A Work in Progress - The British Columbia Farmland Preservation Program

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Introduction

The passage of the Land Commission Act on April 18, 1973 is arguably one of the most important pieces of land use law passed by the British Columbia legislature. The Act, the first of its type in Canada, ushered in a program to preserve the province's limited but often highly valuable farmland resource. The Act has also had broader impacts. It has played a role in sustaining the economic and social benefits that have accrued from agriculture to every region of the Province. The program has helped to preserve the character of many communities, contributing to their health and livability and helped to maintain valued natural capital. The Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) has also shaped growth patterns over the last 30 years, by acting as a defacto urban growth boundary. In so doing it has contributed to the development of more compact and efficient urban communities and provided an opportunity to address land use conflicts by ensuring a stable urban/agricultural 'edge'. The program is assisting the implementation of smart growth principles within urban areas, which in turn contributes to farmland preservation.

As Wilson and Pierce (1982, 17) noted, "It is impossible not to be impressed by the qualities of the political act which grasped the farmland nettle in British Columbia. It is skillful, logical, bold and strong". The creation of the British Columbia (B.C.) Land Commission is considered a major event in the evolution of regional planning in Canada as well as in planning for conservation, resource development, and the environment (Hodge and Robinson, 2001). This far reaching, progressive legislation was a component of sustainability long before the term came into vogue - preceding the Brundtland report by fourteen years (Brundtland, 1987).

Table I: British Columbia Agricultural Capability

	% of BC's Land Base
- Land Capable of a Range of Crops (CLI Class 1-4)	2.70%
- Prime Agricultural Land (CLI Class 1-3)	1.10%
- Class 1 Agricultural Capability	0.06%
- Land Suitable for Tree Fruit Production in the AIR	0.04%

(Source: Smith, 1998)

Pre-Conditions for the creation of the Agricultural Land Reserve

A Challenging Geography

After Quebec, British Columbia has the second largest land area among Canadian provinces. But unlike other provinces, B.C. is characterized by its high mountains and plateaus. Three-quarters of its land is above 1,000 metres in elevation and more than 18% of the Province is rock, ice or tundra (Cannings and Cannings, 1996). This valley/mountain physiography has resulted in a relative scarcity of agricultural land. Less than 3% of the province's land area has an agricultural capability allowing a range of crops (Canada Land Inventory (CLI) Class 1 to 4). British Columbia, in 2001, only accounted for 3.8% of Canada's land in farm use. But as an indication of the quality of its agricultural land base and intensity of use, B.C. accounted for 6.0% of Canada's total annual gross farm receipts, 8.2% of all farms, 6.7% of all dairy cattle, 14.9% of all chickens and hens, and 18.7% of all land growing fruits, berries and nuts (Statistics Canada, Census of Agriculture, 2001).

Within the same narrow valleys that are so agriculturally productive, there has been an historic competition for a variety of settlement uses - urban, industrial, parks and recreation, and supporting infrastructure. The valleys also hold significant habitat and environmentally sensitive areas. Common with other jurisdictions, early settlement patterns in B.C. were often directly associated with areas of prime agricultural land, resulting in urban expansion onto farmland. B.C. has historically, and continues to have, a highly urbanized population, largely focused in the south-west region of the Province[5]. As British Columbia experienced rapid growth in the post World War II decades, the population nearly doubled between 1951 and 1971 (BC Stats). The Province's valley / mountain reality served as highly visual context for the growing public awareness and concern for the impacts of urbanization on farmland which would find voice in both regional and provincial land use policy.

> "We normally see British Columbia as a series of valleys framed by postcard peaks, but if you stand atop even a small mountain ... you will always be impressed by the sea of rugged mountains around you and by how small the lush valleys really are."
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> (Cannings and Cannings. 1996, 155)

Influences, Concerns and Motivations

There were a number of pre-conditions and concerns that influenced the development of B.C.'s agricultural land preservation program as summarized below.

i) The emergence of regional planning was sensitizing a broad public to the linkages between urban growth patterns (sprawl) and the implications on farmland preservation.

ii) Students in planning schools across the country in the late 1960's and early 1970's were being exposed to the concepts of regional planning and the importance of resource management and its relationships to urban planning.[6]

iii) A desire to curtail the loss of prime farmland. Prior to 1973, urbanization was estimated to be converting to non-farm uses between 4,000 to 6,000 hectares of prime agricultural land each year (PALC, 1983, 4).

iv) A desire to stabilize the agricultural land base to ensure that land improvements designed to enhance agricultural incomes (e.g. diking, drainage and irrigation systems) were not lost due to housing and other non-farm developments (Briefing Material, 1973, 8).

v) A concern with food security and avoiding the continued heavy dependency on external sources of food recognized at the time (PALC, 1983, 4 & 5).

vi) A desire to reinforce and support local government elected officials concerned with the farmland preservation (Briefing Material, 1973, 8).

vii) Recognition that many local jurisdictions were not able to withstand the pressure to change zoning. It was felt that this was a critical point where almost all land preservation schemes fail (Briefing Material, 1973, 7).

viii) An underlying recognition of global population growth and food shortages.

ix) The availability of the Canada Land Inventory (CLI) survey of agricultural capability was a critical pre-condition that was fundamental to the designation of the ALR. The CLI provided a biophysical underpinning to the Reserve and aided immeasurably its defence.

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[5] At the time of the 1911 census B.C. and Ontario were the only provinces with more than 50% of its population living in an urban setting. At the time of the 2001 census B.C. and Ontario were the most urbanized provinces at 84.7% compared to 79.7% for the country as a whole. In 1971, 60.2% of B.C's population was focused in the south-western portion 01 the province, a figure that rose to 70.4% by 2001. (Dept. of the Interior Canada. 1915. 95, Statistics Canada, 2001 Census & BC Stats).

[6] As an example, the 1963 university text book, Regional and Resource Planning in Canada, was exposing students to Ralph Krueger's passionate concern for the disappearance of the Niagara Fruit Belt. to A.D. Crerar's review of the loss of farmland in metropolitan regions 01 Canada and Norman Pearson was writing about the impacts of urban and recreational planning. Crerar and Pearson would both play influential roles in the development of the Land Commission Act.

x) The Social Credit government provided a 'stage- setting' piece of legislation in 1971 when it enacted the *Environment and Land Use Act*. The passage of the Act, which established the Environment and Land Use Committee (ELUC) of Cabinet was sweeping in its powers and was the tool of choice when the provincial New Democratic Party, in late 1972, 'froze' the subdivision and non-farm use of agricultural land." (Wilson and Pierce, 1982).

