

RDCK Agriculture Plan Consultation Report



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The Project is also benefiting enormously through the guidance of our Steering Committee, composed of people from across the region. The members include:

- Deirdrie Lang (Nelson Area/ Kootenay Co-op Country Store General Manager) / Ben Morris, Alternate (Produce Manager)
- Rick Morley (Procter, mixed crop farmer)
- Judi Morton (Passmore, mixed vegetables, fruit and small-lot livestock farmer)
- Aimee Watson (Kaslo, urban gardener, Co-ordinator of the Kaslo Food Security Project)
- Randy Meyer (Lister, mixed farmer – livestock and hay)
- Curtis Wullum, (Lower Kootenay Band)
- Jody Scott (Nakusp, forester and new viticulturalist)

Ex-Officio members of the Steering Committee are:

- Larry Binks (RDCK Director Area C)
- Paul Peterson (RDCK Director Area K)
- Don Low (BC Ministry of Agriculture, cherry farmer)
- Sangita Sudan (RDCK General Manager of Development Services)

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Means	2
The Process	4
Community Consultations	4
The Surveys	6
Website contact page and other connections	7
Preliminary Themes & Next Steps	9
Farm Incomes	9
Food Systems Infrastructure	10
Regulations	12
Beyond Farmers	13
Conclusion	14
Appendix A: Community Consultation Tools	15
Appendix B: Community Consultation Preliminary Analysis	18
Appendix C: Survey responses	19
Appendix D: Census Canada analysis by George Penfold	20

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide information on the scope of and methods used in our outreach to the communities and residents of the RDCK as part of the information gathering component in the development of an Agriculture Plan.

Brynne Consulting embarked upon the Ag Plan Project with a strong commitment to consulting the residents of the RDCK. This commitment arises from the fact that members of the Brynne Consulting team reside in distinct communities within the Region and so recognize that there are unique characteristics in each community as well as particular production, eco-system, cultural, and market considerations.

Our consultations had three main goals:

- 1.To collect information and input from residents across the region;
- 2.To engage citizens in the democratic processes of the Regional District - in this case, that of planning for agriculture and secure food supplies; and
- 3.To build support for and “ownership” of the eventual Ag Plan amongst the citizens of the RDCK.

October was devoted to determining the range of communities in which it would be appropriate to hold consultations, establishing contacts and setting up venues. The actual consultations took place in November through early Dec. As of the 11th of December, our scheduled consultations are completed. However, we recognize both the will for and the value of ongoing dialogue with area residents about this Plan. Thus, we will accept, and integrate into our work, additional survey responses and input via other mechanisms such as our website's contact page (<http://www.agplan.ca/contact>), casual and arranged meetings, and phone calls.



The Means

We launched the consultation phase of the Project with a range of awareness raising initiatives to capture people's interest and encourage them to be involved. These included the creation of an eye-catching postcard deliberately designed to be relevant over the entire course of the Project. The post card was used to "brand" the project and became the basis of our website (agplan.ca) and of a series of posters created to promote the community consultations. We also developed a black and white option for the community consultation event posters to ease the cost burden on those wishing to print them out and post them around communities.

After receiving approval from the Investment Agriculture Foundation and the RDCK, we disseminated a news release about the Ag Plan throughout the region. The news release was circulated to local media outlets (print, radio and internet-based), as well as via the e-lists of area agricultural and food security-related organizations, including the Kootenay Local Agriculture Society, Creston Valley Food Action Coalition, the Kaslo Food Security Project, Kootenay Food Strategy Society, Nelson Community Food Matters and others. The response rate was positive and enabled us to do further outreach, with interviews in print (the Express, Valley Voice) and on radio (Kootenay Co-op Radio, on two different programs).

The website has been used to disseminate information about the community consultations (location and date) as well as to invite input via on-line surveys (which can be provided in print form for those who choose to not complete it online) and the contact form on the website.

Initially, the intention with the community consultations was to direct the conversation to areas that are specifically within the purview or influence of local governments. To that end, we developed a "Conversation Starter" that identifies a range of common issues and concerns and then shifts to an overview of local government possibilities, outlining the major areas over which they have control or can influence.

