



30 September, 2010

The State of Agricultural Land Management in BC

What is the Agricultural Land Reserve and how does it support provincial food security?

Our food security in British Columbia depends on the availability of productive farmland that is not only protected from loss, degradation, and development, but is also available to active farmers. Across British Columbia, however, industrial, urban, recreational, and agricultural land users have for decades been locked into political and economic battles over our scarce land resources.

In the early 1970's the provincial government of BC finally addressed concerns about rapid urban expansion onto the province's best quality farmland by introducing the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) program, a provincial zone in which agriculture is recognized as the priority use. Within the zone, farming is encouraged and non-agricultural uses are controlled or prohibited. The ALR covers approximately 4.7 million hectares across BC, and includes private and public lands that may be farmed, forested or vacant land. Essentially, the ALR comprises those lands within BC that have the potential for agricultural production.

The program is administered by the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC), an independent body of the provincial government whose three-fold mandate is to preserve agricultural land, to encourage farming on agricultural land in collaboration with other communities of interest, and to encourage other bodies to accommodate farm use of agricultural land in their plans, bylaws, and policies¹. At its inception, the ALC initially consisted of a province-wide group of twelve Commissioners, but has now been reorganized into six, three-person, regional panels that are overseen by the Chair of the Commission². The primary role of the ALC today is to make decisions regarding applications to exclude, subdivide, or otherwise put to non-farm use parcels of ALR land. Each year, more than 500 applications are received from First Nations communities, private landowners, and local governments.

Challenges Facing the ALR

Today, in the face of peak oil, climate change, food-related health concerns, and a growing understanding of the importance of a secure local food supply, the importance of protecting our agricultural land base has never been greater, and thus the value of the agricultural land reserve program is considered intrinsic to many people in the province. Since its inception, the ALR program has certainly slowed the rate at which agricultural land has been lost in the province. Many high profile cases of exclusion approval in urban-rural fringe areas highlight the reality that the reserve is still being eroded.

¹ BC Agricultural Land Commission Website, 2009

² Ibid.



The Society Promoting Environmental Conservation

Healthy cities are our future



Some of the most memorable fights over ALR land have played out over the Spetifore Lands in Delta (also known as Southlands), the Six Mile Ranch near Kamloops, Fantasy Gardens and Terra Nova in Richmond, and Colony Farms in Coquitlam. Instances such as these call into question the program's adequacy as a farmland conservation strategy, and have led analysts to point to three main issues that impede the effectiveness of the ALR legislation today.

Firstly, there are serious concerns related to the structure of the program's administrative body, which, as indicated above, now operates under a decentralized, regional panel model. While this ensures more attention is paid to regional needs and concerns, it has proven unusual for these regional panels to recognize that farmland preservation is in the interest of the food security of the entire province. As a result, an unprecedented amount of valuable agricultural land has been excluded from the ALR since the change to the panel structure³.

A second, very much related concern is the seeming lack of discrepancy between qualitative and quantitative measures of the reserve. While statistics reported by the ALC itself show that the total acreage of reserve land has in fact increased since it was first created, a closer look reveals that its composition is greatly changed. Whereas lands removed are generally of the highest agricultural potential (Class 1 or 2 on the Canada Land Inventory scale), those added are of lower quality and only able to grow a limited range of crops⁴.

Finally, a more overarching concern is that the economic conditions under which the ALR currently operates are much different than those evident some thirty years ago. A recent report on the ALR by BC's Auditor General highlights the reality that the commission is now operating under a severely constrained budget that limits its ability to ensure compliance with the ALR legislation, collect up-to-date information on the BC agriculture sector and use of land included in the ALR, make informed decisions with regard to applications to exclude, subdivide, or put ALR parcels to non-farm use, and to fulfill its mandate to promote farming in the province⁵. In addition to a lack of funds to enable the ALC to promote and enhance agriculture, rising input costs and marginal sales revenue continue to make agriculture only marginally profitable for farmers today. Both the ability of the ALR program to promote farming, and farm families own ability to protect themselves, are thus in jeopardy.

What can we do?

Although the Agricultural Land Reserve program is administered by a provincial commission which may seem out of reach to individual citizens, there are steps that you can take to help protect our agricultural lands from development and support the farmers who are growing food for the region.

³ Campbell, 2006, 5; Cavendish-Palmer, 2008, 51

⁴ Campbell, 2006, 5; Cavendish-Palmer, 2008, 51

⁵ Office of the Auditor General, Doyle, 2010



The Society Promoting Environmental Conservation

Healthy cities are our future



- *Inform yourself about the origins of your food and buy local, organic food where feasible.* One of the most effective ways of supporting local farmers who are enhancing the food security of our region is by patronizing their business. By purchasing from local farmers who employ environmentally sensitive agricultural practices (including biodynamic and organic agriculture), you can help make it more economically viable for local farmers to grow food for the local, rather than export, market. This increases the likelihood that their land will remain in food production rather than being lost to development pressure.
- *In municipal and provincial elections, ask the candidates in your riding what their stance is on the ALR program in particular and the protection of agricultural land in general.* Although the ALR is a provincially administered program, municipal mayor's and councils have significant influence on the land exclusion application process as all applications from landowners for removal or subdivision of their ALR properties are first heard by city planning departments before being forwarded to the ALC with recommendations. In our political system, local-level politicians are some of the most easily contacted decision makers so understanding whether or not they prioritize food security and the protection of agricultural lands is not only important, it's relatively easy.
- *Stay up-to-date and weigh in on news about ALR exclusion applications with organizations such as SPEC and the Farmland Defense League of BC (see "further resources," below)*
- *Consider supporting SPEC in its efforts to promote the protection of our agricultural lands.* SPEC operates in dialogue with multiple organizations, researchers and post-secondary institutions to ensure we promote informed, realistic and balanced policy decisions to create both an environmentally and economically sound food system.

Further resources:

Website of the Agricultural Land Commission <http://www.alc.gov.bc.ca/>

Farmland Defense League of BC – website <http://farmlanddefenceleague.org/> and facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=24207596928>

Smart Growth BC – webpage on agricultural land issues with links to various academic and popular papers on the ALR

<http://www.smartgrowth.bc.ca/AboutUs/Issues/AgriculturalLand/tabid/111/Default.aspx>

Contact information if you want to let politicians know your opinion about the ALR:

- Look up the contact information for the MLA of your riding here: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/mla/index.htm>
- Agriculture Minister Steve Thomson: steve.thomson.mla@leg.bc.ca
- ALC head office: ALCBurnaby@Victoria1.gov.bc.ca



The Society Promoting Environmental Conservation

Healthy cities are our future



Sources:

Cavendish-Palmer, Hannah A.. "Planting Strong Boundaries: Urban Growth, Farmland Preservation, and British Columbia's Agricultural Land Reserve." Thesis for Masters in Public Policy, Simon Fraser University (2008): 74p.

Campbell, Charles . "Forever Farmland: Reshaping the Agricultural Land Reserve for the 21st Century." David Suzuki Foundation (2006): 37p.

British Columbia Provincial Agricultural Land Commission Website. "About the Commission". 2009. Retrieved from: http://www.alc.gov.bc.ca/commission/alc_main.htm.

Doyle, John. "Audit of the Agricultural Land Commission." Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia (2010). Retrieved from: http://www.bcauditor.com/files/publications/2010/report_5/report/OAGBC_AgriculturalLandCommission_Final.pdf