Provincial Election - August 1972

The election, on August 30, 1972, of the New Democratic Party was undoubtedly the singular most important pre-condition leading to the development of B.C.'s farmland preservation program. In the lead up to the election, the NDP were not alone in voicing concern for the preservation of agricultural land. As Baxter (1974) notes, all four major parties outlined an agricultural policy. The Liberal Party proposed an 'Agricultural Land Trust', which would purchase development rights and the Progressive Conservative Party focused on 'long range and systematic planning ...so the best agricultural land is used for farming and not wasted on other purposes", while the Social Credit Party rested on past performance (Baxter, 1974, 8). Indeed, in December 1971, the B.C. Department of Agriculture, with growing concerns over the loss of farmland, prepared a report by Sigurd Peterson (Peterson, 1971) for Agriculture Minister Cyril Shelford recommending that the provincial government undertake a farmland preservation program focused on the Fraser Valley. The proposal recommended outright purchase of land or the acquisition of development rights. As pointed out by Petter, the report did not include an estimate of the program's costs. Despite this, Shelford took the report to cabinet where Premier Bennett pronounced it 'too hot to handle' (Petter, 1985, 7).

The NDP's agricultural land use program was outlined in a booklet, "*N.D.P. A New Deal for People*" and included a proposal to "Establish a land-zoning program to set aside areas for agricultural production and to prevent such land being subdivided for industrial and residential areas" (NDP, 1972). Despite the Liberals and Conservative party's pre-election platforms, together, both parties only gained seven seats in the election. The NDP alone was in a position to act and they delivered on their election promise with precision and speed.

With Haste

For those interested in the rather chaotic route taken by the NDP government to turn an election promise into legislation in creating the Land Commission Act, Andrew Petter's account is recommended. The process, that appears to have been strongly conviction driven, was not constructed within a formalized policy mechanism. Petter (1985, 4) asks the question: "How was it possible for a government that lacked a planning structure to put forward so quickly legislation as far- reaching and enduring as the Land Commission Act?"

On November 29, 1972, just two months after the election, David Stupich, Minister of Agriculture, spoke to a British Columbia Federation of Agriculture (BCFA) convention and stated that, "I would not advise anyone to invest in farmland with

any intention to develop it for industrial or residential purposes" (Vancouver Sun, Feb. 3, 1973). As Petter (1985, 9) explains, it was with this speech and to this audience that farmland preservation was driven onto the front pages of newspapers across the Province with the result that Stupich effectively 'locked' Cabinet in on the issue.

B.C.'s farmland preservation program formally began on December 21, 1972 when, after 114 days of being elected, the NDP government enacted Order-in-Council 4483 under the *Environment and Land Use Act*. Stupich explained that the government was forced to act quickly after his speech to the BCFA in November due to a rush of re-zoning and subdivision applications involving farmland. (Vancouver Sun, Feb. 3, 1973).

The Order prohibited the further subdivision of land taxed as farmland and lands deemed by ELUC to be suitable for cultivation of agricultural crops (Order-in-Council 4483, 1972). With the passage of Order-in-Council 157 on January 18, 1973 the government further clarified that non-agricultural development was not permitted on any land of 2 acres or more that was taxed as farmland, zoned as farmland by a municipality or had a CLI agricultural classi- fication Class 1, 2, 3, or 4 (Order-in-Council 157, 1973).

The effect of these two orders halted both the subdivision and non-farm use of agricultural land in B.C.

These actions became commonly known as the 'farmland freeze'.

Purchase or Zone

As legislation was being crafted in the fall of 1972 and early 1973, a debate emerged that would have a lasting effect on the form the farmland preservation program would take. This involved the use of a purchase of development rights model vs. a land districting (zoning) model.

Petter (1985) describes a serious split in cabinet. The issue revolved around the question of whether development rights were vested in the property owner or with the Crown. Stupich had pledged to farmers that the government would compensate them for freezing development on their land. This was a consistent position of the farm community and given the traditional closeness and working relationship that the Minister of Agriculture maintains with his farm constituents, coupled with his accounting background, Stupich's support for this position is not entirely surprising. The earlier farmland preservation proposal of Sigurd Peterson, now Stupich's deputy minister, had also incorporated a plan for the purchase of "development rights". As Petter indicates, the very initial draft of the bill reflected the compensation of farmers for their loss of development value. (Petter, 1985, 13-17).

Minister of Resources, Robert Williams took an opposing view. Williams influenced by American economist Henry George, felt that the development value of raw land, like other values, was a public asset not requiring compensation. While Stupich had not provided a cost estimate of a compensation package associated with purchase,

Williams suspected that the costs would be far too high and asked his assistant Norman Pearson, with a background in land use planning, to analyze the options. Using Peterson's proposal as a base, Pearson concluded that the purchase of development rights would be so high it would be more expedient to purchase the land outright (Petter, 1985).

In October 1972, just one month before the launch of B.C's farmland preservation program, Pearson had made his position on the purchase of development rights quite clear at a workshop - 'Land Use in the Fraser Valley - Whose Concern?'- held in the Lower Mainland. At the workshop Mayor Douglas Taylor of the District of Matsqui had advocated the preservation of farmland by means of the purchase of development rights. Pearson rebuked the proposal. His philosophic departure with the Mayor was grounded in the need to act in the public or community interest. He commented that the concept of zoning was based on the viewpoint that development rights were vested not in the landowner, but in the Queen, and these rights have subsequently been passed on to municipalities by the province. As a result munici-palities, on behalf of the community, can designate, through zoning, what rights a landowner has to develop their land. Pearson stated, "Mayor Taylor is trying to suggest that these rights are vested in the individual, and that the Queen has to buy them back, but if we were to follow this line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, the Queen would have to, for example, reimburse every landowner who is denied re-zoning for a high rise apartment or a shopping centre, and our traditional basis of zoning would be shattered" (Pearson, 1972, 6-7).

With Pearson's information in hand, Williams' conclusion was that any attempt at development value compensation would cripple the Province financially. Williams, also with experience as a municipal planner where zoning was accepted as a right of government, asked Pearson to draft a memorandum that rejected both the purchase of farmland or development rights due to their fundamental violation of the development rights vested in the Queen.

To appease Stupich and create a far less costly proposal, Williams did suggest consideration of:

- guarantees of a protected market, price or production, price support etc.;
- social programs such as a special farmer pension;
- rebate taxes on unearned increment phased over several years (Petter, 1985, 14-21).[7]

As Williams' version of the bill went through several drafts, William Lane, a municipal lawyer with considerable experience in land use law (and future first Chairman of the Land Commission) was asked to contribute to the drafting process. Lane made several important contributions to the revised bill. Of note was the inclusion of the Land Commission in the process of designating the ALR and freeing it from the statutory definition of "agricultural land". On the issue of purchase vs. zoning, Petter relates that to Lane, who like Pearson and Williams had experience with municipal planning, the idea of a province-wide zoning scheme did not seem at all unorthodox and the notion that such a scheme should require compensation did not even enter his mind (Petter, 1985). Rawson, in

her 1976 *Ill Fares the Land*, referred to the establishment of provincial zoning in favour of agriculture as simply the 'provincial retrieval of provincial powers' (Rawson, 1976, 42).