However, we quickly discovered that a focus on local government purview stifled conversation to a degree that may have precluded some important input. This was due to the fact that people had ideas and concerns but were not clear on whether or not they could actually be addressed by local government. We therefore revised our facilitation strategy, though we continued to use the Conversation Starter, supplemented by a "Relocalizing Agriculture" diagram, to spark conversation and ideas. The community meetings were facilitated to allow a wide-ranging discussion,

leaving the Brynne Consulting Team to sort through what is and isn't relevant to an RDCK agriculture plan.

Another tool that worked well with the community meetings was the community-specific maps, provided by the RDCK's GIS department. The maps never failed to draw people to them and often generated discussions about the farming history of each area, as well as helping to convey visually the very small amount of land within the RDCK that is suitable for agriculture.

In contrast to the community meetings and contact page on our website, the Surveys used in the consultation have very focused questions. The intent of the Surveys is to gather specific data on farming and the food systems of the RDCK, at a level that is likely not captured in the federal Census Data. While the results of the surveys will not be as statistically accurate as the Census Data, they will nonetheless provide us with nuances and localized data that will complement our other information sources.



The Process

Community Consultations

Community consultations were arranged based on the contract agreements between the RDCK and the Investment Agriculture Foundation and between the RDCK and Brynne Consulting. The communities identified in the contracts were supplemented with priority areas identified by the Brynne Consulting Team as well as in response to invitations from community members and suggestions from RDCK Directors.

Between the 8th of November and 11 December 2010 we held 13 consultations with a total of 163 people participating. These meetings took place in the following communities:

- Salmo, 8 November - 11 participants¹;
- Creston (Public Library), 9 November - 12 participants;
- Argenta, 22 November - 13 participants;
- Kaslo, 22 November - 10 participants;
- Nelson, 23 November - 19 participants;
- Winlaw, 24 November - 22 participants;
- Castlegar, 25 November - 10 participants;
- New Denver, 30 November - 12 participants;
- Argenta, 1 December (second meeting at the request of the participants) - 8 participants;
- Nakusp, 1 December - 18 participants;
- Nelson Food Cupboard, 2 December - 2 participants;
- Creston (Recreation Centre), 6 December - 8 participants;
- Crawford Bay, 7 December - 5 participants;

Members of the Project team also gave presentations at the following events or venues:

- OpenHouse presentation of Michelle Mungall's "Kootenay Lake Regional Food System" project, Crawford Bay, 6 November;
- Selkirk College Second Year Environmental Planning Class, Castlegar, 10 November;
- Creston Valley Food Action Coalition *Annual General Meeting*, 6 December;

¹ Participant numbers do not include members of the Brynne Consulting Team.

- Creston Farmers Market, 11 December.

Key or particularly enthusiastic individuals were included in more intimate meetings. Some of these meetings were initiated by the Project Team and others by residents of the RDCK. These meetings include:

- meetings with various RDCK Directors, including Directors Popoff, Wright and Peterson;
- meetings (in person and via phone) with RDCK staff, including Tanji Zumpano, Brian Nickurak, Mike Morrison, and Dawn Attorp.
- a meeting with two women (a dietitian and a food technician) wanting to start a business supporting fledgling and established food processors;
- ongoing consultations with George Penfold, Regional Innovation Chair in Rural Economic Development with Selkirk College;
- a meeting with Roy and Jane Lake, elders in the Johnson's Landing and Meadow Creek farming community;
- a phone interview Inanna Judd, longtime commercial farmer in Argenta;
- meetings with Wayne Harris, President of the Creston Valley Agriculture Society;
- a Salmo Food Sustainability meeting organized by Salmo Community Services;
- City of Nelson's "Our Climate, Our Community" Workshop (by invitation).

A common experience at each community meeting was a level of excitement that kept people talking in small groups well after the meetings ended. Based on feedback we have received from some participants, the very existence of this ag plan project is galvanizing a new energy and enthusiasm that may have spin-off effects not directly related to the ag plan but nevertheless of benefit to the Region's food systems.

