



BRITISH COLUMBIA CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION

Representing the Beef Cattle Industry of British Columbia

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SUBMISSION to the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) Review Committee

INTRODUCTION

The BC Cattlemen's Association appreciates the opportunity to meet with the Review Committee to discuss cattlemen's ideas about how to improve the Agricultural Land Reserve for all landowners, particularly those involved in livestock production.

In 2007, at the request of our membership, the BC Cattlemen's Association began work to identify areas of concern regarding the Land Reserve and its governance by the Commission. During this time, the Association worked to identify opportunities to strengthen the Province's commitment to farmers/ranchers and thereby ensuring the future of British Columbia's food producing lands.

The BC Cattlemen's Association membership is supportive of the Land Reserve's principle of ensuring our farming future by protecting food producing lands. This support is conditional upon the governance of the Land Reserve being improved and the increased flexibility for diversification within agriculture.

The Association has identified twenty-nine recommendations as items requiring attention of the Land Commission, the Province, and Local Government. In the interests of time, today we would like to focus our attention on a short-list of priority items that require immediate attention. We would appreciate the opportunity at a future date to explain the rationale for each of our twenty-nine recommendations.

THE CORNERSTONES

As ranchers, we firmly believe in the principle of the Reserve but see the false sense of security it provides. It is our opinion that food security can only be achieved when a combination of factors, or cornerstones, are met with equal priority; Land, water and profitable farmers & ranchers.

Access to food producing lands, coupled with access to adequate water supplies coupled with skilled ranchers and farmers to work the land for a profit. Equal consideration must be given to the people, land and water in order to maximize British Columbia's food productivity, now and in the future.

For almost four decades, the Land Reserve has been overseeing the practices on the land alone. Managing one cornerstone in isolation of other factors does not serve the needs of the farming community nor will it serve the needs of British Columbian's in the long run.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- That the Agricultural Land Commission amend their mandate to give equal consideration to protecting agricultural land for future generation of farmers, ensuring that food producing lands have adequate access to the water necessary to produce food, and that the regulatory framework encourages profitability of farmers & ranchers.

PROFITABILITY

The lack of profitability in agriculture is the single most threat on the Agricultural Land Reserve and to the continuous food supply. The best way to maintain the Land Reserve and secure our food supply would be to have profitable farms and ranches. Society has become urbanized and as a result, we have fewer people choosing to become farmers and ranchers. If these businesses were able to be financially successful, then more people would want to practice agriculture and would remain in the industry.

The Land Reserve has been a responsibility shouldered entirely by the agricultural landowners. The Association feels the burden of the Land Reserve must be cost-shared with society. Programs are needed to discourage fragmentation of ranchlands, including those not within the ALR.

A recent article about the farm income crisis explained it best, "Farming without profit is gardening." Farmers and ranchers are business people; self-sustaining, and driven to succeed. Over the last decade, the ranching industry has experienced escalating farm debt, erosion of equity and eventual liquidation of assets. Without profitability, landowners are resorting to selling all or part of the ranch for development, oil and gas, recreation properties, ranchettes, and even to conservation organizations which may restrict the farming.

This sustained period of negligible farm income has had a profound impact on sustainability of agriculture. Those ranchers that struggle through and remain in business, no longer have the cash flow necessary to reinvest in the ranch, particularly infrastructure (fences, machinery, buildings, livestock waterers etc). As ranchers leave the industry, the productivity of the Land Reserve is greatly diminished. Land that lays dormant does not help achieve the Province's food security needs and is also vulnerable to noxious weed infestations. Agriculture's ability to be profitable is critical, and can no longer be separated from the management of farmland.

The Agricultural Land Commission can no longer be removed from the financial challenges that farmers and ranchers face. The commission should be advising senior levels of government of the financial health of the agricultural sectors and the risks this poses for the integrity of the Land Reserve. The Land Commission should also assume some responsibility in ensuring that appropriate programs are in place to support and encourage farming/ranching. Additionally the Commission and Local Governments should provide agricultural landowners the flexibility necessary to carry out activities that do not conflict or impede agricultural interests. This would provide farmers and ranchers with the ability to diversify their business and derive income to support their farming activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Recognize the Profitability Factor -- The Agricultural Land Commission can no longer be removed from the financial challenges that farmers and ranchers face. The commission should advise senior levels of government of the financial health of the agricultural sectors and the risks this poses for the integrity of the Land Reserve and recommend assistance programs be put in place to support and encourage farming/ranching.

- Agricultural Land Tax/Fund -- Keeping agricultural land in production is the primary goal, however in situations where exclusions are approved, the Agricultural Land Commission should establish a tax on land removed from the Land Reserve that would be reinvested in the remaining agriculture in that region. This tax could fund an Ecological Goods & Services payments program that would recognize the contribution of all farmers/ranchers.
- Development Credits -- A development credits systems should be implemented in British Columbia. The purchase of these development credits either through covenants or other conservation tools must not exclude agriculture as the primary land use.
- Diversifying Farm Opportunities -- Bonafide farms that wish to diversify their business should be allowed to convert a portion of their farm property (a maximum limit needs to be established ... 1%? 5%? 10%?) to an alternate land use. This income could support continued farm/ranching activities.
- Non-Farm Uses -- The list of approved non-farm uses for lands within the Land Reserve should be eliminated. In its place, any non-farm use that is not detrimental to the water resources or the environment, is reversible and thereby could allow at any time in the future, farming activities to be carried out on that parcel, should be approved by the Land Commission. Guidelines will be needed to ensure activities (i.e., carbon sequestration & afforestation) do not impede the arability of that parcel of land for agricultural purposes and must require that the land be returned to a state that is conducive for farming or ranching.

