keynote Speaker

By Marilee Peters

Sara Dent, the coordinator of Young Agrarians, will be the keynote speaker at the upcoming COABC annual conference. Recently, she shared her thoughts with the Organic Grower about what keeps her motivated in her work, what she's looking forward to most at the 2015 gathering and (spoiler alert!) a look ahead at her conference keynote.

Q: Tell us about your role at Young Agrarians.

A: Essentially, I'm the "Girl-Friday-who-does-everything." I take care of fundraising, program development and coordination, plan and host special events, facilitate workshops, run communications on various social media platforms, and try to think strategically about how to track our impacts and evaluate our success. It's kind of crazy but I love it: the variety and the pace really keeps me on top of my game at all times.

Q: What's your top tip for new or prospective farmers?

A: Work on as many farms as you can that do the kind of farming you're interested in. It's a good way to figure out what type of farming suits you best, and how you want to run your farm, especially if you're coming from a non-farming background. Don't be afraid to ask about the business aspect of the operation. If the owner is willing to share, it is important to learn how to make farming financially viable.

I'd also tell new farmers to trust themselves and their ideas, not to be daunted by someone saying, "you can't do it." Just because it didn't work for that person, doesn't mean you may not be able to figure out some new way to make it work. Keep looking around for solutions and ideas that fit your situation. We have to innovate these days in different contexts to try and make all the pieces fit together. Doing your research will pay off when it comes to actually starting your own farm.

Q: What will you be focusing on in your keynote address?



Credit: Darcy Smith

“ [I tell] new farmers to... keep looking around for solutions and ideas that fit your situation. We have to innovate these days in different contexts to try and make all the pieces fit together.”

A: I'll be talking about the growing movement of young farmers, and how exciting it is to be part of the networking and community building that's taking place. Young Agrarians is looking at the needs and challenges of young farmers now and in the future. We



Mix it up! Photos from Young Agrarians Farmer Mixers in 4 areas. Clockwise from top left: Vancouver Island, March, 2014; Okanagan, 2013; Muskoka, Ontario, October, 2014 and Kootenays, Winter, 2014.

need to continue developing programs and policies that support young people to choose farming. There is so much innovation going on, as young farmers struggle to get established, and YA helps to build out the connections that make it possible.

Q: What are you looking forward to most at this year's conference?

A: It's so nerdy, but I'm really looking forward to the land linking workshop, and learning more about the succession planning arrangements that can help to make land available to young farmers.

Q: Do you have a favourite memory from past COABC conferences?

A: I always love listening to the farmer-to-farmer sharing that happens at the COABC conferences. Someone will say, "well, a few years ago we tried this, and it's really worked for us" and a big "aahh" will go up from the room and you know that six other people are going to rush home and give it a try. Those exchanges are the real heart of the COABC conference experience. 🌱

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To Ash or Not to Ash?

Soil Fertility Series: Part I



Measuring soil pH levels. Credit: Marjorie Harris

The growth in cogeneration energy facilities means there is more wood ash available on the market. What should you consider when evaluating whether to use wood ash as a soil amendment?

By Marjorie Harris

Mother earth's food web depends on healthy, nutrient-rich soil. The food chain grows from the soil up: as plants accumulate nutrients from the soil, it must be replenished or it will become depleted, and the food web will soon suffer the effects of a lack of nutrients moving up.

The concept and practice of building soil fertility is the foundation of organic agriculture. It is estimated that every acre of healthy soil contains about two tons of living organisms. As an organic farmer, developing an intimate, hands-on knowledge of the soil on your land is the first step to creating a soil management plan that will ensure you maintain optimal conditions for fertile soil.

What's In that Dirt?

Among the many diagnostic tools available to the farmer is the pH of the soil. You need to know: does your soil have a high pH or low pH? The pH level in your soil can influence the balance of the soil microorganisms and change the availability of nutrients. Soil with a pH level below 7.0 is considered acidic, while soil with a pH level above 7.0 is classified as alkaline.

Vast areas of western Canada are covered by naturally occurring acidic soils reclaimed from previously forested land. The process of cropping year to year removes calcium and magnesium from the soil, leading to more acidic conditions.

