

Highlights of the RDBN Agriculture Plan Regional Workshops

Workshop #1: Smithers

Held on Monday, September 19, 2011 at 6:30 pm, at the Town of Smithers office

Land Issues

- In this area there is a growing trend of high-quality agricultural land being purchased for residential use. The property owners often allow the agricultural land to lie fallow or allow minimal agricultural use in order to obtain farm status. The residential use of agricultural land is driving up land prices and creating a barrier for new farmers trying to purchase farm land. Additionally, large tracts of fallow land easily become infested with invasive weeds, which spread to adjacent farms and increases weed control costs for those farmers. One potential solution to this issue is to encourage residential users of agricultural land to lease the unused land to a farmer. The land owner may benefit by earning income from the lease agreement, maintaining the value of their property, and possibly acquiring farm status for the property and paying less property tax. The farmer would benefit by being able to access productive farm land at a reduced cost. The Regional District may be able to assist in the facilitation of connecting land owners willing to lease their land with farmers looking for lease land.
- There are many farmers in the area using small acreages for agriculture. Land prices for smaller properties can be higher per acre than larger agricultural properties. This reflects the strong rural residential market in the area. There may be sufficient land available in the area for agricultural use but the cost is prohibitive to agricultural use.
- If new small lots with good agricultural capability were made available for agricultural use it could provide an opportunity to new farmers that cannot afford the current land prices and don't require large acreages. However there is no mechanism for the RDBN to ensure the long term agriculture use of such properties and prevent their conversion to strictly residential use.
- Farmers in the area could use support for infrastructure costs, especially in areas that are experiencing growing elk populations that cause significant damage to farm infrastructure. There is also a need for support from the provincial government to curb the growing elk populations, especially in the Telkwa area.

Regulation Issues

- Farmers are burdened by too many regulations and there is no support for compliance. The District Agrologist played a vital role as the interface between farmers and the provincial government. This position was highly valued by the community and should be reinstated and properly supported.
- A local producer has found a market for ducks in a local restaurant, but was unable to get the ducks slaughtered by a Class A or B licensed facility*. The producer therefore qualified for a Class E license, so that she could slaughter the ducks herself, however

Class E licenses do not allow sales to restaurants. (*Note: RDBN staff spoke to the local Class B poultry slaughter facility owner who stated that he is now able to able to slaughter ducks.)

Resource Issues

- There is a need to tap into the wealth of local agricultural knowledge so that it is not lost to successive generations of local farmers. Many family farms are not being taken over by the next generation. Connecting retiring farmers with new, unrelated farmers may prevent these farms from being broken up and sold off. Additionally, there may be existing farmer that are willing to assist new farmers. The Regional District may be able to facilitate these connections through a farm succession and/or farm mentoring directory.
- Local agricultural education is deficient. There exists a need for an adult 4H-type program or regional agricultural education seminars. Some institutions such as Olds College (Alberta) and University of Guelph (Ontario) have online agriculture courses; however these courses are not designed for northern BC agricultural systems.
- OBAC funded three \$20,000 grants to UNBC PhD students for agriculture research within the OBAC region. This is an excellent example of support for local agriculture innovation.
- Cooler space limits capacity for both meat and vegetables. Shifting seasonality to capitalize on times when coolers are less busy is very restricted by our climate; for many it is too cost prohibitive to slaughter animals outside of the fall season.
- Case example: A farmer has found a good market for selling small chickens for about \$12; it costs the farmer about \$6 to feed each bird and \$4.50 to pay a licenced facility to slaughter each bird, leaving minimal profit. This market would be profitable if the farmer could slaughter his own chickens for farm gate sales.

Opportunities

- Product continuity is key to customer retention. Building capacity for year round production/availability of locally produced food will enhance local markets.
- The public needs to be educated about the advantages to consuming locally produced food. Most northern farmers do not need to use as much pesticides and fertilizers, so food is likely healthier and production is less harmful to the environment.
- Secondary processing of produce may lengthen the shelf-life and increase the year-round availability of locally grown produce. Coordination of resources may combat the cost prohibition of secondary processing: kitchen, testing and material costs.

Opportunities cont.

- Expansion of external markets is necessary because of the limited number of local consumers. Market research is best undertaken by committed, funded personnel, not volunteer farmers. The Regional District may be able to assist by supporting innovative projects and helping existing organizations (i.e. Cattlemen's) conduct market research.

