

Smart Growth BC's Position on the Provincial Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR)

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Smart Growth BC

Protecting the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR)

1.0 - Context and Position on the Agricultural Land Reserve

A productive, secure agricultural land base in British Columbia is vital to our ability to maintain agriculture as a viable industry, to secure our food supply and to act as an urban containment boundary. A key economic driver, agriculture supports the livelihood of over 200,000 British Columbians at BC's 21,000 working farms and food processing industries. It does this while contributing over \$2.2 billion to the provincial economy and providing for over 50% of our food needs. Remarkably, all of this activity and productivity occurs on less than 5% of the provincial land base. The continued success of agriculture in British Columbia requires that non-farm uses must be limited in agricultural areas. If not, urban/rural conflict will intensify to the point where farming simply will not be viable.

The threat of urban encroachment on agricultural land in British Columbia is very real. Over 82% of British Columbians live in urban areas, with the fastest growing urban areas located adjacent to the best agricultural land in the province (in south western BC and in the Okanagan Valley). Prior to the introduction of the provincial Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) in 1973-76, British Columbia was losing 6000 hectares of prime agricultural land each year to non-farm uses. Despite boundary changes since that time, the ALR remains approximately the same size as it was at conception (4.5 million hectares).¹ In comparison, Washington State has lost an average of 30,000 hectares per year to non-farm uses between 1982-1992. Ontario loses one square kilometre of prime agricultural land every day to bulldozers.²² The ALR is now lauded around the world as one of the most progressive pieces of legislation for land use planning and is the envy of virtually all jurisdictions across North America.

The ALR has illustrated its success both in the preservation of agricultural land, as well as in the containment of urban sprawl in favour of more compact communities. Smart Growth BC and Northwest Environment Watch jointly released a recent study that compared the growth patterns of Seattle, Washington and Vancouver during the 1990s and illustrated that Vancouver had significantly greater success in containing sprawl and creating compact, complete communities. The report stresses the role of the ALR as a powerful tool for urban containment and notes:

If Vancouver had grown like Seattle over the last decade, data suggest it would have converted approximately 18,000 additional acres—an area equivalent to about one-eighth of the Agricultural Land Reserve within Greater Vancouver, or to about four-fifths the size of the city of Burnaby—to sprawling suburban development.³

¹ From BC Government Website: www.alc.gov.bc.ca

² Sierra Club of Canada. 2003. *Sprawl Hurts Us All*. p.9.

³ The full report is available at www.smartgrowth.bc.ca

In essence, the Agricultural Land Reserve has created a boundary that has obliged local governments to seek out more innovative approaches to growth through densification rather than simply sprawling onto farmland. The benefits from this in terms of reduced automobile use and lower infrastructure costs are significant from both an economic and environmental perspective. Moreover, the proximity of ALR land also radically increases the quality of life of urbanites that benefit from locally grown food sources, its role as open space and from the important green infrastructure functions that it provides. As such, protecting agricultural land through the ALR is a key smart growth strategy.

Smart Growth B.C.'s Position on the ALR

Smart Growth B.C. supports the preservation and protection of our Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) as a means to contain urban growth and to maintain a productive, secure and economically viable agricultural land base in British Columbia.

Guiding Principles

Smart Growth B.C.'s support for the Agricultural Land Reserve is guided by the following principles, which work collectively to direct growth into existing urban areas in order to support the vitality of British Columbia's agricultural industry.

A productive, secure and economically viable agricultural land base in British Columbia requires that:

1. There is no net loss of Agricultural Land Reserve land to urban encroachment or other non-farm uses;
2. Agriculture is recognized as the priority use in the ALR;
3. Urban growth occurs through intensification, in-fill and re-development of existing urban lands rather than through expansion onto agricultural lands;
4. Regional Growth Strategies are developed that direct growth into existing urban areas and away from the Agricultural Land Reserve;
5. The Agricultural Land Reserve designation reduces in perpetuity the economic pressure of urban land speculation on agriculture and thus provides farmers with the certainty that is needed for continued investment and prosperity;
6. The Agricultural Land Reserve boundary receives special planning treatment to reduce urban/rural conflict while maximizing the potential of the agricultural lands adjacent to the interface;
7. Communities formally recognize agricultural working lands as an economic engine rather than a land bank to provide for further urban expansion; and
8. Local citizens and community groups recognize the fundamental importance of agriculture in their community and actively advocate for its long-term protection.