Other processes that contribute to soil acidification include nitrogen fertilizers, plant root and organism respiration, decomposition of organic matter and the direct absorption of atmospheric sulphur and carbon dioxide. As the pH level of the soil becomes progressively lower, the productivity of acid-sensitive crops like alfalfa and sweet clover is reduced.

Liming products from natural sources (check the Permitted Substances List for examples) are generally used to correct the pH back to a neutral 7.0 on the pH scale. At pH 7.0, more nutrients become available to the growing plant.

Increasing the pH of the soil may also help to increase the decomposition rate of organic matter in the soil (such as compost) by soil bacteria. This will speed the rate of nutrient release to the plants.

Wood Ash as a Liming Agent

In recent years, increasingly large amounts of waste bark, sawdust and yard waste (often referred to as “hog fuel”) are being burned in forestry facilities in BC and Alberta to generate steam, electricity and heat. As a result, hundreds of thousands of tons of wood ash are dumped into landfills.

This has sparked interest in wood ash as an agricultural amendment. Wood ash retains many of the nutrients originally absorbed from the soil by the growing trees, and in comparison to other liming agents, wood ash contains significant amounts of phosphorus, calcium, magnesium and potassium. However, during burning the trees’ original content of nitrogen and sulfur is mostly lost to the atmosphere, leaving ash deficient in these elements.

Wood Ash Regulations

The Permitted Substances List states that wood ash used as a liming product must not contain any prohibited substances. If you source wood ash from a forestry or Cogen (cogeneration) facility, you must obtain documentation declaring that only clean wood waste is being burnt in the facility, and not old railway ties or brominated pellets. This documentation will be required on the organic inputs list given to your Certifying Body.

In addition, if you are considering purchasing large amounts of off-farm wood ash, a thorough understanding of the *Guidelines for the Beneficial Use of Fertilizing Residuals* is recommended for its application, use and storage. The guidelines are referenced to determine if a fertilizing residual (FR) is subject to an authorization certificate, and to establish the appropriate standards and criteria for resource management.

Some points from the *Guidelines for the Beneficial Use of Fertilizing Residuals*:

- A Fertilizer Residue (FR) Project form will need to be submitted for off-farm sourced wood ash intended for agricultural application. The Environmental Management Act - Waste Discharge Regulation governs wood ash distribution in agriculture and the application process is regulated under “The of Practice for Soil Amendments.” A Soil Amendment Plan must be approved by the appropriate government official through the Ministry of Environment before the wood ash is delivered to the farm site.



Ed Basile, SSOL Gardens, Kamloops. Credit: Marjorie Harris

What’s In a Name? Ash vs. Flyash

Wood ash produced on an industrial scale is often referred to as flyash. Historically, flyash referred to ash produced through coal burning, but in recent years the term has been expanded to include biomass burnt in high-temperature furnaces up to 2000F.

Know Your Ash

CAN/CGSB 32.311 Permitted Substances List (PSL) Soil Amendments and Crop Nutrition

- Ash: Ash from plant and animal sources only. Ash from burning minerals, manure, coloured paper, plastics or other synthetic substances is prohibited.
- Ash obtained from off-farm sources shall not exceed the limits (category C1) for acceptable levels (mg/kg) of arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper, lead and mercury specified in the *Guidelines for the Beneficial Use of Fertilizing Residuals*, published by the Quebec Ministère du Développement durable, de l’Environnement et des Parcs, Direction du milieu rural.
- Shall not cause buildup of heavy metals in soil over repeated applications

- The ash must be stockpiled more than 15 m from any ditch, watercourse or lake.
- The stockpiling may be longer than 6 months; however, from the 1st to the 15th of December, the amount stockpiled must not exceed 100 m³...
- Ashes and other pulverulent materials must be moistened or otherwise treated to prevent their dissemination by the wind.
- Wood ashes are considered liming amendments by the BNQ, rather than mineral fertilizers, although ashes also have fertilizing properties.

dioxides of calcium, magnesium, potassium and some sodium and these molecules are utilized similarly by the soil as hydrated lime. The percentage of limestone (CCE) in wood ash is estimated to be about equivalent to 65% for calculating agricultural applications. 

Marjorie Harris, BSc, IOIA V.O., A.Ag, lives in Armstrong, BC, and works locally and internationally. She can be reached at marjorieharris@telus.net.

How Much Ash Is Enough?