Though officially the community consultation phase of the Project is over we are aware of other communities that likely warrant a meeting. We are exploring the possibility of a meeting in the Edgewood area and a meeting in Harrop / Proctor is currently being planned for later in December.

Though we have had regular email and phone contact with Curtis Wullum of the Lower Kootenay Band, a series of postponements has meant that our consultation with him has been rescheduled for December 16th. It is likely that a follow-up meeting with Curtis and perhaps some other members of the Lower Kootenay Band will take place in January in the Creston Valley. We have also been in contact with Marilyn James of the Sinixt and have had similar scheduling problems. We hope to schedule a meeting with Marilyn later in December.

The turnout at some of the community meetings was less than we expected. This was particularly the case for our second Creston Valley meeting, where the Project Team called over 100 farmers to talk to them about the Ag Plan Project and invite them to a special farmer meeting. Though the response rate on the phone was positive and high, few of them showed up at the actual meeting. However, smaller meetings enabled us to delve more deeply into some of the issues, with time to brainstorm solutions and alternatives.

The low turnout from Creston Valley commercial farmers was discussed at the December 10th Steering Committee meeting. It was agreed that extra effort is warranted to ensure that we hear from them. Based on a suggestion that the farmers may be more responsive to a draft document than an invitation for a discussion on planning for agriculture, it was decided to arrange a meeting in Creston in mid January and present a first draft of the Background Report.

A preliminary analysis of the discussions at the community meetings has been completed and is appended to this report. More in-depth analysis is currently underway to provide information and direction to the Background Report and the Agriculture Plan.

The Surveys

Three distinct surveys were created by the Project Team and uploaded onto our website. The three surveys are: one for farmers / producers; one for the general consumer; and one for retailers. The surveys were promoted at each of the community consultations, in outreach efforts and interviews, on the ag plan website as well as on the RDCK website.

Some area organizations, such as Kootenay Local Agriculture Society, have notified their members via newsletters and email reminders to fill out the surveys. We had indicated that the surveys would close on 15 December. However, due to a high level of interest, generated in part by the display and interactions at the Creston Farmers Market, we have agreed to accept survey submissions until the middle of January. Any new data will be incorporated into our Background Report and the Agriculture Plan as appropriate.

To date, 75 people have completed the general survey, 20 farmers have completed the producers survey, and 3 retailers have completed their survey.

Some highlights from the farmer responses to date:

- Among the farmers, the highest response rate has been from those residing in Electoral Area H (so far);

- 80% of the respondents are farming commercially, though the percentage of their income derived from farming was consistently pretty low;
- 65% see pressure to convert farmland to non-agricultural uses in their neighbourhoods;
- Almost three quarters of the farmers who filled out the survey could expand farm operations on their current site; and
- Though most farmers do not feel supported by any level of government (up to 88%), more felt that local government supports them over any other level of government (25%).

Highlights from the consumer surveys include:

- Three quarters of the respondents are women;
- 90% of them have a garden;
- Almost half are willing to pay a 10 - 20% premium for local produce while over 30% will pay a 20 - 50% premium; and
- Consumer respondents offered a wealth of suggestions for ways to better support the farmers and food systems of the RDCK.

Amongst the three retailer respondents:

- availability of local product was the greatest barrier to purchasing local food, followed by reliability of supply, choice and price.
- retailers are willing to pay a 10 - 20% premium for local produce; and
- local meat is hard to find but high on the wish list.

The summary reports of the completed surveys are appended to this report. Please note, however, that they do not include responses to open-ended questions. Those rather data-heavy portions can be made available upon request and will be carefully incorporated by the Project Team into the work on the Background Report and Agriculture Plan.

Website contact page and other connections

To date we have received 15 contacts via the ag plan website. The on-line contact form has generated a range of submissions, from an observation on the importance of not relying solely on the internet to do our outreach (we knew that!); to personal stories of the challenges of finding viable land-sharing options when the farmer or land-owner is too old to manage it on their own; to a request for a meeting about the ag plan.