Workshop #2: Vanderhoof

Held on Tuesday, September 20, 2011 at 6:30 pm, at the District of Vanderhoof office

Land Issues

- The issue of planting trees on agricultural land for carbon credit must be considered beyond the actions of one company. If other companies are interested in obtaining carbon credit in this manner, it should be brokered to the benefit of farmers. Trees could be planted in portions of agricultural land that are unarable or require habitat enhancement such as riparian areas. Farmers should receive compensation for land stewardship in the context of carbon sequestration.
- Grant funding applications for land improvements are overburdened with bureaucracy.
- The Regional District could play a role in promoting the good farm stewardship of local farmers. Many farmers have completed Environmental Farm Plans (EFPs), but the public does not understand or appreciate the efforts required by farmers to complete an EFP. Agriculture can be built into the community through education. Education about local agriculture should occur in schools through field trips to the farmers' market and local farms.
- Weed control is critically underfunded by the provincial government and large corporations such as BC Hydro and CN Rail. Increased access to Crown land is increasing the spread of invasive weeds. There needs to be a concentration of weed control activities on transportation corridors. A farmer can control the weeds on his own property, but be continually burdened by a weed infestation on an adjacent road right-of-way. Weeds such as Canada thistle are no longer a priority for government funded weed control programs, but remain problematic and costly for agricultural producers. There needs to be incentives for private weed control and long term plans for control that include increased public education. The Weed Control Act should not be enforced on private land owners until the provincial government provides effective weed control on public land.
- Elk are becoming an increasingly destructive presence in the region. They multiply quickly and eat large quantities of feed and are extremely damaging to fences and silage bags. The Regional District may be able to play a role in lobbying for an open elk season in the region.

Regulation Issues

- Producers need to pressure government directly to provide more extension services, if the information that is provided via the internet is insufficient.
- Farming must be made profitable without introducing a quota system. Farmers could be compensated for land stewardship, but a funding source must be established. Profitability will solve succession issues. Increased local consumption of local foods is critical.

- There is a need for innovation that could be filled through new crop trials and a revival of experimental farms. The existing data from the old experimental farms is out-dated.
- The provincial government and BC Hydro need to start developing and implementing long term plans for alternative energy. Farmers could capitalize on BC Hydro's new 'smart' meters and sell energy back to the grid.
- The local meat slaughter and processing facility (The Country Locker) is busy year-round. It is difficult to change the seasonality of beef production because calves are all born at the same time of year. Fall calving is much more expensive and the price for the cattle is the same.
- The Central Interior Poultry Producer's mobile abattoir did not travel into the region this year. Mobile slaughter facility costs are higher than a stationary facilities', which presents a business challenge.
- Some farm gate producers have inferior product, which justifies regulatory demands.

Opportunities

- It is a challenge for local producers to match retail prices through direct sales. While it would be a good thing for local retail stores to sell local beef, the prices would have to be higher. Some local producers feel that price is the most important consideration for their customers and that it is challenging to market a more expensive product.
- Local advocates must inspire a societal shift to local food consumption. There is a need to diversify the local agricultural economy and actively market new products. Marketing is the solution to increasing local food consumption. Consumers need to link their personal health to their food choices. There is no existing vehicle for providing information to consumers.
- The local farmers' market should be operated throughout the year.
- Local producers may not be able to meet the demands of purchasers. Producers need to figure out what needs to change in order to meet those needs. This is necessary to break into institutional markets.
- Innovation cannot be driven by volunteers. It would be beneficial if the energy and ideas of UNBC students were relayed and taken advantage of.
- The Regional District needs to advance local agriculture interests.
- Bioenergy projects need tax breaks. There needs to be a pilot project for a bioenergy greenhouse that is anchored through a subsidized storefront.

Workshop #3: Burns Lake

Held on Wednesday, September 21, 2011 at 6:30 pm, at the RDBN office

Land Issues

- Range users are not consulted when forestry activities are planned and executed within range lands. Logging contractors often damage fencing in range lands, and new roads allow the expansion of invasive weeds.
- There is arable land in the area that is not within the ALR. This land should also be protected from subdivision and non-farm use, especially given the scarcity of premium arable land in the area.

Regulation Issues

- There is concern that the potential changes to the meat inspection system post 2014, when the federal government hands over inspection to the provincial government, may result in abattoirs having to pay for inspection services. A benefit to provincial regulators may be that there is more direct contact between the industry and the regulators. There is a need for a District Agrologist to inform the agriculture industry about changes in regulation such as this.

