

ECONEWS

Issue 208

Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

DECEMBER 2010

WE NEED MORE LOCAL FOOD - BUT HOW?

We need to grow, process and eat much more fresh, local organic food. Of this, there is no doubt.

We grow only 5% of the food we eat on Vancouver Island. So whether it's because of looming climate impacts, local food security, or our children's health, we need to increase this ten-fold.

Stephen Chu, US Secretary of Energy, says there may be no food coming out of California by 2050, since global warming could cause 90% of the snow in the Sierra Nevada to vanish.

There is a clear desire by people to eat more local food - but growing more is not an easy matter. The road leads to a briarpatch of thorny problems, instead of a farmland full of food.

1. There is no provincial leadership, and the 2008 Agricultural Plan has been starved of the funds to implement it. It seems that in the provincial government, nobody cares.

2. Apart from dairy, egg and poultry farmers who benefit from the successful quota system, many farmers struggle to make their farms pay. In North Saanich, average annual farm income is \$5,580.

3. America spends \$15-20 billion a year on farm subsidies, with most going to big corporate farms. American food is subsidized by illegal immigrant labour at \$8-\$10 an hour, and non-organic imported food is subsidized by soil degradation. It is cheaper to use chemical fertilizers than to care for the land using organic methods.

4. It is a struggle to get local food into local stores, which have long-standing arrangements with suppliers.

5. There are troublesome regulatory barriers, such as the rules that closed down local meat abattoirs, and the lack of insurance for farmers who want to share farm equipment.

6. Local farmland is incredibly expensive. Saskatchewan - \$500 an acre; Greater Victoria - up to \$100,000 an acre. It took 3,000 people two years

to raise \$1.4 million to save the 27-acre Madrona Farm, plus \$600,000 from the previous owners. \$74,000 an acre.



David & Natalie Chambers, Madrona Farm

7. Our farmers are aging, but young people who want to farm can't get onto the land, except as unpaid apprentices - forever the landaid, never the land.

8. Many of the region's agricultural land-owners are not growing food. In North Saanich, 42% of the agricultural land (638 hectares) is being used for "forage", which often amounts to hay or empty fields. Only 1.3% of the land is being used for cattle, and only 12 farms (out of 78) are growing vegetables, on a total of 7 hectares (1.4% of the land).

9. Our schools teach our children nothing about food, cooking or farming. We have a whole generation of kids who think food comes in frozen packages from the supermarket.

So what *can* we do, to begin to turn this briarpatch of problems into gorgeous fields full of organic food?

We can organize. There are a lot of Island food and farming organizations, and each is playing a hero's role, from LifeCycles to the Island Farmers Alliance. But none speaks for the whole food community - the farmers, value-added businesses, retail stores, restaurants, institutional purchasers, and consumers. We need a single Island Farmers and Food Alliance which can

speak and work for everyone, organic and non-organic alike.

We can buy more local food. The University of Victoria has made incredible progress - their Purchasing Team has found ways to source 50% of the food consumed on campus from local farms. At the recent Island Farmers' Alliance conference, the idea was floated to create networks of Local Food Champions, such as UVic, the Island Chefs Collaborative, farmers markets, and retail stores that stock local food, and give them 1-5 Stars as a measure of their success, to encourage people to support them.

We can revamp the Agricultural Land Reserve. We could require ALR landowners to farm at least 10% of their land for real food - not hay for horses. We could allow farm owners to sublet land to new farmers, and loosen up the rules to allow strata farmland-ownership and coops, including clustered farm housing, subject to the condition that the owners or tenants work the land.

We can teach our children well, requiring a food garden in every school, and teaching them how to garden, cook, and appreciate real food.

We can inject some vision into the Liberals, the NDP, and the provincial government, making ourselves noisy enough that they will realize that agriculture is not an invisible ministry that can be ignored without harm. They must realize that food is all-important, and show the leadership that's needed.

We can encourage everyone to grow more food in their gardens, and local municipalities to support more community gardens and food-growing on public boulevards. Wherever we have land, we have the capacity to grow food, as Carolyn Herriot's best-selling book *The Zero Mile Diet* has shown. We owe it to ourselves, and our future.

Guy Dauncey