**Hansard April 7, 2014**

**PROTECTION OF FARMLAND AND AGRICULTURAL LAND RESERVE**

N. Simons: Two farmers from the Kootenays, Erin Harris, a dairy farmer, and Oliver Egan, who grows vegetables and fruits at his Edible Acres farm, stood on the steps of the Legislature this morning with a clear message: government should keep its hands off the agricultural land reserve. They showed that they can grow much more than just hay, as the minister stated.

My question is to the Minister Responsible for Core Review: will he listen and heed the advice of these Kootenay farmers?

Hon. S. Thomson: I'm going to be careful in my response here and maybe seek guidance, to start, because I think the member opposite's question was specifically related to legislation that is before the House, and the member opposite knows that that legislation is before the House. So I seek your guidance in terms of responding specifically, because it was in relation to the Agricultural Land Commission, agricultural land reserve, and changes to that, which are before the House.

Madame Speaker: As members are aware, only a general substance matter can be discussed, not the contents of a bill. I would caution the member.

N. Simons: I appreciate it, Madame Speaker. Maybe that's the answer about the ALC legislation, but affordable agricultural land in British Columbia is critically important to young farmers like Erin and Oliver. If it's opened up for development, it'll become unaffordable. Will the minister responsible listen to farmers and to 85 percent of the population of this province and make sure we protect our agricultural land?

Hon. S. Thomson: Again, that's exactly what we're doing with the changes. I have to be careful again, because I've just made the comments about responding directly to legislation, so I'll have to be careful.

What's important to recognize is that there is more land in the ALR today than there was in 1974. Between 2001 and 2007 over 48,000 hectares were added to the ALR. Approximately 8,000 hectares were approved for exclusion. In the 1990s the members opposite removed over 20,000 hectares from the ALR.

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**CONSULTATION ON CHANGES TO AGRICULTURAL LAND RESERVE**

N. Simons: When the minister for the core review was first questioned about his plans to undermine agriculture in British Columbia, he made a promise: "The public will have an opportunity to provide input to core review as part of the…committee on Finance and Government Services budget consultations."

[1030]

Yet the Finance Committee was never empowered to consult on changes to the agricultural land reserve, nor has there been any other formal consultation process about this government's plans to destroy agricultural land.

My question is to the Minister Responsible for Core Review. Will he recommit today to consult with British Columbians before making changes to how we protect agricultural land?

Hon. S. Thomson: On this side of the House we've been clear in the process that, firstly, the independent decision-making process of the Land Commission will be preserved going forward. Secondly, we've been clear that in terms of developing policy, developing the regulations that will assist on this foundation of the changes, there will be full consultation with local government, with the industry, with the Land Commission in the process. We've been clear on that process.

The changes are designed to help support agriculture, to move agriculture forward, and we will continue to consult with the industry in that process.

Madame Speaker: Powell River–Sunshine Coast on a supplemental.

N. Simons: The last time he was asked about whether he would consult before undermining the protection of agricultural land, the minister said: "Mea culpa." For those who don't understand, he said: "That's my fault." Well, mea culpa isn't good enough.

British Columbians want to be heard before B.C.'s farmland is lost forever. So will the minister do the right thing and consult with the people of British Columbia before making changes to how we protect agricultural land?

Hon. S. Thomson: Again, I'll reinforce that the communication that we have committed to is that we will consult fully with the industry, consult fully with the commission, consult fully with local government in the development of the policies and regulations that help support the legislation.

The response from industry has been clear. B.C. Cattlemen's Association said: "We look forward to the changes. We look forward to the consultation. We agree that this provides opportunities to enhance the agriculture industry, and we look forward to consultation on regulations." B.C. Fruit Growers Association, same message.

We are committed to continuing to consult with industry. We will consult, and we have communicated that fully in all of our communication around the introduction of the legislation.

**MEAT INDUSTRY REGULATIONS AND AVAILABILITY OF MEAT-PROCESSING LICENCES**

L. Popham: If the Minister Responsible for Core Review had consulted with farmers, one of the things he might have heard about: that it's not the ALR that's made life difficult for farming in B.C.; it's the B.C. Liberals. That's right. A perfect example is the changes to meat regulations that were brought in, in 2004.

Interjections.

Madame Speaker: Order. The members will come to order.

Continue.

L. Popham: A perfect example is the changes to meat regulations that were brought in by the B.C. Liberals in 2004. Those changes shut down meat processors across the province, making it uneconomic for many farmers and processors to stay in business. After promising last year to start reversing some of those changes by giving licences to farmers in the North Okanagan to produce meat for local consumption, not a single new licence has been issued in that region.

My question is to the Minister Responsible for Core Review. If this government wants to help farmers, if they really want to help farmers, why don't they deliver on their promise to allow class E meat-processing licences in the North Okanagan?

Hon. S. Thomson: Again, what we've heard…. The Minister of Agriculture has toured the province listening to farmers, getting their…. The member for Peace River North has consulted, has met with industry, and we're hearing clearly from industry. The B.C. Greenhouse Growers' Association supports government's core review objective and looks forward to the results of the consultation in great detail in regulations. That's the Greenhouse Growers' Association.

[1035]

Rhonda Driediger, chair of the B.C. Agriculture Council: "We look forward to these changes. The act is old, hasn't really been updated for a long period of time."

We're looking forward to the consultations. Again, we are committed to consult. I think it's a little ironic to be receiving this question from the member opposite.

Interjections.

Madame Speaker: Order.

Hon. S. Thomson: They've been talking about the Agricultural Land Commission. It's very ironic, when you're talking about protection of the Agricultural Land Commission.... The member opposite, the member for Saanich North, was involved in a land commission decision and spoke in a meeting about smart farming. Here's her response from that meeting: "It's a difficult choice that I've made, and I've probably disappointed some folks in the audience. As far as Saanich as a community is concerned, I think it's a better direction to have a subdivision."

**GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR AGRICULTURE**

L. Popham: Well, only this government would consider that a zinger. I guess they support having a feedlot in the middle of a subdivision. A real zinger. This government is completely out of touch with agriculture in B.C. — completely.

The B.C. Cattlemen's Association recently…

Interjections.

Madame Speaker: Members, Members. The Chair needs to hear the answer and the question.

Please proceed.

L. Popham: …noted: "When the agricultural land reserve was implemented in 1974, there were programs in place that supported the farming community and encouraged agriculture. Those programs have disappeared under the B.C. Liberals, like Buy B.C. In fact, for the last decade we've had the lowest support for agriculture in this country."

If the minister of the core review actually consulted widely with farmers, he would understand that the way to support farmers is to support farming, not to make it easier to build a jail or a motel on farmland.

Again, to the Minister Responsible for Core Review, why doesn't he work to support B.C.'s food producers instead of attacking agricultural lands?

Hon. S. Thomson: I know the member opposite's passion for the industry, but it is, again, a little ironic to be receiving these questions from somebody who supported subdivision within the agricultural land reserve. Better for the community? Those are difficult decisions, I know.

But again, in reference to B.C. Cattlemen's Association, here's Kevin Boon of the B.C. Cattlemen's Association: "We have been asking for some flexibility in some of the land uses in the ALR that would better accommodate moving forward and enhancing the agricultural community."

That's what we are hearing from the agricultural community. They support the changes we're doing. That's why we have also provided in the budget an additional $4 million in funding support for the agricultural land reserve: so that they can do the important work they do in this province.