Resource Issues

- There is a lack of production guides that are specific to agriculture in northern BC. Local farmers have to get information from out of province (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba), which may not be suitable for the local climate and soils.
- Out of family farm succession is inhibited by land costs. It would be challenging to operate a profitable farm if burdened by a large mortgage.
- There needs to be a forum for sharing agricultural knowledge between local farmers.
- There is a lack of provincial support for agriculture in northern BC.
- Farmers need marketing and research support. There are agricultural products available year round, but the public may be unaware. The market for off-season, grain fed beef is small, however the potential for year-round poultry is increasing. More people are building insulated chicken barns and flying in chicks in the winter.
- Local restaurants could capitalize on marketing the use of local food.
- New slaughter and cut/wrap facilities should be encouraged.

Opportunities

- It is difficult to compete with external markets, especially with respect to produce.

- The local farmers' market is struggling. Improvements to the local meat store may entice more clientele; grant funding would assist the owner in making improvements.
- There may be opportunities for increasing connections between local producers. For example, one farmer stated that they raised pigs last winter and could not sell them, while the local meat store owner stated that he could not stock enough pork to satisfy his customers.
- There is a need to promote public consumption of local foods and at the same time provide more opportunities to the public to access local foods. Currently in this area it is difficult to access local foods, which obstructs the long term results of any public awareness campaign.

Workshop #4: Southbank

Held on Monday, October 18, 2011 at 6:00 pm, at the SEDA office

Land Issues

- Fencing land is expensive; there needs to be government support for fence repair, especially in the case of a natural disaster such as the snowstorm of 2006.
- The people who are purchasing rural agricultural acreages for residential use may be doing so due to a lack of available rural residential property, and not because of personal preference for larger parcels.
- A local property owner is in the process of applying to subdivide ALR land in order to provide smaller rural residential properties.
- There is a need to make more rural residential land available; this could be created from the unarable portions of agricultural land and surrounded by buffer zones, and help alleviate pressure on agricultural lands.
- The ALR needs to be taken more seriously, especially since there is no requirement to farm ALR land.
- The ALR regulations should be more flexible for unarable portions of land.
- Currently there are no programs offering incentives to improve Crown land held under agriculture tenure. Previous programs have been discontinued and need to be re-established.
- Public access to range lands is an issue, with no foreseeable solution as the public has a right to enter and use Crown land.
- Acquiring Crown land for agricultural use is too expensive. The farm has to pay to clear the land without compensation, and then pay to purchase the land.
- Completing a range use plan is not too onerous; stewardship plan require more paperwork but it is not too cumbersome.
- Farmers must take it upon themselves to educate neighbouring residential property owners in order to reduce residential/agricultural land use conflicts.
- If a farmer were allowed to subdivide off some small residential parcels, the farmer could educate the purchasers of those properties that the nearby farms smell and may be a nuisance.
- Agricultural producers need more positive encouragement from government. Farm production could be tied to a carbon tax with a rebate program for production quantities.

- Elk are moving into the region but are not yet problematic. A hunting season for elk should be established now before elk populations get out of hand.
- Wolves are an increasing problem in the area. Although wolf hunting is unrestricted, there are no incentives such as a bounty, for hunting wolves. Previous wolf culling programs no longer exist.

Regulation Issues

- Northern Health regulations present a barrier to farmers wanting to sell processed foods.
- Market fluctuations affect where farmers bring their animals to slaughter, either local slaughter facilities or remote such as in Alberta or the US.
- There is a need to develop specialized or niche markets.
- Local consumers may be unwilling to pay higher prices for local beef.
- There are significant concerns about possible changes to the meat inspection regulation that may cause local slaughter facilities to have to pay for meat inspection services in 2012.
- New regulations affecting the industry must be paired with implementing education programs, to prevent a gap between regulation and compliance.
- There is a local need for a knowledgeable District Agrologist to provide support services. Cutbacks to the Ministry of Agriculture have left too few support staff to adequately service the area.

Resource Issues

- The local agricultural industry is not profitable enough for new entrants, who are then faced with regulatory roadblocks.
- There is a need for a regional agricultural education program.
- The government could support local agriculture by giving tax deductions for farm improvements.
- There is a need to get the Provincial government interested in northern agriculture.
- Resources such as seeds for alternative crops can be difficult to obtain.
- There may be an opportunity for more organic farming in the area because of the few environmental contaminants on the Southside.
- Different government agencies and different levels of government need to work together to increase efficiency with respect to regulation.

Opportunities

- There may be a strong market for locally produced organic eggs.
- The local community needs to become more cohesive in order to withstand the changing demographics of the area. There is a significant decline in the number of young families in the area, and therefore fewer consumers of local agricultural products.
- There is no access to cheap farm labour.
- There is a strong sentiment that people should have the freedom to choose to purchase food products at their own discretion, regardless of government regulations.