The Land Commission Act

The Land Commission Act was enacted on April 18, 1973 and the Commission (of at least 5 members) was appointed by Cabinet in May of that same year. The primary role of the Commission was to preserve agricultural land. The original Act, however, also gave the Commission the additional objectives of establishing green belt, land bank and park land reserves along with Agricultural Land Reserves (ALR). A source of early misunderstanding was the fact that in the case of green belt, land bank and park reserves, the Commission had to purchase (or otherwise acquire) these lands before designation. Only the ALR could be designated without purchase using traditional zoning tools. While the Commission's responsibilities concerning green belt, land bank and park reserves were eventually removed (1977), they served to foreshadow the importance of functional integration and a regional perspective that were to form the hallmarks of the emerging regional growth strategy in the Greater Vancouver and other regional districts.

The process for designating the ALR was set out in the Act in some detail. Application processes were established to exclude land from the ALR and allow for the subdivision or non-farm use of land in the ALR. The

Act also included an appeal provision to the Environment and Land Use Committee (ELUC) of Cabinet for persons dissatisfied with a decision of the Commission.

The scope of permitted land uses in the ALR were outlined and largely restricted to farm uses. Land owners aggrieved by a decision of the Commission could appeal only on a question of law or excess jurisdiction to the Supreme Court. The Act specifically stated that land shall be deemed not to be taken or injuriously affected by reason of designation in the ALR. Originally, the Act was only subject to two other pieces of legislation - the *Environment and Land Use Act* and the *Pollution Control Act* - (and later the *Interpretations Act* was added) which speaks to the strength of the legislation.

The relationship of the Act to local government plans and bylaws was outlined. With few exceptions, applications under the Act were routed first to local governments for advice, and in some cases applications had to be authorized by the regional board or council to proceed to the Commission. The Act did not impair the validity of a municipal or regional district bylaws relating to the use of land in the ALR except, where there was an inconsistency, the Act, regulations or orders of the Commission prevailed and the inconsistent part of the bylaw was suspended and of no effect. A local government bylaw, such as a building lot line set back, could, however, provide regulation in addition to restrictions imposed by the Act.

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[7] Following passage of the Land Commission Act. in 1973, the Farm income Assurance Act was passed. The Act was administered by the Ministry of Agriculture and paid indemnities to producers when market returns were below calculated basic cost of production. Wilson and Pierce. 1982. 13 and 14.

Designating the ALR

The first and quite daunting task facing the Agricultural Land Commission was the establishment of the ALR.[8] The designation process required an engagement of the Commission with local governments and other provincial agencies.

One of the early criticisms of Bill 42, the predecessor of the Act, was a lack of local government involvement in the process of establishing the ALR. This omission was corrected by the inclusion, in Section 8 of the Act, of a clear and central role for local governments. This was accomplished by tasking each of the Province's 28 regional districts with producing, with assistance from the Commission, an ALR plan for their region and subsequently adopting the plan by bylaw. The regional districts in turn worked with their member munici-palities in the development of each ALR plan. The Act gave regional districts 90 days to complete their work, a time period that the Commission could and did extend as required. The decision on the part of the Province to directly involve the local governments from the outset was inspired and far sighted. It demonstrated faith in what, in 1973, was relatively new entities on the land use planning/governmental scene, and acted to energize and give purpose to regional districts. In hindsight, to have isolated local governments from the development of the ALR would have only served to undermine the farmland preservation program in the longer run.

While local governments insisted on being involved in the designation process, they may not have been fully aware of what they had bought into. As Rawson (1976) reflected with admiration, drawing up the ALR proposals was intense work, particularly on the staff side at the regional district, municipal, and Land Commission levels. Rawson (1976) adds that local government staffs performed uniformly well. Through the engagement of local governments in the designation process there undoubtedly was initially a greater sense of local ownership to the ALR plans. These same staff persons who worked so hard to develop the original ALR plans were normally the same personnel who were engaged with the Commission in the administration of the Act for some years to come. These early gains, however, were gradually lost as new local government elected officials, without an appreciation of the historic context of the designation process, came to regard the ALR as strictly a ‘provincial’ reserve.

Clearly, the most important, indeed critical, tool at the Commission's disposal that aided the designation of the ALR was the availability of the CLI agriculture capability classification system. Runka (1977, 136) summarizes the significance of this tool.

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[8] This summary of the original ALR designation process draws heavily from two sources - both with direct involvement. One is a paper written by the first General Manager and former Chair of the Commission, Gary Runka, "British Columbia's Agricultural Land Preservation Program", 1977 and the second, Ill Fares the Land, 1976, written by Mary Rawson, one of the original Commissioners. Both sources are recommended for persons interested in a "first hand” look at the beginnings of the ALR.

One important decision was that... [the ALR]… should be based on biophysical parameters, the natural characteristics of the landscape, rather than the variables of market and socioeconomic considerations. Initially, therefore, we had to decide on a technical base that would weather all storms, politically and otherwise, and be as fair as possible to everyone. The Canada Land Inventory (CLI) agricultural capability interpretation, derived from basic soil a- climate data, was the only uniform province wide classification of the land resource available at the time - a very necessary requirement in order to fairly and equitably apply province wide zoning. Without this basic biophysical inventory, the scheme of credible agricultural zoning intended to preserve agricultural land in the long term would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to implement.

Basing the ALR on biophysical rather than short term market and economic conditions has been a perspective that future Commissions have also drawn upon in the administration of the Reserve.

To aid regional districts in their work, the process of ALR designation began with input from the then Department of Agriculture which prepared suggested agricultural land reserve maps. This again was a critical input. The maps drew upon the Department's overall knowledge of farming in the Province, and identified those lands that had the soil and climate combination to support agriculture that were not already urbanized or irreversibly alienated. These maps were a generalized second-stage interpretation of basic soil survey and CLI data which was combined with proposed urban expansion areas on lower capability or non-agricultural land use. The Department of Agriculture's mapping would also have given local governments much needed early direction into the anticipated scope of the Agricultural Land Reserve.

The draft maps were then forwarded to each regional district for their consideration. The regional districts consulted with their member municipalities and public hearings were required to consider and gain input on the proposed ALR. Runka (1977) notes that about 300 information meetings and public hearings were held in the regional districts to afford the public active participation in drawing the ALR. The regional districts were then required to adopt their agricultural land reserve plans by bylaw and file them with the Commission.

When advising on the ALR, the Commission requested that local governments take into account 'in- stream' development to ensure that sufficient land was available to accommodate five years of future urban growth. This was to allow for a period of transition and give local governments time to organize their community plans and servicing programs. The Commission hoped this period of grace would be sufficient for the new priority being placed on the protection of agricultural land to become a part of the community's thinking (Rawson, 1976). Looking back over the span of 30 years, the hoped for fundamental adjustment on the part of local governments away from the post World War II attitude that farmland is 'urban land in waiting' has been mixed at best.

Once completed, the regional districts filed their proposals with the Commission. The Commission then reviewed in detail each ALR plan to ensure compliance with the intent of the Act. As Runka (1977, 137) has

noted, "The quality of the plans submitted to the commission varied, depending on the attitudes and directions local governments chose to project. During the ... review stage, therefore, we attempted to ensure basic technical consistency with the agricultural land reserves throughout the Province."