COMMUNITY PLANNING

Minimizing the impact on the agriculture community from urban and rural development should be a stated objective of the Commission. The Association believes the effects of sprawl can be mitigated with better community development and coordinated land use planning. Rural sprawl is a serious threat to agricultural land. With expanding rural and urban centres, the Land Commission must work with Local Governments to identify lands on the edges of the community and assess whether they should be earmarked for future development. The goal of this exercise would be to prevent satellite communities from becoming established in rural areas.

All levels of government and the Agricultural Land Commission must consider the present and future water needs for agriculture and ensure agriculture's water needs are given priority.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Controlling Urban & Rural Sprawl --The Agricultural Land Commission should ensure that density level plans are in place and met before considering an application to expand the municipal boundary onto Agricultural Land Reserve lands. The Land Commission and Local Governments must work together to minimize the impact of satellite communities on farming/ranching operations.
- Planning Requirements -- The Agricultural Land Commission must require that Local Governments have an approved Official Community Plan that sets density levels, an Agriculture Area Plan and a Water Plan in place before considering any applications.
- Ag Advisory Committees -- The Agricultural Land Commission should discuss any applications with the local agricultural advisory committee, where none exists the local farm organizations and/or local cattlemen's association should be consulted.

GOVERNANCE OF THE RESERVE

Our member survey indicated that governance of the Land Reserve was an issue requiring attention. Only 20% of our survey respondents felt that the Agricultural Land Commission was effective at achieving their mission *"Preserve agricultural land and encourage and enable farm businesses throughout British Columbia."* Survey respondents also provided written comments indicating that the Commission focused solely on preserving agricultural land rather than achieve the full mission of encouraging and enabling farm businesses.

Our survey also indicated that cattle producers are uncomfortable with the Delegation of Authority Agreements the Commission has entered into with Regional Districts and the Oil & Gas Commission. The application review process is neither adequate nor transparent and often times perceived to be a rubber stamp. Farming/ranching activities must be given priority over other industries on lands within the Land Reserve.

The Auditor General's report identified the need to provide additional staff and resources for the Agricultural Land Commission to adequately fulfill their mandate including enforcement activities. The BC Cattlemen's Association agrees that this may be necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Farming/ranching activities must be given priority over other industries on lands within the Land Reserve.
- That the Agricultural Land Commission amend their mandate to give equal consideration to protecting agricultural land for future generation of farmers, ensuring that food producing lands have adequate access to the water necessary to produce food, and that the regulatory framework encourages profitability of farmers & ranchers.
- Annually review existing Delegation of Authority agreements to better protect agricultural land and landowner's rights. This review must involve an open discussion with all interested agricultural landowners, and must be fully transparent and meaningful.
- The overall governance of the Land Reserve could be improved by ensuring the Chair and Regional Commissioners have significant agricultural expertise and knowledge.

OFFER AN EXIT STRATEGY

Like any other business, farmers and ranchers eventually retire. Many retiring farmers/ranchers are not able to exit the industry without compromising the viability of the operation through fragmentation and/or removing the land from production.

We have a problem that requires immediate attention. The farming and ranching population is aging, and those who do not have family to inherit the ranch feel trapped by the Land Reserve. They can no longer work the land, whether it is because of finances or are physically unable to do such labour intensive work any longer, yet they cannot afford to stop farming/ranching. Removing the land from production would result in a loss of farm status and an increase in taxes. Landowners in this situation are in a conundrum. They do not wish to see the farm/ranch that they've invested so much of themselves into go dormant yet they cannot continue to run their farming/ranching business.

The preservation of farmland and rangeland is very important to ranchers, farmers, society and the Provincial government alike. However, more forethought must be given to address the problem of landowners feeling trapped by the ALR. The high cost of starting a farm, difficulty securing financing for a large farm property, coupled with low profitability has caused many new ranchers to be unable to pursue ranching. Current agricultural landowners are left with little or no option for retirement.

The BC Cattlemen's Association believes that the Province has a responsibility to work with the agricultural community on resolving this crisis. Without intervention by the Province, this farm/ranchland will be sold off title, by title and become fragmented thereby reducing the overall productive capacity of the land.

In order to protect the remaining land within the Land Reserve, the Land Commission and the Province should assist those ranchers that wish to retire.

One suggestion is that the Province would begin purchasing the development rights for lands within the Land Reserve. This would allow the current landowner the funds for a decent retirement, without compromising the productivity of the farm/ranch.

The Provincial government should offer landowners the ability to purchase (one-time-only) the development rights of lands within the Agricultural Land Reserve. This would allow a cash payment to the landowner for the development rights. The ranch could then be sold at productive value and financed over time. These development rights could then be banked and sold to developers that remove lands from the Land Reserve, including expropriated lands (e.g., Site C Dam). Profits from the sale of development rights could be returned to the proposed ALR Fund.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- That the Agricultural Land Commission and the Provincial Government consult with the agricultural community about the need to establish retirement options that do not compromise the productivity of lands within the Land Reserve.
- That the Province purchases development rights/credits from agricultural landowners that are wishing to exit the farming/ranching industry.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

The BC Cattlemen's Association applauds the Minister, the chair and the Review Committee for having the fortitude and foresight to take a look at operations and be open to hearing new ideas for conducting future business.

We take our role in conveying cattle producers' views and ideas to you very seriously. Our goal is to improve the Agricultural Land Reserve for the present generation of ranching families who are responsible for the stewardship of these lands and for future generations who need to see that there is hope for a sustainable future on these lands.

Respectfully submitted to the ALR Review Committee on September 10, 2010 by the Executive Committee of the BC Cattlemen's Association, on behalf of our Board of Directors and 1,170 rancher members.