

THE B.C. LAND COMMISSION

KEEPING THE OPTIONS OPEN

The need to preserve B.C.'s agricultural land for farm use

We tend to forget that the daily preoccupation of most of mankind is obtaining sufficient food to maintain life. Many countries are engaged in a desperate race to keep food supplies growing at least as fast as their populations. Each year there are 80 million more mouths to feed on this earth — an increase in population equivalent to that of the greater Vancouver area *every five days*.

In a world that suffers from malnutrition and starvation, unabated population growth can only

increase the pressures on land capable of producing food. The world is facing a major protein shortage because traditional food-exporting countries such as Canada are becoming less and less able to meet the soaring demand. If British Columbia is to satisfy its domestic needs and maintain the option of a trading position in the food markets of the world, our valuable agricultural land must be safeguarded.

Over-abundance and under-population: A myth?

British Columbia is one of Canada's have-not provinces in terms of agricultural land. Over 90% of the land area is mountainous and non-arable — beautiful to behold but agriculturally unproductive. Only 5% of the land area is suitable for production of food crops. And if only the land west of the Rockies is considered, this figure drops to 3%. In fact, in the entire province of British Columbia, less than 1% of the land area has Class 1 agricultural capability and only 1/100 of 1% is suitable for the production of tree fruits.

Our agriculturally productive areas are located at the lower elevations, which are also the centres of urban population — centres where the impact of private

actions and the pressures of urban expansion are the greatest. By 1972, erosion of B.C.'s agricultural land by urban sprawl had reached 15,000 acres per year. Most of this was in the lower Fraser Valley and the Okanagan Valley, areas of prime agricultural capability. Even from a purely conservation viewpoint, some form of action had to be taken to inhibit urban sprawl and protect our precious agricultural land resource. The Land Commission Act was passed primarily for this purpose.

In many parts of the province, agricultural land also has high capability for forestry, recreation, or wildlife and its loss to urbanization therefore is doubly significant — for other resource uses as well as for food production.

THE LAND COMMISSION ACT

The Land Commission Act, although primarily intended to preserve agricultural lands for farm use, also contains provisions related to other land uses. For example, it is concerned with the preservation of greenbelt lands in and around urban areas, the preservation of landbanks suitable for urban or industrial development, and the establishment of park-land for recreational purposes.

The essential significance of the Land Commission Act is that its passage marks the coming of age of agriculture in British Columbia. Food production is now an industry of urgent concern to all citizens of a province whose farm resources must be husbanded as never before.

The Land Commission, which consists of five members, was appointed by the Lieutenant Governor-in-Council in May, 1973, and reports to the Legislature through the Minister of Agriculture.

The preservation of agricultural land

The Land Commission is empowered to preserve agricultural land for farm use by means of the establishment of protective zones. These zones are shown on maps commonly known as Agricultural Land Reserve Plans. Within a designated Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), regulations define the type of land-use activity that may take place.

The Commission also has the authority to purchase agricultural land and to hold, manage, lease or sell purchased land at its discretion. These powers are necessary in order that the Commission may act positively to encourage farming and preserve agricultural land for future generations.

The preservation of greenbelt land

In general terms, a 'greenbelt' is an area of permanent open space within or surrounding a town or city. Its main purpose is to provide undisturbed natural landscape for the interest and enjoyment of the urban population.

Typical greenbelt would include treed areas in the heart of the community, pedestrian and cycling paths alongside waterways, and natural viewpoints overlooking the city.

The Land Commission is not empowered to designate land for greenbelt without first purchasing the land.

The Commission's objective is to encourage the preservation of natural greenbelt lands by local and regional governments.

The preservation of landbank land

The Land Commission is also empowered to purchase, either on its own or jointly with local and regional governments, certain lands that have desirable qualities for urban or industrial development. It is expected that the Commission will play an increasingly important role in "landbanking" as one means of directing urban development away from farmlands and preserving agricultural lands for agricultural use.

The preservation of parkland

The Land Commission also has a role to play in encouraging the establishment of lands in parkland reserves for recreational purposes. This function is intended to complement and not compete with the activities of Provincial and Municipal park authorities. As in the case of greenbelt and urban landbank land, the Commission has no powers to designate parkland unless the land has been purchased or received as a gift.

Agricultural Land Reserve Plans

During its first year of operation, the Commission co-ordinated the efforts of the Regional Districts in the task of preparing Agricultural Land Reserve Plans for the Province. While this task was being accomplished, Orders-in-Council were in effect limiting the subdivision and change of use of agricultural land.

An Agricultural Land Reserve is best described as a form of zoning that protects the land from the encroachment of non-agricultural development and limits the use of land within the Reserve to agricultural and other uses that do not diminish the

capability of the land to produce crops.

The establishment of the Land Commission was in response to a clear need for shared decision-making in the land planning process. It was only through the spirit of co-operation which emerged from the joint efforts of the general public and local, regional and provincial governments that the ALR's were established in so short a period of time. The Commission will continue to encourage such participation in the ongoing administration of the ALR.