The Act provided opportunity for the Commission to recommend amendments to the ALR plans for eventual Cabinet consideration and this was done in a number of cases. In turn, other government ministries and agencies commented on the ALR plans with the ELUC having final review prior to Cabinet's consideration and approval. Once approved the Commission could then designate the ALR plans on a regional district-by-regional district basis. At this point the original 'farmland freeze' Orders under the *Environment and Land Use Act* were lifted and zoning under the Land Commission Act was then applied (Runka, 1977, 138).

The first ALR plan was designated on February 13, 1974 for the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen, 11 months after passage of the Act and 10 months after the Commission's appointment. By the end of 1974, a total of 23 of the 28 regional districts had their ALR plans designated. Four more were completed in 1975 and the last remaining ALR plan was designated on December 1976. With the designations complete, only 5% of the Province's land area was found to warrant being placed in the ALR - about 4.7 million hectares.

Into the Mix

Despite the speed with which the ALR was designated, considerable care was taken and fairness was uppermost on the minds of the Commission when making recommendations to Cabinet on the eventual shape of the Reserve.

The process was based on several factors that influenced the final designations. First, those lands included in the original 'farmland freeze' gave initial direction to the shape of the emerging ALR plans. The Act, it should be noted, did not limit the designation of the ALR to CLI class 1 to 4 lands nor in fact make mention of the CLI.

Thus, the Commission was not bound strictly by the class 1 to 4 criteria, a point missed by some critics. Since the initiation of the 'farmland freeze' there had been an on-going appeal process for those persons who felt aggrieved. The results of this appeal process would also have been taken into consideration. The practical experience of the Department of Agriculture would also have been a very valuable input. In designating the ALR, an effort was made to identify cohesive ‘agricultural landscapes' and ensure their continuity. The regional district process of ALR plan development was also a fundamental component affecting the final shape of the ALR, including the '5 year urban growth' provision. In determining the ALR boundaries, all

lands were considered for potential inclusion. As a result, private lands, crown provincial and federal as well as Indian Reserves were all considered if their biophysical characteristics warranted inclusion in the ALR. With respect to

federal lands, including Indian Reserves, the regulations associated with the Act did not apply.[9] The ALR plans in these later cases did serve to provide an indication of a resource value.

Despite all of these influences, as Runka (1977) points out, the ALR is solidly grounded on the CLI agricultural capability rating. This greatly assisted in the Commission's desire to achieve fairness and objectivity. It also removed the ALR from the specter of being nothing more than arbitrary zoning.

Freedom from a strict use of a CLI class 1 to 4 criteria in determining ALR boundaries resulted in the Commission approaching its job with far more creativity given the diversity of the land base and technical considerations. First, all class 1 to 4 lands that were not irreversibly developed, regardless of ownership or tenure was included in the ALR. Class 5 and 6 lands were also included where historical land use patterns indicated that such land could be used effectively for agriculture in conjunction with class 1 to 4 lands. This occurred often in areas of the Province where class 5 and 6 range land is the underpinning of ranching operations. In addition, it is not always appreciated that in many cases land with a relatively low capability rating with a low range of cropping options may actually be highly suitable for a small range of crops (cranberries in a bog setting for example). The Commission also included some relatively small areas of class 7 land where such land might have allowed undesirable intrusion of incompatible uses into the ALR.

A practical challenge the Commission faced was the problem of transferring the underlying irregular pattern of "natural zoning" provided by the CLI mapping, into technical descriptions that would be legally defensible, and that would be considered practical by landowners (Rawson, 1976). Runka (1977, 138) explained that the process of taking the technical CLI data and converting it to straight-line legal boundaries for the purpose of land registry identification and longer term administration of the ALR was, "...a long, tough, frustrating job and the results were not altogether successful. Partly because of this, the credibility of the agricultural land reserves has been questioned, especially by nontechnical people." Indeed, successive Commissions have expended considerable effort dealing with such anomalies and inconsistencies, real or perceived. Runka suggests that the problems between natural vs. legal boundaries is something future users of biophysical information, including those generating the data, should be more aware of.

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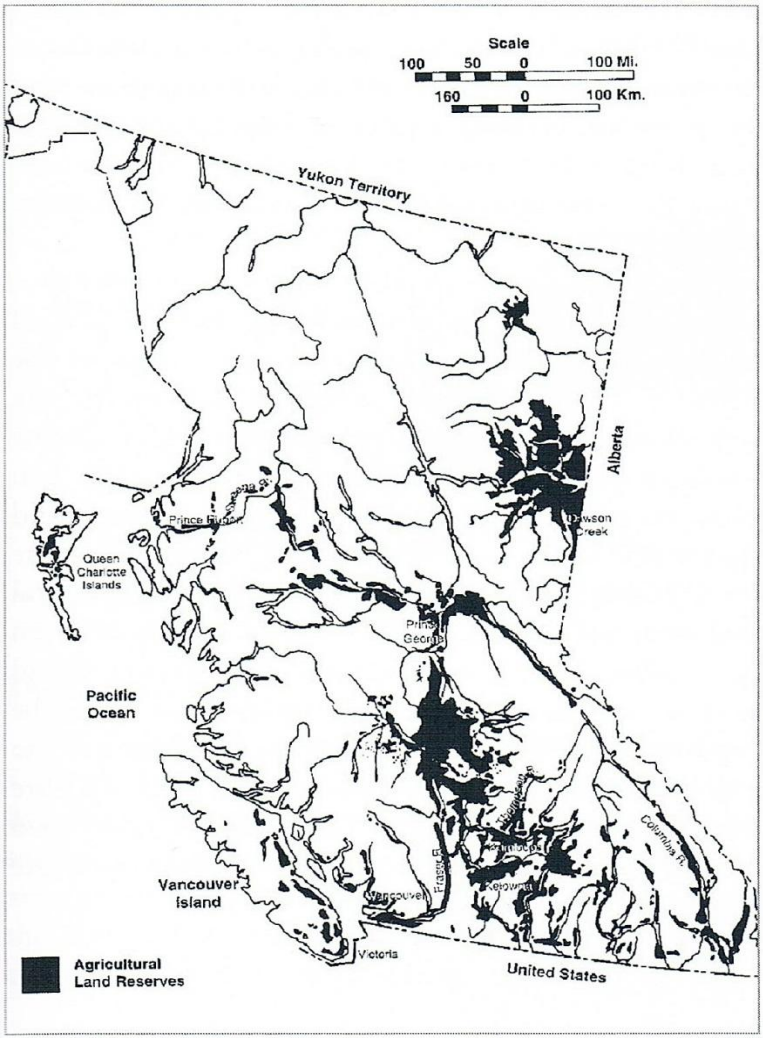
[9] As a result, the ALR designation of federal lands has acted as a form of ‘resource mapping' but in many cases the federal government has entered into discussions with the Commission when the development of federal lands within the ALR is under consideration.



