

Thought for Food

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This Land is Your Land

Gail Southall

In British Columbia, we are blessed with some of the finest land Mother Nature created. Whether you fancy majestic mountain vistas, rolling grasslands, dripping rain forest, or arid desert scenes, Mother's artistic hand is surely visible in B.C. But all of our gorgeous scenery comes with a tremendous responsibility.

Seventy-five percent of our provincial landscape is mountainous, and 60% is forested. Somewhere between five and eight percent of the earth beneath our feet is considered habitable. That means us people and all of our domestic trappings must squeeze ourselves onto a mere fraction of B.C.'s vast domain. We demand that this smidgen of earth support our ever-increasing housing, economic, agricultural, industrial, transportation, and social systems. With all these pressures, careful management of our valuable land is paramount, and, with an expanding population and a diminishing agricultural land base, perhaps no more so than in any sphere that competes with agriculture.

Anyone who has lived in a community will have witnessed development swallowing up farmland. Unless you're perched on the side of a mountain somewhere, your house/apartment is likely covering a former farm. Housing developments, highways, office buildings, golf courses, airports, shopping malls – many a hectare of prime agricultural property lies beneath human 'improvements'.

Urban sprawl and decimation of farmland led the provincial government to pass the Land Commission Act in 1973 and later form the Agricultural Land Reserve (A.L.R.) to help stop productive land from disappearing under the paver's wheel. One of only three such protective bodies in North America, the Land Commission claims to defend food-producing land from development, but is it really working, and is it enough?

On the surface one will see that the Reserve currently holds about 50,000 hectares more than the original 4.7 million designated when it was formed. But a closer examination will show that changes to land distribution within the A.L.R. have resulted in a net loss of more than 350 square kilometres of prime farmland in the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island, Okanagan Valley, and our own Central Kootenay locale, as less productive land in B.C.'s north has replaced producing land in the south. In the 34 years of the A.L.R.'s existence, over 8,000 hectares (20,000 acres) of agricultural land in the Central Kootenays has been lost. Creston's fruitful soil is a jewel in this area of steep valleys and rocky slopes. We are the grub basket of the Kootenays and our farmland is critical for regional food production, yet evidence would suggest it is endangered. Creston is growing, and with new houses spreading like invasive weeds, the A.L.R. doesn't appear to be protecting our agricultural interests at all.

But however flawed, the A.L.R. system is currently the only custodial instrument we have, and it can only work, and will only change for the better if we take active responsibility for it.

What can you do? If you believe in the importance of protecting essential local agricultural land:

- Support local growers. Give farmers an economic reason to continue farming. This may be the single most important thing you can do to ensure your children have arable land on which to grow their food.
- Learn more about the A.L.R. Visit their web site: www.alc.gov.bc.ca.
- Pay attention to newspaper notices of A.L.R. exclusion applications and express your

objections in writing. These notices can be convoluted, so don't be afraid to contact the Commission to ask for clarification.

- Engage farmers and town folk alike in conversations about preserving agricultural land and work to implement suggestions for positive change.
- Support development policies that reserve farmland for farming. The A.L.R. takes precedence over, but does not replace local and regional land use legislation.
- Back political candidates that make agriculture and local food security top priorities. This is an election year and a great opportunity to make your voice heard.
- If you own land in the A.L.R. and are not using it for farming purposes, think about how that may impact your community's access to food. Land can be leased to others wanting to farm.
- If you're making application to remove land from the Reserve, please reconsider. We need all the farmland we can get. As Mark Twain so wisely stated, "they're not making it anymore."

Gail Southall is Coordinator for the Creston Valley Food Action Coalition, a group of people dedicated to better feeding our community using local resources. For more information visit www.crestonfarmfresh.ca.