

News Release: 27 March 2014

Core Review ALC Changes Threaten BC's Food Security Agriculture Advocates Respond to Bill 24

Victoria—Like forests and water, our foodlands are a public trust. We must retain agricultural land for a food secure future.

Changes to the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) and Commission (ALC) announced today in the Legislature refer to regional differences, fertile land and benefits for BC farmers. A common interpretation of the “fertile land” and two-zone emphasis from the Premier and Ministers is the Okanagan and Fraser Valleys and southern Vancouver Island as deserving of more protection and the rest of the province less. What this does is to weaken protection for 90 per cent of lands currently in the ALR.

Less than five percent of BC's total land base is suitable for agriculture and protected in the Agricultural Land Reserve. “This is potentially disastrous: it could leave just one-half of one per cent (0.5%) of BC's land base with the present standard of farmland protection,” said Brent Mansfield, Co-Chair of the BC Food Systems Network (BCFSN). “That is not enough!”

It also raises questions about agricultural lands in BC's north. “We already know that we will have to look north for food production as growing seasons change due to the effects of climate change, such as the present drought in California,” said Co-chair Abra Brynne. “Almost half of the ALR lands are in the north, with 72 per cent of BC's remaining prime quality lands in the Peace River Valley. Future generations cannot afford to lose that food growing potential. There is just too much at stake.”

The ALR has earned broad public support over 40 years. As well as preserving farmland, it is a key element of regional and community planning, defining urban containment boundaries. “Cannibalizing the ALR – with two zones and six regional panels - is no way to improve it,” said Brynne. She questioned the process that led to these changes. “The Core Review process promised but did not deliver public consultation,” she stated. “Farm and food organizations, local governments and the Agricultural Land Commission itself have not had a proper opportunity for dialogue.”

Given the importance of access to both land and water for food production, this rushed and unusual process is a marked contrast to the public consultation process undertaken before introduction of the Water Sustainability Act. “We understand that farmers need more flexibility from the farmland protection system for succession planning and for agriculture-related ancillary businesses,” said Mansfield. “But the methods need more discussion.”

The BCFSN calls on the government to set this Bill aside and consult properly with stakeholders and the public on any changes to the Agricultural Land Commission Act, just as it did with the Water Sustainability Act. Let's find a way to work together to update a province-wide farmland protection system for the 21st century that will serve food producers and support food security for all British Columbians.

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For further information: see attached backgrounder. The following spokespeople are available:

- Abra Brynne, BC Food Systems Network
Nelson * 250.777.2480 * abrabrynne@gmail.com
- Brent Mansfield, BC Food Systems Network
Vancouver * 604.837.7667 * brentmansfield@gmail.com
- Lenore Newman, Canada Research Chair, Food Security & Environment, University of the Fraser Valley Abbotsford * 604.754.0569 * Lenore.newman@ufv.ca
- Linda Geggie, Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable
Victoria * 250.896.7004 * lgeggie@telus.net