

Opinion: If we want to eat, we need to support our farmers

Agricultural Land Reserve's protection is essential for B.C.'s continued sustainability

BY WENDY HOLM, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 2, 2014



Lenore Newman, Harold Steves and Ray Galawan, left to right, attend a forum on proposed changes for B.C.'s Agricultural Land Reserve in Vancouver on March 2. Proposed changes could make for a very different future for the ALR.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen, PNG

If awards were given out for worst public process ever, Victoria would surely be in the running for its beneath-the-radar, dog-days-of-August approach to public discussion of regulatory changes that will gravely affect B.C.'s Agricultural Land Reserve.

For most, the four-week, 11-question consultation process that concluded Aug. 22 — consisting of a handful of closed-door meetings and an online, optionally anonymous survey — was over before they knew it had even begun.

And poor process is only the beginning.

As respected professionals with decades of experience in agricultural land use planning in this

province, we believe these regulatory changes, if enacted, would gravely compromise the ability of the Agricultural Land Commission to protect the public interest in B.C.'s ALR, arguably one of the finest systems of farmland protection in North America.

While the discussion questions appear simple, their implications are anything but. Seven changes have been proposed, such as the alteration of on-farm content requirements for storage, packing, processing and retail facilities. Breweries, distilleries and meaderies could be included, lounges serving alcohol could be expanded, and there could be changes in the sale of off-farm B.C.-produced spirits. The construction of anaerobic digesters and energy cogeneration facilities are being considered, as are unspecified clarifications of agri-tourism guidelines.

The remaining four questions relate to relaxation of subdivision, minimum parcel size and permitted non-farm uses in the newly created Zone 2: the Kootenays, Interior and North regions.

We have three major concerns, each of which will have a critical impact on the future productive capacity of B.C.'s food lands.

Our first concern is that these changes would take the ALC out of the picture when it comes to evaluating many non-farm activities within the ALR. The system we have today works well: applications are analyzed on a case-by-case basis by knowledgeable professionals who take into consideration local conditions, the continuity of the farm and the protection and enhancement of the farmland in perpetuity. Replacing today's objective review process with a hands-off, cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all regulatory approach would have a detrimental impact on the integrity of the ALR and would, in effect, eliminate the ALR in Zone 2 because neither the ALC nor local government would be able to adequately regulate non-farm uses.

Our second concern relates to the impact of the Zone 2-specific changes on B.C.'s productive grasslands and 85 per cent of our fertile, class 1-4 farmland. Opening non-farm uses and giving landowners the right to subdivide down to quarter-section parcels (below commercial viability and in direct contradiction to ALC's recent experience in the region) will result in escalating land prices and permanent farmland alienation.

Our third concern relates to the apparent disconnection between the proposed regulatory changes and other existing legislation. The legacy of 41 years of vision, solid planning and hard work has created a productive relationship between the ALC Act, the Farm Practices Protection Act and the B.C. Assessment Act. These laws support the development of local government OCPs, zoning and bylaws, which support good farm practices. It is impossible to contemplate putting all of this at risk. (For our thoughts on how the proposed regulatory changes will affect local governments, see our Aug. 28 correspondence to the Union of BC Municipalities, posted at wendyholm.ca/c.UBCM.ALR.8.28.14.pdf)

Ninety-five per cent of British Columbians support the ALR, and for good reason. Only five per cent of our land base can produce food, and only one per cent is high-capability (class 1-3) soils.

It doesn't take a wizard to see the future. Already, B.C. imports more than half its food. Climate change and water shortages threaten traditional supply regions. Add to this population growth and higher

transportation costs and there is only one conclusion a thinking person can reach: food prices have nowhere to go but higher.

If we want healthy and resilient communities, we must support our existing farmers, encourage our future farmers, and protect and enhance our foodland commons in perpetuity.

Time is fast running out. Insiders expect the regulations to be passed in the fall sitting of the B.C. legislature.

With the regulatory response period already closed, what can concerned British Columbians do?