Periodically the Project Team receives phone calls from people who either attended a public meeting and want to discuss issues further, from media generated interest, or from media contacts. We have been fortunate to have strong support from the Valley Voice that has resulted in an initial column on the Project, a staff writer attending one of our community consultations, and a follow-up interview and pending second column in the paper. This may explain the high survey and community consultation participation level from Area H.

And lastly, because the Project Team lives and works in this region, we have all been approached by fellow residents in informal settings.



Preliminary Themes & Next Steps

With the bulk of the public consultations completed, the Project Team can now focus our attention on analyzing what we have heard and collected. It quickly became obvious that there were some common themes. However, the variations between communities in terms of their priorities and needs will need careful consideration. And since few of the suggestions came in the form of concrete actions that could be taken by local government, we will need to research and identify possible responses by the RDCK and other potential actors.

Farm Incomes

The perennially and notoriously low farm incomes came up in one way or another in every community consultation. According to George Penfold, average net return for RDCK farmers in 2006 (based on Census Canada data) was \$5,422, on an average capital investment per farm of over \$680,000. These figures undoubtedly account for the fact that we lost 47 of our 609 farmers between 2001 and 2006.² Repercussions of low farm income identified in the community meetings include³:

- fallow or abandoned farms that increase weed and pest pressures on the farms and orchards that remain;
- loss of biodiversity as farmers are forced to focus on the “high value crops”;
- continuing loss of farmers and their expertise - the next generation, even if they are inclined to continue farming, are often encouraged to do anything else;
- a lack of retirement options for farmers that often result in the eventual sale of their land and rarely to other farmers - the perennially low incomes do not allow for much of a retirement fund. The opportunity to retire on the farm where many lived and worked for so many years is a luxury few can afford. If the land ceases to be productive farm land, then the property taxes go up. And if the land is in the ALR, the options for a second dwelling to house another farm family are limited.

“We’re all headed for bankruptcy unless we have some sort of a niche market.”

“I’m aiming for Freedom 85: if I die with my boots on, I don’t have to worry about retirement.”

² See appended RDCK and RDCKB Stats analysis by George Penfold.

³ All quotes in text boxes are by community consultation participants.

- farm income cannot support the purchase of land at residential / recreational market values;
- difficulty funding equipment and infrastructure needs for start-up farmers, even if they are able to acquire the land.

Given that our food systems are inherently linked to a globalized supply chain, the mechanisms for the RDCK to impact market issues are limited. However, there may be ways that the RDCK can foster better access to local markets or lower the cost of doing business for farmers, for example. An exploration of options to address what is a key issue for food producers across the region will be part of the Project Team's work going forward.

Food Systems Infrastructure

Throughout our consultations, we have heard stories of infrastructure that used to exist in this region, or of models that exist elsewhere that could work here. The irony is that many of the support systems or locally-based infrastructure that used to exist here ceased under pressure from the globalized food system. An example would be the demise of a family-owned regional food distribution company, Qualitie Produce, after more than four decades serving RDCK communities. Yet it is precisely because of pressure from the globalized food system that local support mechanisms are all the more necessary since farmers here, with extremely limited growing seasons and a small land-base, compete in the global marketplace. The costs of production here are inherently more expensive.

"Small-lot agriculture is inefficient, and that is what we have here in the West Kootenays."

Among the infrastructure issues and needs identified are:

- regionally-based extension services, providing professional support to fledgling and established farmers - this used to be provided by the Ministry of Agriculture but has not been in place for many years now;
- education across the population about food and farming: school-based programs; agriculture how-to books well stocked in our public libraries; on-farm apprenticeships and mentoring;
- One region-wide branding and promotion initiative of local farm product would benefit many farmers - for most farmers, the costs, skills and resources necessary to do their own marketing are difficult to acquire;

- Ongoing loss of farmland means that young farmers may not have land to return home to after they leave for off-farm educational opportunities;
- Need to eliminate speculation on farmland completely, complemented by no further removals or subdivisions in the ALR;
- creative and locally based distribution systems are necessary - this may include revisiting railroads and waterways for shipping product around the region.