Wood ash can be spread evenly over land and needs to be incorporated into the soil quickly after application to prevent the dust from blowing away or rain causing a runoff. Wood ash is a skin irritant and caustic, so proper protective equipment should be worn to protect the health of the applicator. Wood ash should be kept at least 50 meters from water supplies to prevent contamination.

To calculate how much wood ash to apply per acre, the formula for agricultural lime Calcitic limestone (CaCO₃) is used. Wood ash contains oxides and hy-

For Further Information

Guidelines for the Beneficial Use of Fertilising Residuals

 www.mddelcc.gouv.qc.ca/matieres/mat_res-en/fertilisantes/critere/guide-mrf.pdf

Soil amendment” as defined in the Code of Practice for Soil Amendments

 www.bcac.bc.ca/sites/bcac.localhost/files/Ardcorp_Program_Documents/EFP/EFP%20Reference%20Guide%20Chapter%206.pdf





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It Takes a Seed BC Eco Seed Co-op



BC Eco Seed co-op producer members and steering committee at the BC Seed Gathering, November 2014 Credit: Sara Dent

All organic food starts with a seed. But is the seed you're using organic? And was it produced in your region? Thanks to a newly launched BC seed co-op, you may soon be able to answer "yes!" to both those questions.

By Jen Cody and Jesse Howardson

“Seed is the foundation of a grower’s business, whether they are growing vegetables or producing seed,” notes Mel Sylvestre, a coordinator at UBC farm and one of the co-founders of BC’s first organic seed co-operative. “I got into growing seed because I want to be able to select seeds that work in my growing region and work in an organic system.”

In BC and across Canada, organic growers are required to source organic seed whenever possible. But in practice, BC’s organic producers purchase organic seed only 65% of the time, and very little of this seed is produced in the province. In BC, an increasing number of seed producers and advocates are recognizing that this gap is an opportunity.

As more and more growers get turned on to regionally adapted organic seed, innovative models that pool resources are needed to meet the rising demand and strengthen the regional seed

system through collaboration. At the recent BC Seeds bi-annual conference, a group of seed producers committed to increasing the quality and quantity of the province’s organic seed launched the BC Eco Seed Co-op.

The Co-op will support growers to make the leap to regional organic seed by providing collective marketing, education, training, and equipment sharing to alleviate some of the high overhead costs associated with seed production. Already, a number of regions throughout BC are represented in the Co-op, including West Kootenays, Sunshine Coast, Vancouver Island, Fraser Valley, Shuswap, and Fraser Canyon.

“I am excited by the BC Eco Seed Co-op because I can see the potential for seed growers collaborating with market growers to determine which varieties meet the needs of a market,” says Patrick Steiner, owner of Stellar Seeds. “Seeds that produce vegetables to meet a mar-

Growing Seed Sovereignty for Canadian Farmers

Most of the seed bought today by BC growers is imported from the US and elsewhere. Yet as recently as the 1940s BC was known internationally as a supplier of seed.

Until fairly recently, seed systems were local by necessity and tradition. Then, in just a few years, rapid consolidation of the seed industry eroded thousands of years of seed as a publicly held heritage. Organic plant-breeder John Navazio explains that “seed was truly in the process of becoming just another external input like fertilizer and pesticides,” rather than an integral part of the whole farm system.

One legacy of the consolidation in the seed industry is the proliferation of hybrid (classically bred by two parent lines) varieties, developed to meet the demands of a market driven largely by conventional growers. Seed companies benefit from developing the hybrids, because growers need to continue to purchase seed in order to guarantee the qualities of seed that are successful for their business.

With more investment in open-pollinated varieties, we would see wider availability of varieties, qualities, and quantity of seed that organic growers need. We would also see more growers able to increase their seed self-sufficiency and reduce their reliance on big agriculture for seed.

In a recently-released survey from the Canadian Organic Trade Association, organic growers cited a lack of available varieties, quantities, quality and higher cost as the chief deterrents to buying organic seed. The same is likely true for regional seed.

Jen Cody, a co-founder of the BC Eco Seed Co-op, sees contributing to seed self-sufficiency and sovereignty as a project the Co-op can take on. “In the future, BC Eco Seed Co-op will be able to respond to the need for a good selection of open-pollinated varieties to meet the performance needs of organic farmers, while maintaining public access, adaptability and diversity,” she says. “This is very important to the state of seed saving in Canada today, with Bill C-18 threatening the right of farmers to save seed.”