2.0 - Agricultural Land Reserve Issues and Threats

The fact that most of the population of British Columbia lives and works in urban areas poses a constant threat to the loss of the ALR to urban uses. The demand for large single-family homes in suburban areas is a powerful force and there is limited understanding among the general public of the need to view agricultural land as more than a greenfield site waiting for a better use.

For the most part, many local governments in British Columbia also fail to see the importance of maintaining an agricultural land base. They are under immense pressure to provide services, infrastructure, housing and local employment for their citizens and constant outward expansion is seen as a key component of their economic strategy. While residential taxes help to support some of the financial burden of local government, the development of new industrial and commercial land is seen to be the principal manner to achieve fiscal viability at the local level. Ironically, recent economic studies illustrate that converting agricultural lands to other uses often costs more in services than it produces in municipal tax revenues.⁴ The temptation to convert agricultural land to support economic growth is extremely strong, however and most municipalities perceive the ALR as a hindrance to their efforts and often do not explore with sufficient vigor viable alternatives to the outward expansion of urban areas. While many Official Community Plans support agriculture in principle, the lure of a development proposal is enough to transform their actions in practise.

Since the 1970s the ALR has been successful in mitigating this constant threat of incremental urban encroachment onto agricultural land by maintaining decision making at the provincial rather than the local level. The net effect is that the provincial "common good" of long-term agricultural security was paramount over the local desire for increased urban expansion. This is in direct contrast to virtually all other jurisdictions in North America where decisions on agricultural land use have been made at the local level and thus have been much more susceptible to development pressure.

The rules of the Agricultural Land Reserve and its governing Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) were changed on November 1, 2002 however when the Agricultural Land Commission Act repealed the Agricultural Land Reserve Act, the Land Reserve Commission Act and the Soil Conservation Act, and replaced them with a new Act. Key to these changes were the decisions to decentralize the Commission by creating six regional panels of three commissioners each, and to encourage the Commission to devolve more authority to local governments on issues of land use within the reserve.

Smart Growth BC is concerned that these changes, along with recent policy directions for the ALC, have the potential to compromise the integrity of both the ALC & ALR. We believe that there are a number of critical public policy and regulatory issues that need to be

⁴ For more information on these "cost of community services" studies, visit the American Farmland Trust at www.farmland.org

addressed to protect both the effectiveness of the ALC, and to ensure the integrity of the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Our concerns relate to:

- The Commission's regional panel structure;
- The ALC's consideration of community needs in its Vision Statement, policies and Service Plan;
- The decrease in funding and human resources that the ALC receives over the last decade;
- The need for more transparency in the decision-making regarding lands within the ALR;
- The potential incremental, negative impacts on the integrity of the ALR from greater devolution of ALC jurisdiction or decision-making to local government;
- The need for greater partnership and capacity building between local government and provincial agricultural agencies (the ALC and the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands) for the protection of the ALR.

Commission Structure

In 2002, the Commission undertook its most recent reorganization. Originally a single provincial body, the Commission now comprises a chair, executive committee, and six regional panels. Each three-member panel reviews and makes decisions regarding all applications affecting ALR lands in their region. The consideration of applications by 3 person regional panels weakens our provincial commitment to the ALR. Regional panels are more susceptible to pressure from local interests, which do not always represent a strong voice for farmland protection and rarely reflect the provincial perspective upon which the ALR was founded. It is difficult for the provincial significance of every ALR exclusion application to be appreciated when considered on a regional basis. This structural change to a panel system has been accompanied by notable increases in applications (and approvals) for exclusion, subdivision and non-farm use of ALR lands. The regional panels and the process surrounding ALR decisions must maintain the preservation of the ALR as the fundamental goal.