Another practical problem was the lack of detailed mapping or air photo coverage in some parts of the Province. This problem alone would assure the Commission years of future effort in ALR review processes where these problems were apparent. In addition, particularly given Gary Runka's first hand experience as an agrologist who worked on the development and application of the CLI agricultural capability ratings in B.C., there was awareness early on that within some areas (portions of Vancouver Island serve as an example) the CLI information could be improved. But as, Runka reflects, there was an urgency to establish the ALR and all of the associated problems were recognized and subsequent Commissions have used various techniques to refine the ALR boundaries where appropriate (Runka, 1977, 138).

In 1978 the Select Standing Committee on Agriculture assessed the CLI agricultural capability of lands in the ALR - Table 2 summarizes their work, and indicates that the Commission was able to secure 70% of the province's prime (Class 1 to 3) land within the ALR. The dearth of higher quality agricultural land in the Province is further emphasized when considering that more water (ditches, channels, streams) is mapped into

the ALR than land having a class 1 CLI rating, and over 40% of the ALR has a class 5 and 6 capability rating, suitable only for perennial forage crops or natural grazing.

Table 2 - Total CLI Agriculturally Classified and ALR Lands in British Columbia (hectares)

CLI Agricultural Classification	Total Area Classified	Land in ALR	ALR as a % of Lands Classified
Class 1	69,989	52,920	75 6%
Class 2	397,634	289,079	72 7%
Class 3	999,644	692,090	69.2%
Class 4	2,131,581	1,409,080	66.1%
Class 5	6,137,470	1,468,100	23.9%
Class 6	5,357,781	431,560	8.1%
Class 7	14,898,572	167,540	1.1%
Water		88,890	
Total	29,992,071	4,599,259	

Source: Select Standing Committee on Agriculture, 1978, Inventory of Agricultural Land Reserves in British Co1unbia, Phase 'I Research Report.

The Commission

For 27 years, the program was administered by a 5 to 7 member 'provincial' Commission that normally met five days each month. A total of 72 individuals are serving, or have served on the Commission, with an average term of 3 years. While fluctuating over the years, the delivery of the program has usually had a staff compliment of 20 to 30 personnel.

In April 2000 the Commission underwent a fundamental re-organization. First, the Province's Forest Land Commission and the Agricultural Land Commission were amalgamated into a single 'Land Reserve Commission', To provide greater regional focus the traditional 5 to 7 member Commission expanded to include a Chair and 9 Commissioners. The Commissioners were divided into three regional panels, each with the full decision making power of the Commission. Each panel had responsibility for two of six major regional divisions of the province. The panels maintained consistency by normally meeting for two days a month together and three days in their respective regions.

A second major change occurred after the Liberals formed government in May 2001. Initially the Commission remained in place until November 2001 when it was replaced by an interim five person provincial government Commission. On May 1, 2002 the Commission was again re-organized. A 19 person Commission (Chair and 18 Commissioners) were appointed and formatted into of six regional - three person - panels with each member drawn from the region it is responsible for. With responsibility for one regional area, the Panels normally meet in the region for 3 days every other month. Once each year all Commissioners meet as a group to discuss broad policy issues. In November 2002 the Act was changed (back to the Agricultural Land Commission Act - 2002) with

removal of the Forest Land Reserve duties, resulting in the Commission again focused solely on its agricultural land preservation mandate.

The most recent structural change to the Commission was set in place to accomplish the government's "new era" commitment of a more regionally responsive Agricultural Land Commission. This also involved greater deregulation, an 'across government' commitment, and an encouragement from the provincial government that the Commission actively pursues the delegation of decision making power to local governments for subdivision and non-farm use applications. To date there has been reluctance on the part of many local governments to take on the responsibility of ALR decision making and only one delegation agreement is in place (Fraser-Fort George Regional District).

Despite a stated goal of ensuring the Commission is more regionally responsive there is little, if any, evidence that the Commission has, in the past, inappropriately administered the Act in manner that has not balanced the provincial interest with regional wishes. Indeed the Commission can point to a lengthy list of decisions taken at the request of local governments and provincial ministries that responded to legitimate local or regional needs.

It is too early to fully appreciate the impact of the new structural arrangement, but after two years, the six panel structure and the push for devolving decision making is being viewed warily in some quarters, such as West Coast Environmental Law, Smart Growth BC, and several Vancouver Island regional district planners. While the Commission has historically recognized regional differences, this was balanced with a desire to achieve decision making consistency in similar situations. There is concern that the current structure may lessen consistency and harm the Commission's integrity. The ability for suasion in a manner contrary to adhering to the principles of the mandate could prove easier with a 3, rather than a 5 to 7 person Commission. One of the founding concerns in the establishment of the program was local government's tendency to yield to pressures to convert agricultural land to non-farm use. The structural change to 'regional panels' can be viewed as an abandonment of a 'provincial' land commission. The decision appears motivated by a desire to move back to a stronger local decision making model and away from the provincial overview provided by a 'provincial' land commission. If the most recent experiment in re-structuring does prove to weaken the Commission's resolve, it will undoubtedly come at a cost to the farmland resource.

More positively, the Commission has shown considerable resilience. Regardless of which political party has governed and been responsible for Commission appointments, of the 53 individuals that have completed service on the Commission, only rarely has there been a Commissioner that did not seem to fully grasp the essentials of the task at hand. Commission after Commission has consistently 'risen to the mandate'. Despite changes in emphasis that have come with the most recent structural changes, it should be kept in mind that the Commission's mandate, as laid out in the Act, remains basically unchanged.

Mandate Modifications

Over the course of 31 years, the mandate of the Commission has been amended but has been unwavering in its primary objective to preserve the

Province's farmland for agricultural use. Key mandate modifications are highlighted below.

1977 - A focus on agricultural land preservation

- Responsibility for land banks, greenbelts and parkland reserves removed from the Act.
- Name of Act changed from Land Commission Act to *Agricultural Land Commission Act*.
- Minister responsible for the Commission able to grant landowners leave to appeal a decision of the Commission on exclusion applications to the Environment and Land Use Committee (ELUC) of Cabinet.
- Soil Conservation Act is passed and the Commission given responsibility for its administration.

1988 - Golf courses an outright use in ALR

- Via a regulation change, golf courses become an outright use in the ALR (setting off a ground swell of golf course proposals in the ALR).

1992 - 1994 - A time of renewal

- Moratorium imposed on golf courses in the ALR, and golf courses once again require Commission approval.
- The ability to appeal Commission decisions on exclusions applications to ELUC rescinded.
- The decision making power of Cabinet on applications for exclusion by local governments was ended and given to the Commission.
- If an application is declared by Cabinet to be in the provincial interest it is removed from the Commission and the decision is made by Cabinet. (This power has only been used once in 11 years.)

A Commission sponsored symposium "Urban Growth and the Agricultural Land Reserve: Up not Out' - was held in March 1993 to mark the 20th anniversary of the farmland preservation program.