The launch of the Co-op comes at a key moment for this innovative form of seed enterprise in BC. In a difficult economic and political climate, working together to achieve a vision of seed sovereignty is essential. The members of the Co-op are committed to working collaboratively to ensure a future where open-pollinated seed varieties are held in the public domain, and farmers have the right to save seed for themselves and others.

ket that is becoming more and more discerning about flavour, texture, and nutrient density, while simultaneously selecting for high yields and disease resistance.”

The Co-op members are committed seed stewards – some with over 25 years experience. Yet even with this breadth of experience, building a province-wide co-operative is no small feat. Our members run or manage full-time seed/farm businesses, spread throughout BC. A significant step towards building capacity for the Co-op was garnering funds in order to build momentum and carry the work forward into the busy farm season. Funding from the Bauta Family Initiative on Canadian Seed Security galvanized the incorporation of the Co-op.

Working Collaboratively for the Future

An important aspect of the Co-op’s plan to scale up seed production in BC is to avoid competition with regional seed producers, many of whom are already providing thousands of customers with quality packet sales. Because the current market pays more for organic seed in individual packets than in bulk amounts, the challenge for BC seed growers will be to find a financial model that supports producing seed for a wider market that includes bulk sales.

In fact, BC seed companies see the benefit of participation in the Co-op, with three companies already members. Collective marketing, pooling resources and seeds for bulk sales, and promotion of individual member seed business-

es are some of the strategies being investigated as ways to work cooperatively.

For the founding members of the Co-op there is the deep commitment to passing on the story with the seed. Knowing where our seed comes from, how it is grown, and who is stewarding the seed is central to a re-localized seed system. Part of the shift towards a re-localized seed system is reinstating local knowledge around seed. This will require widespread collaboration with long-time seed stewards, plant breeders, home gardeners, researchers and farmers, and will mean practicing on-farm experimentation and innovation.

Sowing Opportunities: How You Can Get Involved

All BC organic growers can support seed sovereignty by buying organic and regionally produced seed, becoming informed and learning more about seed growing and seed issues. Consider increasing the amount of seed you produce for your farm business.

If you are a grower who is producing seed, we are actively recruiting core producer members to contribute to the process of developing a co-operative from the ground up. To inquire about becoming a producer member, please email the seed Co-operative at bcseedCo-op@gmail.com.

For more information about our history and to see the results of our Seed Producer's survey (coming early 2015), visit our current webpage at <http://www.bcseeds.org/bc-ecoseeds-Co-op/>

Over the next year, BC Eco Seed Co-operative will continue to increase our presence both online and at various events around the province. In 2015, we'll be launching a new website.

The BC Eco Seed Co-operative will be facilitating a workshop at the 2015 COABC conference in Chillwack: The Benefits of Integrating Seed Saving Practices into your Farm Business.

Our members want to chat and collaborate with you, so don't hesitate to get in touch! We are happy to be involved in your community and

help increase your capacity to grow quality seed and to learn more about your seed needs. 

Jesse Howardson has been learning and growing on organic farms for the past 6 years. She deepens her knowledge and passion for contributing to a grassroots, resilient local seed system through collaboration on many seed-focused projects.

Jen Cody is an active coordinator and founder of Growing Opportunities Farm Community Cooperative. Jen participates as a member of the community farm project advisory council, chairs the Center Island Seed Savers Network and is thrilled and energized by her participation in this movement!

 www.bcseeds.org/bc-ecoseeds-coop



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Choosing the Right Farm Dog



A good herder. A watchdog. A hard worker. Protection from predators. Loyal. Gentle. A playmate. A companion. If your farm dog wish list seems unattainable, you need to know about English Shepherds.

By Marilee Peters, with Zbigniew Wierzbicki

Once a fixture in farmyards across the eastern United States and Canada, English Shepherds are intelligent, high-energy dogs with a strong work ethic. Also known as American Farmer Collies, a century ago the English Shepherd was the small farmer's indispensable best friend, keeping livestock in order, scaring off predators, even keeping a watchful eye on young children while parents were busy with farm chores.

But as small diverse family farms gradually became as rare as those proverbial hen's teeth, so did this hard-working, affectionate breed of dogs.