ALC Policy

The ALC's Vision Statement and Service Plan of February 2005 feature a performance measure related to "community needs", suggesting that exclusion of ALR land may be justified when "no other reasonable alternatives exist" for community development. Over the last 30 years, the presence of the ALR has provided ample opportunities for local governments to plan for long-term growth within their existing urban areas. SGBC is concerned that the consideration of "community needs" is in direct conflict with the Commission's primary purpose to preserve agricultural land and encourage farming. In light of recent ALR exclusions and non-farm uses, it is clear that the ALC is straying from this primary mandate. The inclusion of "community needs" in the ALC's Vision, policies, and Service Plan discourages local governments from seeking alternative solutions to urban land use expansion. Alternatively, the Commission could better focus its resources on working with local governments to shift attitudes that view farmland as an urban land bank. While growing communities will always perceive a need for land for housing, employment and other non-agricultural purposes, they must be encouraged to plan proactively to accommodate

these demands without encroaching onto the ALR. The changes to the ALC vision statement to include community needs and the decisions that flow from it are a clear threat to the integrity of BC's food supply and farming base. SGBC advocates that the preservation of the ALR is the most important community interest and that ALR land should not be excluded for other community interests. The protection of the ALR and the food security it provides is essential for all present and future British Columbians, therefore the ALR needs to be managed with a provincial vision in mind.

Transparency

There has been a long-standing concern about the need for greater transparency in the assessment and decision-making processes concerning agricultural land and the activities of the Agricultural Land Commission. While the ALC has recently made significant progress in increasing this transparency, it is important that all British Columbians understand the processes of the Agricultural Land Commission and its regional panels. The public and the media need to be able to monitor those deliberations and, if they desire, to make comment. While respecting legitimate issues of confidentiality, reports that recommend or comment on applications to the ALC should be public documents and any exchanges between applicants and Commission members or staff should be required to be divulged before decisions are taken. This transparency will allow the public to monitor any changes to the ALR and anticipate any threats that may be arising. This process will help to bring the notion of agricultural land preservation away from the simple processing of ALR applications and towards a provincial appreciation of and commitment to the integrity of the land reserve.

Devolution

With the growing pressures faced by local governments pertaining to revenue shortfalls, we are concerned that current plans to encourage further devolution of ALC decision-making authority to local government may compromise the integrity of the ALR. While the power to exclude land from the ALR rests firmly with the ALC, decisions relating to subdivision of ALR lands and housing within the reserve could be delegated to local governments. The province-wide perspective in ALR decision-making thus far has ensured that provincial agricultural interests were paramount over local development issues. In bringing these decisions down to the local level, the lure of increased revenues to local government from agricultural conversion, combined with landowner and developer pressures, has the potential to overwhelm the due diligence of agricultural considerations. This need only occur in a limited number of instances to undermine the integrity of the whole ALC process while creating precedents that may be difficult to refute.

Partnerships

While Smart Growth BC does not believe the devolution of authority to local governments of ALC authority is a positive step, we do support a greater partnership between local government and the ALC on discussions of agricultural lands. If "delegation agreements" are made between the ALC and local governments however, there needs to be certain conditions in place to ensure that local governments make responsible choices around agricultural land. Most local governments have limited capacity to make informed decisions surrounding agricultural issues. Partnership with the ALC, as well as with the Ministry of Agriculture

and Lands, is integral to building their capacity. More specifically, the partnership needs to support local governments with:

1. The development of Agricultural Area Plans;
2. The formation of Agricultural Advisory Committees consisting of farmers, food processors and citizens whose interests and expertise is in the protection and enhancement of the productive capacity of our ALR;
3. The development, as appropriate, of special planning techniques and bylaws along portions of the agricultural/urban interface to ensure greater land use compatibility;
4. The provision of educational workshops on agriculture systems to staff and elected officials; and
5. Better data on the agricultural systems within their municipality or regional district.

To make these partnerships effective, it is essential that the local governments that have reserve land within their jurisdiction have stated agricultural policy in their Official Community Plans. Moreover, it is integral that these local governments involve citizens in the creation of appropriate advisory committees that represent the broad range of interests in agricultural and land use planning.

These partnerships are fundamental in ensuring that the long-term interests of agriculture and the Agricultural Land Reserve is explicit in every land use decision at the local level that has direct or indirect implications for agriculture.