Premier Harcourt, in the key note address, remarked:

"After twenty years it's no longer a question of whether we should have an Agricultural Land Reserve - the issue now is how to make it better. We can't keep putting pressure on our agricultural lands. We've got to find ways of moving urban growth up not out ... up in urban densities and up onto hillsides, not out into rich valley farmlands."

(Up not Out. 1993, p. 2)

■ An additional objective was added to the Commission's mandate to encourage municipalities, regional districts, first nations and ministers, ministries and agents of the governments of British Columbia and Canada to support and accommodate farm use of agricultural land in their bylaws, plans and policies.' (ALC Act, Sec. 10(1)(d))

■ Opportunity provided for the Commission to enter into agreements with local governments to delegate decision making authority on applications involving subdivision and non-farm use of land in the ALR.

■ The relationship of the ALR to local plans and bylaws was clarified and strengthened. Local governments must ensure that their bylaws are consistent with the Act, regulations and orders of the Commission and any inconsistency is of no force or effect.

■ Municipal Act (now Local Government Act) amended to require local governments to forward to the Commission official community plans prior to adoption for comment,

■ The Forest Land Reserve is designated and Forest Land Commission appointed. Staff of the Agricultural Land Commission provides operational support to the Forest Land Commission.

1999 - Provincial interest defined

■ After completion of a report by Moura Quayle, Stakes in the Ground, regarding provincial interest and the ALR, the legislation was amended (came into effect in 2000) to include language defining provincial interest.

2000- Commission Amalgamation

- The Forest Land Commission and the Agricultural Land Commission are amalgamated into the 'Land Reserve Commission'

- Commission reorganized into three, 3-person panels

2002 - Agricultural Land Commission

- Forest Land Reserve duties removed, with the Commission again focused solely on it's agricultural land preservation mandate.

- Commission re-structured - 19-person Commission (Chair and 18 Commissioners) formatted into six regional, 3-person panels with each member drawn from the region the panel is responsible for.

Two Key Duties

As the challenge of delineating a 4.7 million hectare agricultural zone was finalized, two roles quickly emerged that have been central to the Commission's administration of the ALR for the past three decades. Under the Act, processes were established to allow applications. This quasi-judicial role of deliberating on applications has been at the core of the Commission's day-to-day life. Within about a year of the ALR's being designated a second major activity, reviewing local government land use policy, plans and bylaws - emerged as another cornerstone activity.

The Application Box

It seems unlikely that those persons who crafted the original Land Commission Act fully grasped the enormity of the task and the impact on the Commission's future workload that the application review process would have The Commission has dealt with about 35,000 applications under the Act - an average of about 1,280 each year. The routine job of dealing with applications has evolved into the core activity of the Commission. There are basically two different types of applications; those that physically alter the boundaries of the ALR - exclusions and inclusions - and those that propose the subdivision or non-farm use of land within the Reserve. About 90% of all applications are initiated by private landowners with the remainder from local governments, the Commission or other provincial agencies. Given the Commission's considerable experience, the application process in place today has been finely tuned over the years to ensure thoroughness, fairness and efficiency. Although the complexity of an application will vary the processing time, the Commission strives to achieve a 90 day turn around on 80% of applications considered. The application files have always been open for scrutiny and using electronic means, the Commission is moving towards ensuring greater transparency in the application process.

Local Government Role

Most applications under the Act have to first be submitted to the municipality or regional district within which it originates. In the case of exclusion, applicants also must provide public notification of the application. A minor number of applications (e.g. for highway road widening) are routed directly to the Commission but even in these cases local governments will be informed of the decision and the Commission may seek the advice of the local government in question.

When a local government (or the Commission) initiates an inclusion or exclusion application a public hearing is required. In the case of landowner applications for inclusion or exclusion the local government may hold a public information meeting if considered appropriate.

Local governments have developed their own, internal ALR application review procedure and many have developed material to assist the public in understanding the process. In most cases the Act requires local governments to authorize the forwarding of an application to the Commission. Authorization provides local governments with an opportunity to ensure the integrity of their official community plans and bylaws. If the application is not authorized the process ends. Historically the use of 'authorization' has varied among local governments with several automatically (by policy) forwarding all applications to the Commission regardless of the proposal being contrary to local land use regulations or not. Other local governments take a far more active role in the use of their authorization powers. To further ensure the integrity of local bylaws, on every decision letter that involves an approval, the applicant is informed that an approval by the Commission does not usurp the local government bylaws that still must be observed.

With each application that is authorized, the local government provides a variety of background documentation and a recommendation to the Commission. The Commission considers, but is not bound by the recommendation of a local government. The Regulations also set out an application fee structure with approximately half retained by the local government.

<u>Commission Application Review Process</u>

Once the Commission receives an application it is logged into its 'application tracking system'. Having dealt with about 35,000 applications to date, the need for an electronic tracking system has become an administrative imperative. Each Commission research staff has regional responsibilities for the purpose of gaining familiarity with a particular area of the Province. The research officer reviews the material submitted by the applicant, the documentation and recommendations supplied by the local government, and prepares a report for the Commission. The Commission attempts to examine as many applications on site as is possible.

The Commission's review of an application is comprehensive, strives for fairness and applications are routinely re-consider where new information justifies a second

look. The Commission's review combines a consideration of site specific details and broader issues. The 'ingredients' of an application review includes: the applicant's proposal and reasons for the application, CLI data, previous applications on the subject property and properties in the vicinity, relevant policies of the Commission, the history of agricultural use on the site, investments in agricultural infrastructure in the area, the property's context within the larger agricultural community, potential off-site impacts, the possibility for buffering to mitigate impacts if approved, the potential for the proposal to create expectations if approved, input provided by the local government and relevant zoning, official community Plan and regional growth strategy information.

In the case of exclusion applications, the Commission must give prior written notice (to the applicant, local government and possibly other parties) of the meeting to consider the application. The applicant is provided a copy of application material prior to the meeting. At the meeting the Commission may accept written submissions and hear the applicant and other interested parties. It has become a standard procedure of the Commission to afford the applicant an opportunity to speak directly to the Commission on the proposed exclusion.

Three Decades of Applications[10]

Despite the continual onslaught of applications there is no conclusive evidence that the process has undermined the objectives of the farmland preservation program. It does, however, have the ability to overwhelm the Commission's work and sap its energy. The impact is to divert the Commission away from spending more time on analytic tasks, awareness building and proactive planning activities.

Runka (1977) predicted when the ALR was first designated that there would be a need for an on-going process to fine tune the ALR boundaries. After 31 years, 133 thousand hectares have been excluded from the Reserve and 176 thousand hectares included. Taking all exclusions into account, the original ALR has been reduced by only 2.8%. In sheer land area, inclusions have more than made up for land excluded. This resulted in a larger, not smaller ALR after three decades.