Now, with small family farms experiencing a rebirth, farmers are rediscovering the merits of English Shepherds and the breed is emerging from decades of obscurity. Here in BC one small organic farm has led the way in re-introducing English Shepherds among farmers.

A few years ago, Aileen Collings and Zbigniew Wierzbicki of Elderberry Lane Farm and Vineyard on Lasqueti Island decided they needed a good herding dog, to help keep their rarebreed mulefoot hogs in order. They started researching, looking for a breed fast enough, smart enough, and determined enough to

round up their herd of mulefoots (notorious escapees known for their ability to break down fences) but also gentle enough to trust with young animals, and companionable.

Eventually they discovered English Shepherds, only to realize that there were no BC breeders. They knew they wanted to locate a dog from a working farm, not from a backyard breeder raising dogs intended as urban pets. So they put themselves on a list with a breeder in Antelope, Oregon, and they waited.

Before too long, they got the call that a puppy from the latest litter was on its way to them. And just like that, Lassa entered their lives. A female, Lassa is a beautiful sable with white markings. From her earliest days at Elderberry Lane Farm, Lassa eagerly took on the job of livestock manager. Zbigniew recalls doing the rounds of the farm with Lassa when she was still a puppy (a twice-daily habit that both Zbigniew and Lassa never break), when one of the cows decided to let the dog know what she thought of her.

“She was a nasty cow who didn’t like dogs,” recalls Zbigniew. “And she snorted and spit to scare off Lassa. I heard this ruckus and I looked over, and there was little Lassa, not scared at all, just sitting and growling at the cow. And do you know, that cow backed down.

Just a few weeks later, Lassa was chasing the cow and herding her.”

Although Zbigniew made it a habit early on to take Lassa along every time he did the rounds of the farm, she had little formal training. “These dogs are so intelligent, they learn just by spending time with you, and by watching you,” he explains. “Even as a puppy, Lassa knew what to do on the farm, instinctively. I think she reads my mind sometimes.”

Part of knowing the job is realizing when they’re not needed, and because English Shepherds are non-aggressive, they’re able to “turn off” when the job at hand is completed. Zbigniew has seen his dogs sleeping companionably next to the livestock that they have just herded, although at the same time keeping a watchful eye on the sky for birds of prey that could be a threat to their charges. “If I’m not around, they’re able to make decisions about what needs to happen,” says Zbigniew.

As Lassa approached maturity, Zbigniew and Aileen decided to acquire another dog, a male. Their intention had always been to breed the dogs, and having learned just how invaluable the English Shepherd was as a farm dog, they wanted to make sure that other farmers in BC had a chance to experience these won-



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Fast Facts on the English Shepherd

Size: range in height from 19 - 24", weight between 40 - 70 pounds.

Notable Qualities: Intelligent, Reserved, Territorial, Devoted, and Bossy.

History: Descended from Shepherds' dogs of England and southern Scotland

Is An English Shepherd Right for You?: The breed organization, the English Shepherd Club, cautions that you should identify your needs and expectations to be sure that an English Shepherd is the right choice. "English Shepherds thrive in an environment with clear, consistent rules and a confident leader. Lacking those, an English Shepherd just might decide to take over and run things himself!"

Source: English Shepherd Club

 www.englishshepherd.org

derful dogs. Max, their next dog, came from working farm in Texas (its an indication of how rare the English Shepherd is that Zbigniew and Aileen were forced to go so far afield to find a dog unrelated to Lassa), and before long there was a litter of puppies at Elderberry Farm.

Those puppies found homes on organic family farms across Vancouver Island and the central Interior. "It was our idea to send them to organic farms where they'd be with animals and children," says Zbigniew. After the birth, Lassa had to be spayed due to complications, so there are no plans for a further litter, but Zbigniew and Aileen hope that some of the farmers



who received puppies will continue breeding English Shepherds.

Asked to sum up the qualities of the English Shepherd, Zbigniew says simply, "They have a natural instinct for herding, and they respond very intelligently to praise. And they're the most gentle dogs on earth." 

Zbigniew Wierzbicki and Aileen Collings own Elderberry Lane Farm and Vineyard on Lasqueti Island, Certified Organic and Bio-dynamic (Demeter) Certified by the Bio-dynamic Agriculture Society of BC.