How the agricultural land reserves were established

First, the twenty-eight Regional Districts of the Province, which include 139 municipalities, were requested to prepare Agricultural Land Reserve Plans for their regions, keeping in mind the intent of the Act and considering local needs and problems. To assist the regional governments, the B.C. Department of Agriculture provided 'suggested ALR maps' based on Canada Land Inventory and other relevant data. Then, information meetings and public hearings were held in each Regional District so that British Columbians could actively participate in drawing the ALR in their areas.

When the plans were agreed upon at the Regional District level, they were submitted to the Land Commission for review. In some cases, changes to the plans were recommended.

Finally, the amended plans were presented to Cabinet through the Environment and Land Use Committee for refinement and approval. After Cabinet approval, the Land Commission then officially 'designated' the Agricultural Land Reserve Plan for each Regional District. At this point, the Orders-in-Council were lifted and the provisions of the Act applied.

Land-use regulations

The establishment of Agricultural Land Reserve boundaries was only the first step in the Commission's task. Subsequently, Land-Use Regulations have been drawn up to define the activities that may take place within a designated ALR.

Normal agricultural activities are permitted without reference to the Land Commission. Certain non-farm activities are permitted within a designated ALR,

provided the activity is considered by the Commission to be compatible with the intent of the Act. The primary criterion for compatibility is that the physical capability of the land to produce agricultural crops is not permanently damaged by the proposed non-farm use — that is, that the land-use can be changed should the land be needed for food production in the future.

Application procedures

Once each Agricultural Land Reserve Plan was designated, certain rights of application and appeal under the Land Commission Act came into effect. Applications will normally be one or more of the following types:

An application for inclusion within a designated ALR (Sections 33-36 of B.C. Regulation 494/74)

An application to subdivide or use land within a

designated ALR for non-farm purposes (Section 11(4) of the Act)

An application for exclusion from a designated ALR (Section 9(2) of the Act)

Applications under the Land Commission Act are submitted through the appropriate Regional Districts in order to ensure local and regional participation.

Land Acquisition

Agricultural Land

Although the Commission is not actively seeking to purchase agricultural land, it has nevertheless acquired a number of properties. Some of these purchases have been of farms close to expanding urban areas; others have involved land in conflict with other resource uses such as wildlife and recreation. In these cases, the Commission has arranged for management studies to determine the best use of the land.

Through its farmland purchases the Land Commission also hopes to assist farmers who wish to retire but are unable to sell their farms on the open market. These

farms will be offered to young farmers on a lease arrangement to offset the high cost of establishing new farms.

Once the land has been purchased, and the land-use studies completed, arrangements for tenancy are made by the Property Management Division of the Department of Agriculture in co-operation with other resource departments. Arrangements may involve consolidation with other land parcels or leasing the property as a single farm unit or as an addition to a neighbouring farm.

The Land Commission's future role

The Land Commission has been described as the coordinator of activity at the boundaries where town and country meet. The Commission anticipates that much of its work will deal with those land-use conflicts that arise where growing communities impinge upon the neighbouring farmland.

The encouragement of family farming is one of the main objectives of the Land Commission Act. In the administration of Agricultural Land Reserves, the Commission will give careful attention to the impact of the regulations on the operations of the active farmer, rancher and orchardist, especially as they affect the family agriculturalist. For example, the Land Commission expects to help farmers adjust property lines and in some cases assemble land (with the co-operation of their neighbours) in order to achieve more viable production units.

The general policy regarding land owned by the Commission will be to place the properties in the hands of farm families who may not have the extensive resources necessary to purchase a farm outright. A career lease is envisioned, with the hope that the operation will be passed on to the next generation of the family in similar tenure.

The Commission also believes that one of the most effective ways of protecting the farming community is by helping cities solve problems which in the past were handled by the naive expedient of encroaching more and more upon the countryside. Techniques to encourage the efficient use of land within towns,

methods of projecting patterns of future growth, and other innovative strategies will be publicized to assist regional and municipal decision-makers in planning land use within their jurisdictions. In some instances, direct participation with local government on a partnership basis may be necessary to resolve problems for the mutual benefit of town and country. The Vernon spray irrigation project, designed to divert that city's sewage effluent from Okanagan Lake to otherwise arid lands, is an example of this type of co-operation.

On the broader scale, co-operation with the various departments of the Provincial Government and with the Environment and Land Use Committee of Cabinet will continue to be an important function of the Land Commission.

The Agricultural Land Reserve may be viewed in the long haul as a fail-safe device to conserve countryside for food production. However, much of the land in the Agricultural Land Reserves is suitable for integrated use without compromising the land's food production capability. The identification of such uses will be an important aspect of the work to be done in the future. In some cases, as in high capability forest, wildlife or recreation lands, integration will be essential for better ecological land use planning.

The mandate of the Land Commission is both constructive and extensive. Resolution of land-use conflicts which endanger the material well-being and life style of British Columbians will be the central concern of the Commission.

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