Quality, however, has suffered to a degree Most of the land included into the ALR (88%) was in the northern two-thirds of the province, with only a small percentage of this land being prime agricultural land (CLI class 1 to 3). The result; for every 1 hectare of prime land included into the ALR, 3 hectares of prime was excluded. Prior to the introduction of the farmland preservation program it was estimated that 4,000 to 6,000 hectares of prime farmland was being lost to urbanization annually (PALC, 1983). Over the last three decades, this loss of prime agricultural land has been slowed to 616 hectares of land excluded from the ALR each year - province wide.

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[10] All statistical data has been compiled by the author from the files, reports and web site of the Provincial Agricultural Land Commission.

The most prevalent type of application is for subdivision and non-farm use. Commission statistics show a high propensity to approve applications of this type - 71% between 1981 and 2000 for example. There is an inherent danger in a rush to judgment on the basis of such statistical evidence. One would have to review applications for subdivision and non-farm use in some detail to gain a true picture of the quality of decision making. Often an application may involve subdivision of a property along the ALR boundary or a minor non-farm use that has little bearing on the productive value of the property. Unfortunately, there have been few resources available to do close examinations of this type of application activity.

Where evidence does exist it points to the Commission slowing considerably the subdivision of ALR land. One internal review examined the first 18 years of Commission decision making in Delta, a suburb of Vancouver. It indicated that there was, on average, only one additional legal parcel created in the ALR each year over this period. The study also demonstrated a consistent decision making pattern of never allowing the splitting of large farm parcels into smaller units. All the applications approved involved already small lots or were the result of the Commission's home site severance policy that provides opportunity for retiring farmers to sever off a small parcel for a home site upon retirement.

A study of ALR subdivision activity in the Vancouver Island community of North Cowichan considered agricultural criteria as a basis for requesting subdivision. Only 9% of applicants sought subdivision in order to improve the farm operation. In contrast 80% of the applicants were strictly motivated by personal reasons, usually to sever a building site for a family member.

A few further details related to over 30 years of reviewing applications.

- 60% of all applications concern the subdivision or non-farm use of land in the ALR.
- As of 2000, 12.6% of all land excluded from the ALR - 16,005 hectares - was prime (CLI class 1-3) agricultural land, compared to the 22.4% of the ALR that was classified as prime in 1978.
- Only 4.2% - 5,446 hectares - of all land included into the ALR was prime agricultural land.
- There was a decrease in prime agricultural land of about 10,550 hectares over the last 30 years.
- During the first 15 years the annual rate of exclusion (all capability classes) was 6,770 hectares annually but dropped to 2,086 hectares per year in the latter 15 year period.
- 60% of all land excluded from the ALR was in the first 10 years - a time of "sorting out" in which the Commission undertook an ALR enhanced fine tuning program and partnered with several local governments in ALR reviews.

Concluding Remarks

Undoubtedly, the Commission expends considerable energy on what is often negative, rather than positive administration, in the service of persons whose primary intent is to take action that is contrary to farmland preservation. Most applications play out the classic dilemma of balancing individual desires versus community values. There has been a gradual reduction in the annual application flow to the Commission over the past 30 years, however, as application numbers have been reduced, any gains that might have been realized in freeing staff resources and Commission time for other efforts in support of the program have been lost to recent staff reductions. Provincial governments too often appear to have viewed the application process as almost the sole legitimate role of the Commission, placing the Commission in an application box that it has been impossible to break out of. Fortunately the Commission has struggled to broaden its role in several ways, one of which is the considerable effort expended to positively influence land use planning processes.

Planning for Agriculture

From the very early days of the program, the Commission has had a small policy and planning branch, staffed by planning professionals, to assist the Commission in its work with local governments and provincial ministries and agencies. This facet of the Commission's work has centred on the review of a wide array of land use policy, planning and bylaw documents. While the Commission maintains a close working relationship with resource ministries and other agencies, the largest part of the Commission's effort is working with local governments in the review of plans and bylaws. The legislative backstop to this work rests in the following:

i) the Commission's mandate to encourage local governments and others to accommodate farming in the ALR in their plans, bylaws and policies (ALC Act Sec. 6(c));

ii) the need to ensure consistency between local government bylaws and the *Agricultural Land Commission Act*, regulations and orders of the Commission (ALC Act Sec. 46); and

iii) the requirement that local governments forward a copy of draft official community plans to the Commission for comment prior to approval (LGA Sec. 882(3) (c)).

For the Commission, working with local governments following the imposition of the ALR has been challenging, calling on a balance of steadfastness and diplomacy. The passage of the Land Commission Act did not, and was never intended, to remove local government's plan and bylaw authority. This resulted in a situation where the Commission and local governments were both charged with responsibilities for zoning and regulating of the same land base – the ALR. Considerable effort has been expended on sorting out the land management relationship that this has rendered.

Beyond legislative requirements, the Commission's interest in land management processes is grounded on several realities. On the one hand, plans and bylaws inconsistent with farmland preservation objectives have proven to have considerable

undermining potential - setting off expectations of land use change in farm areas. At the same time, when local governments have made policy adjustments that effectively plan for and secure agriculture's place in their communities, this can prove decisive in shifting the focus of the urban development industry. Plans have also been used as the vehicle of choice in the pursuit of adjustments to the ALR. Lastly, the Commission takes an active interest in evolving urban land use policy, recognizing fully that in many areas the ALR boundary is the obverse of an urban growth boundary. The Commission recognizes that failures in urban planning will bear directly on its efforts in pursuing provincial farmland preservation objectives.

A Period of Reacting

During the 1970's and into the mid-1990's, the Commission found many official community plans displaying indifference to agricultural issues. It was clear that urban concerns dominated planning processes. Two local government processes emerged in the first half of the 1990's, however, that re-set the bar - the *Langley Rural Plan* (1993) and Greater Vancouver Regional District's (GVRD) *Livable Region Strategic Plan* (1996).

The Township of Langley, located in the eastern portion of GVRD, contains 23,500 hectares of land in the ALR - 77% of the municipality's land base. The *Langley Rural Plan* involved a process that was intentionally designed not to be dominated by urban issues. The Plan was a watershed municipal document that created a sub-area plan, focused on a rural, predominantly farming area. The planning process was inclusive; drawing upon the farm community for input, it included a series of economic policies geared to agriculture, and placed farming as the use of priority in the plan area.

The GVRD, stretching back to the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board of the 1950's and 1960's, has demonstrated a consistent and keen awareness of the implications of urban growth on farmland preservation. Agriculture is a major land use activity within the Greater Vancouver metropolitan area generating gross farm receipts in 2000 of $698 million - 30% of the Province's total (Statistics Canada, Census of Agriculture, 2001). Greater Vancouver's Livable Region Strategic Plan broke with traditional approaches of projecting population trends into land use needs. It turned the process on its head by identifying and protecting what was most important to the people of the region first. The result was the defining of a Green Zone that includes major parks, watersheds, environmentally significant features along with working forests and agricultural lands. The ALR represents 26% of the Region's Green Zone. Each GVRD municipality has designated their portion of the Green Zone lands and any substantial change triggers a plan amendment that requires Regional Board approval. Since 1996 the ALR in the most heavily populated region in the Province has decreased by only 0.3% - a period during which the region's population grew by almost 300,000.