They raise heritage breed cattle, goats, and rare heritage breed Mulefoot pigs, all overseen by Lassa and Max, their rare breed English Shepherd herding farm dogs.



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Farmland Protection in Northern BC

How Strong Is It?



A UNBC study looks at local land use policies in BC's Zone 2, asking "is 'flexible' just another word for toothless?"

By David Connell

The public's interest in protecting British Columbia's agricultural lands rises to the occasion when people believe that farmland is under threat. That's been the case over the past year, starting with the early signals that the provincial government was planning changes to the Agricultural Land Commission. Details of Bill 24 to amend the Agricultural Land Commission Act followed, along with extended debates in the legislature, public controversy, farmer protests, and eventually the passage of Bill 24, on May 29, 2014.

One significant -- and controversial -- outcome of Bill 24 was the division of the province's agricultural land into two zones: the agricultural centres of the province that cover Vancouver Island, the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley, and the Okanagan (Zone 1) -- and the rest of the province (Zone 2).

This division of the land base amounts to a two-tiered system in which the lands in Zone 2 are deemed less important when it comes to protecting the land base from non-farm uses. Those who opposed the two-zone

system quickly pointed out that Zone 2 lands included the significant majority of the province's productive agricultural lands. Perhaps never before has so much attention been given to these 'other' agricultural lands.

In a media release on March 27, 2014, the provincial government stated that, in Zone 2 lands, "where growing seasons are shorter and there are lower value crops, ALC decisions will now, in addition to the original principle, include additional considerations to provide farmers with more flexibility to support their farming operations."

This need for more "flexible" policy was a tenet of the changes, based on the premise that Zone 2 agricultural lands do not suffer from the same pressures as Zone 1 lands. It is true in that Zone 1 lands are under far greater pressure from urban development, including residential, commercial, and industrial developments. But this is not to say that Zone 2 lands do not suffer from the pressures of non-farm uses. The types of pressures are just different.



Above: Kimi Hendess of Sweet Digz Farm in Richmond and Rebecca Kneen of Crannog Ales voice their opposition to Bill 24 with “felfies” - a social media campaign of selfies taken by farmers in support of the ALR.

Pressure Points: What Are the Issues Facing Zone 2 Lands?

The reality is that the demands on agricultural land use planning in northern BC are diverse, and certainly different from the pressures on the agricultural land base in the more populated areas of the province. Although the biggest concerns relate to natural resource development, there are other issues. Foreign ownership of land is one issue that planners and farmers in Central Interior BC have been talking about for years: about people from other countries purchasing viable farmland, planting trees, and then claiming carbon credits.

Residents of the Robson Valley provide another perspective on the state of agricultural land use in Zone 2. In contrast to the pressures on farmland from increasing populations, the concerns about the land base in the Robson Valley stems from job losses in the forestry sector. As a result of the losses, the population in the Valley has declined over the past ten years and rural schools have closed. Now, residents of the Robson Valley are talking about attracting people to the Valley, and there is a specific interest in attracting bringing new farmers into the area.

The problem is, current agricultural land use policies restrict opportunities for small-lot agriculture, which is often most suitable for new farmers. The underlying concern, from a farmland protection perspective, is that subdividing farmland into small lots contributes directly to fragmentation of the land base.

Zone 2 lands are subject to far more pressure from natural resource developments: oil and gas, mining, and hydroelectric dams. The recent environmental approval for the Site C dam is a telling example of such pressure. But because most agricultural land use policies are designed to protect farmland from the pressures of urban development, many local governments that do not have to deal with problems associated with urban development put less emphasis on farmland protection.

On the surface, this response seems reasonable.

But it creates a unique, and potentially problematic, situation in the newly created Zone 2 lands in BC: now, more than ever before, it will be up to local governments to decide for themselves the extent to which they want to protect their farmland.

It is in this context that a study out of the University of Northern British Columbia is currently underway to assess the state of agricultural land use planning in northern BC, including the Cariboo Regional District and parts north. Is it possible to accommodate “flexibility” without compromising the strength of the overall policy? Or must farmland protection policies be weakened in order to accommodate flexibility? These are the kinds of questions that the UNBC study will try to answer.

We’ll be examining agricultural land use planning documents, and assessing the political context that is influencing agricultural land use decisions, focusing on the strength of our ability to protect the agricultural land base on its own merit.

