



THE CHOICE BETWEEN A SCHOLARSHIP AND A PUPPY...

WE NEED TO rethink the way we 'think about' farmland

On January 14th, this columnist appears before the Joint Federal-Provincial Review Panel to examine the environmental impact of the proposed BC Peace River Site C Dam.

As a Professional Agrologist, I've been engaged by the Peace River Environment Association to defend the public interest in 31,528 acres of Class 1-7 that will be flooded or directly impacted if the dam goes ahead. Of these, 10,592 acres are class 1-5 soils, 9,430 acres of which will be flooded and 1,162 acres of which lie within "flood, stability and landslide-generated wave impacts lines"...(See Smarties for Dummies – Land Lost to the Site C Dam, holmonpolicy.blogspot.ca)

Privileged to enjoy the only Class One climate north of Prince George – indeed the only Class One climate in the top two thirds of BC – the rich alluvial bottom lands of the BC's Peace River valley can grow the same crops as are produced in the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley.

According to BC Hydro's own studies back in the 1980s, Peace River soils about to be flooded for power are capable of producing fresh vegetables for over one million people. And BC is deficient in vegetable production – 57 per cent of our consumption of vegetables that can be grown here is imported from California, Mexico and beyond. Not much different in Alberta and Manitoba I suspect...what better use of this land than human nutrition?

In the case of Site C, the public policy issue comes down to: What's more important? Power for export today or nutrition for communities tomorrow?

The "choose today; tomorrow is out of sight" approach can be forgiven if the subject is a child and the choice – let's say – is between a university scholarship and a puppy. The decision is predictable: the puppy is now; the scholarship is too far in the future to be valued. But when the choice is between growing food or houses, the decision of a developer – predictable for the same reasons – is of far greater concern. For the child, the choices are not exclusive: both the puppy and the education are possible. For the productive lands that produce our food, development is forever. A wise parent will influence the choice by providing the puppy today and preserving the scholarship for tomorrow. Ditto government.

As populations increase and fossil fuels deplete, food shortages will become a problem not only for "poor" nations but for "rich nations" as well. When today's affordable food becomes tomorrow's economically rationed resource, communities with no farmland will be the clear losers as a new game of "find the food" spins out of control in a wildly cycling global economy. Those who can pay the most will. Those who cannot will go hungry.

Already, over 120 global funds dedicated solely to the buy-up of farmland are scouring the globe. Canada is the number one target because our farmland is considered cheap, our infrastructure solid and our economy stable. This all happens under the radar: a stranger walks down the lane with a sack of money and a promise that no one has to move. Twenty-five years of policy abuse by Ottawa and the provinces has burdened Canada's farmers with high debt, low

income and little hope for the future. No wonder the offers are being accepted. Such transactions go unmonitored.

This silent erosion of natural capital begs the question: how will future generations feed themselves?

I suspect we need to rethink the way we "think about" farmland.

Land capable of producing food is part of our natural capital – in effect, a "commons". Created by nature – not human enterprise – and in limited supply, it is our responsibility to add to this capital, not deplete it. The farmer as steward lives off its interest (crops) and invests in good farm management practices to ensure the legacy grows for future community needs. This is what resilience is all about.

In 2010, an estimate of the public amenity benefits and ecological goods provided by farmland in Metro Vancouver asked residents what they were willing to pay to preserve farmland for future generations. Ten times today's (already inflated by speculation) market they replied. According to the study, such results are typical when natural capital is valued by the public.

Today, across Canada, farmland is under increasing pressure for conversion to uses (housing, industry, energy) deemed "more important" by investors (who see extraction of natural capital as their right) and governments (who lacking good ideas of their own, are seduced by the promise of jobs).

Now is the time to craft new mechanisms (legal, accounting, regulatory) to ensure appropriate valuation, protection and stewardship of our natural capital resources. In perpetuity. **D**

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