For the Commission, Langley and GVRD provided models at the municipal and regional level that regarded agriculture as a full partner in their planning processes.

Moving Beyond Preservation

Frustrated by official community plans that did not effectively grapple with issues important in farm areas and that failed to adequately engage agriculture as a full partner in growth management debates, the Commission decided to build on the Langley Rural Plan as a model that had potential for broader application. The Commission also recognized that planning and agriculture have not traditionally been strong examples of cross-over disciplines. In response the Commission, in 1998, published *Planning for Agriculture - Resource Materials* (Smith, 1998) to help bridge the gap between the world of land use planning and agriculture. The document was aimed most directly at municipal and regional districts engaged in plan and bylaw development. *Planning for Agriculture* represented a call to move agriculture into the planning mainstream at the local level.

The basic principle of *Planning for Agriculture* is to contribute to livability, agricultural security, land use compatibility and provide the necessary stability to ensure continuing industry confidence. *Planning for Agriculture*, however, faces the challenge of reversing decades of pursuing the model of auto-oriented, outward expansion of suburban sprawl onto farmland, where the conversion of agricultural land to non-farm uses is not only considered inevitable but quite natural.

With populations rising and in anticipation of continuing demand for the outward expansion of urban growth onto farmland, the Commission felt that establishing planning policies that were specifically designed to secure agriculture's place in communities had the potential to act as a counter balance. In turn, it could play a part in forcing a re-think of urban form and the pursuit of smart growth principles. Some of the key recommendations of *Planning for Agriculture* focused on farm inclusive processes, agricultural area plans, and linear planning processes ('edge planning') along urban and agricultural interfaces. The ALR offered a clear point upon which to 'hang' edge planning to ensure greater land use compatibility and permanence. The major thrust of agricultural area planning is to provide a vehicle that can both identify and offer means to deal effectively with agricultural issues in greater detail than traditional official community plans. These focused Planning exercises allow an opportunity to examine land use dynamics inside the ALR, engage farmers, and develop results based policies. Given society's gradual disconnection with agriculture (in 2001 only 1.6% of all British Columbians lived on farms) planning for agriculture also offers the potential for awareness building and a means to re-connect.

B.C. enacted right to farm legislation in 1996. At the same time amendments were made to the (now) *Local Government Act* and *Land Title Act* aimed at giving local governments new tools to plan for agriculture. Together the 'right to farm' and 'planning for agriculture' package was rolled into the *'Strengthening Farming*' program. The program has been implemented jointly by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF) and the Land Commission with program coordination handled by MAFF The program is designed to augment, not replace the long standing Commission work with local governments on plan and bylaw reviews.

While the Commission has always had planning staff with regional responsibilities, MAFF underwent a significant shift of staff resources. The Ministry's core *Strengthening Farming* coordinating staff was augmented with about 20 regional agrologists who devote a portion of their time to the *Strengthening Farming* program. Together the MAFF agrologists and Commission planners have formed provincial 'agri-teams'. Each team is assigned to specific local governments to work 'on-call' on a variety of local agriculture issues. This alliance draws together planning and agriculture talents and is, in itself, helping to achieve a cross-over of the two disciplines to the benefit of both.

The suite of legislative actions to support the *Strengthening Farming* initiative included a stronger emphasis in the *Local Government Act* (LGA) on the need for official community plan policies that maintain and enhance farming in the ALR. Provision has been made to designate 'development permit areas' in official community plans for the protection of farming by encouraging buffering and more 'farm friendly' urban design next to agriculture. Subdivision approving officers may refuse approval if a subdivision next to farming does not include sufficient buffering or if unnecessary road-endings are directed towards the ALR. The LGA provided for 'farm bylaws' that could specifically deal with issues such as the siting of farm buildings and operational techniques on the farm side.

Farm bylaws require the approval of the Minister of Agriculture before adoption. In addition, powers were granted to the Minister of Agriculture to develop bylaw standards to assist the updating of the agricultural portions of zoning bylaws. The Province can also require a review of zoning bylaws affecting the ALR if there is a concern for their impact on agriculture. Like agricultural area plans, these legislative tools were designed to provide additional opportunities to focus on agriculture and add to the security of the farmland base - and thus have a direct and mutually complimentary connection to the farmland preservation program.

Local governments across B.C. have been re-connecting with their farm communities more directly and taking up the challenges of planning for agriculture. Today 20 local governments in B.C. have appointed 'agricultural advisory committees' to provide advice to councils and regional boards on a wide range of issues. Following in Langley's footsteps there are currently eleven agricultural area plans and strategies in communities in the Province.

To further emphasize the relationships between local government plans and bylaws, the Commission has recently published the *ALR & Community Planning Guidelines*. The Guide is developed for local governments to assist the drafting of plans and bylaws and again points to the importance that the Commission places on local land use polices working in partnership with the provincial farmland preservation program. Taken together, the Commission, and now MAFF's, efforts are designed to build partnerships between the farm community, local governments and the Province and to move beyond the single issue of farmland preservation.

Summing Up

By any measure, British Columbia's program to safeguard the province's scarce farmland resource has met its preservation objective and reduced significantly the conversion of B.C'S farmland to urban and other non-farm uses. The estimated loss of as much as 6,000 hectares of prime agricultural land annually has been reduced, on average, to about 600 hectares since the establishment of the ALR. As in the past, the program will undoubtedly change to meet new challenges. The ALR and the work of the Commission have enjoyed consistently strong public support. Attacks on the ALR tend only to solidify support. An opinion survey in 1997 found that over 80% of British Columbians considered it to be unacceptable to remove land from the ALR for urban uses (PALC web site).

Parallel to the farmland preservation program is a need to ensure an economically healthy and environ-mentally sustainable agricultural sector. But a strong agricultural industry alone will not be enough to thwart the urban/industrial conversion of farmland. A key litmus test of the program will be how successful the Commission is at ending the perception that its role is one of a rationing board, slowly but surely meting out the Province's farmland base to alternative uses. Successfully instilling a land management ethic that recognizes farmland preservation as a social value and the ALR as a treasured and permanent part of the landscape will take the constant and active support of successive provincial governments. It will also take growth management policies at the local level that are founded on the point of view that the best and highest use of agricultural land is agriculture - now and in the future. The ALR rests on the land use scales to provide balance against competing uses. As Moura Quayle (1998) summed up in *Stakes in the Ground*, "Without the courage to hold firm, with stakes in the ground, there will be no incentive to better manage our land base in the face of competing uses. We must halt the slow but steady erosion of our agriculture and food resources, and support our varied agricultural industries. As a forward thinking society, we must dig in, take responsibility, and make sure that future generations have a vibrant agricultural land base". *Holding firm* has been the Agricultural Land Commission's challenge, but it is a challenge that is now being shared.

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