At this late date, we believe the best option is for communities and local governments to demand Victoria reopen this process to transparent and informed consultation. Fortunately, the coming UBCM meetings in Whistler (from Sept. 22-26) provide a perfect opportunity to move this forward.

Make the phone call. Tell your mayor and council you hope the regulatory changes Victoria has in mind for the ALR will be first on the lips and minds of every delegate at this year's UBCM sessions. Tell them professionals would be happy to provide expert counsel to those deliberations. Refer them to this column.

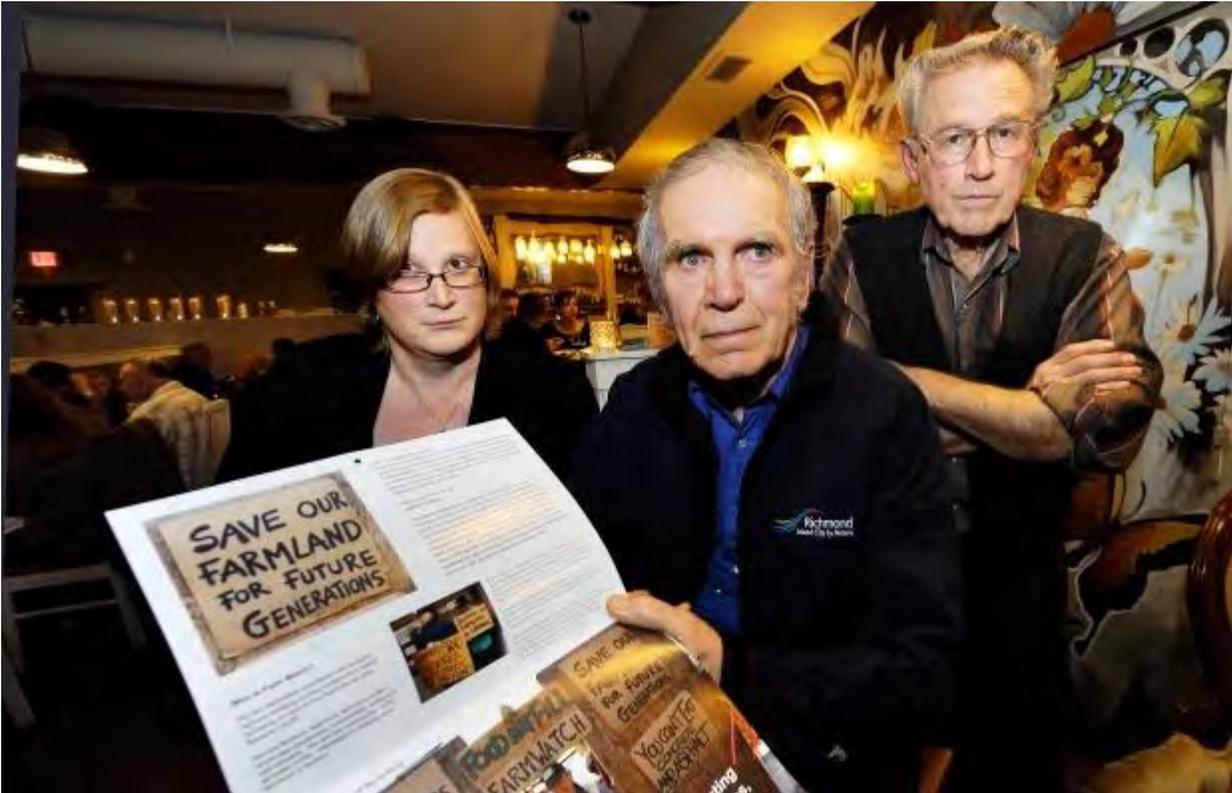
Tell them this isn't our first rodeo.

Wendy Holm is a professional agrologist and former president of the B.C. Institute of Agrologists. Other signatories to this article are: B.C. professional agrologists Jim LeMaistre, Mark Robbins, Eveline Woltersen and Kathleen Zimmerman, and retired agrologists Ron Bertrand, Larry Bomford, Art Bomke and Niels Holbek.

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[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



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