The provincial project started in May, 2014, with final reports expected to be published in the spring of 2015. The results will be of benefit to land use decision makers, planning practitioners and policy-makers at local and provincial levels of government, to non-governmental organisations, industry groups, farmer organisations, farmers, and the general public.

The study in northern BC is related to a comprehensive, three-year national study of agricultural land use planning that gives researchers the opportunity to compare policies in different areas. For example, the strength of BC’s farmland protection policies in northeastern BC will be compared with the policies in northwestern Alberta. Agricultural lands in both areas are under pressure from oil and gas exploration and development, with similar concerns about fragmentation and degradation of farmland.

In BC, the land base has been under the protection of the ALC Act and the ALR for more than forty years (administered through a Delegation Agreement with the Oil and Gas Commission), as well as regional strategic land use planning. In contrast, Alberta has no provincial legislation protecting agricultural lands and is only now starting their first-ever regional land use plans, (no plan has been developed for the northwestern region at this time).

This situation means that researchers have an opportunity to examine two very similar land bases, with

Find Out More

For more information about this project please contact Dr. David J. Connell, Associate Professor, University of Northern British Columbia, at david.connell@unbc.ca or by 250-960-5835. Information about the national project is available at:

 blogs.unbc.ca/agplanning

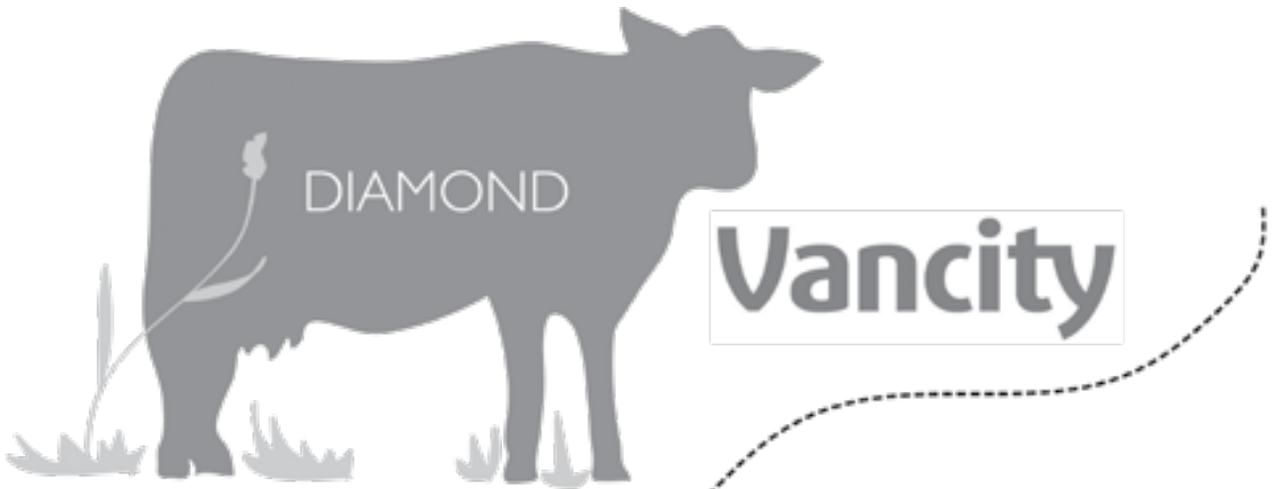
similar uses, but two contrasting farmland protection policies and practices. Thus, the studies can explore whether BC’s policies have resulted in any significant difference in protection between the two provinces..

Since the creation of the ALR it has always been recognised that simply protecting the land base was not sufficient as an isolated policy; we must also promote farming as the highest and best use of these lands, and support the economic development of the agricultural sector. Nevertheless, in many ways the land base is the most important factor, especially in BC where we have such a finite amount of farmland. Under these conditions, if we are not protecting agricultural land for farming, investments in farming activities can be undermined, if not wasted. 

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Dr. David Connell is an Associate Professor of Environmental Planning at the University of Northern British Columbia. His topics of particular interest include local food systems, agricultural planning, and communal living. Recent research projects include estimating the socio-economic benefits of farmers markets; strengthening farmers markets through strategic business planning; developing a regional food hub in central interior BC; evaluation of agricultural area plans in BC.

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