“Roads actually undermined the transportation and distribution of farm product.” *Roy Lake on the loss of lake-based distribution systems in the 1950's*

- permanent farmers markets, with in-door option for cold months - farmers markets benefit greatly from a consistent location as that helps to establish this alternate food outlet in the consumers' minds and incorporates it into their food purchasing routines. Farmers will not participate in farmers markets if there is no demonstrated financial benefit to them in return for the considerable effort necessary to prepare for and staff a farmers market and to deal with leftover product.
- Locally-based markets (retailers, restaurants, buying clubs, etc) generally have less challenging product requirements than the dominant grocery chains - the grocery chains require particular packaging and labeling (usually with a bar code) but most prohibitively require expensive liability insurance to be held by the farmer suppliers. According to Don Low, Ministry of Agriculture's Senior Manager of Business Development and Forecasting, even the very large farms in the Fraser Valley are having difficulty selling to the grocery chains because they are requiring year-round supply, which our northern climate does not readily enable, even in the warmer coastal climates.

“We've never been able to figure out how we could afford a day off the farm to participate in a farmers market.”

Tackling the food / farming infrastructure issue is clearly only possible with many players involved. As we explore these issues we will be considering possible roles for not only the RDCK but also the School District, the Columbia Basin Trust, our regional colleges, agricultural organizations and industry (food and farming).

Regulations

Relative to other issues, regulations were not a dominant theme in the community consultations, with one main exception: the provincial meat inspection regulation. Shifting the whole province into a meat inspection area has had a devastating impact on small-lot farmers in the RDCK, as it has done throughout in the province. The loss of local meat production capacity and access was raised at each meeting.

Among the identified negative repercussions of this regulatory change are:

- wide-spread loss of livestock on many farms: farmers simply stopped raising animals now that they no longer have a legal option for slaughtering (other than one red meat plant operating one day / week in Creston);
- loss of manure for a soil amendment - both for the farmers as well as the gardeners who purchased it from them;
- loss of income from meat and manure sales as well as increased costs with the need to bring in off-farm soil amendments;
- consumers are frustrated by their inability to legally access meat from local farmers and retailers have listed local meat high on their local product "wish list".

Other regulatory matters that were raised in the meetings include those governing water access and use. Water is clearly an essential component of all food systems (for humans and others). Concerns were raised about the quality and availability of water for food production.

Farmers also expressed frustration that bylaw enforcers and other government agents are often poorly informed about farming, including the protection provided by the Farm Practices Protection Act. Related to that is the interpretation of what constitutes farming. Farming is legally defined for purposes of taxation and activities permitted within the Agriculture Land Reserve. These definitions often guide local government zoning bylaws. However, they may not fully capture the range of farming activities that occur in our very diverse region. Nor is on-farm processing adequately understood or defined, with activities like the slaughtering of animals falling into a grey zone, somewhere between harvesting and processing.

Most of these regulatory matters are within the purview of the provincial government. However, that does not preclude the RDCK from taking on an educational and advocacy role on these matters. What remains to be explored in the Project research phase is to determine the critical messages and the most effective media and targets.

Beyond Farmers

This past October, the Columbia Basin Trust held a symposium entitled “Shaping our Future Together”. Almost 300 people gathered in Revelstoke over a three day period to envision and plan for the future. They were guided through exercises to determine the most likely future scenarios to frame this planning. Sixty percent of those present thought that the future would continue along the trajectory we have experienced over the past several decades. However, a full forty percent of those present chose a scenario where the impacts of climate change, peak oil and global political unrest pointed to a clear need to relocalize the essentials of our lives, to the degree possible, in order to plan for resilient communities.

Whether or not we are among the 40% who subscribe to that latter scenario, there are clear indications that the global food supply is not as secure as most assume - at least as manifested in their daily life practice in much of North America. Yet food riots in response to rapidly rising costs have become standard in news reports from around the world since 2006. Dramatic weather events are also wreaking havoc in some of the key food producing areas of the world.

Simple risk analysis points to the wisdom of having a secure supply of food staples close to home - an idea embedded by the RDCK in this project and one with a long history, dating back to the biblical Joseph's interpretation of the pharaoh's dream.

However, with only 1% of the residents of the RDCK involved in commercial agriculture (where goods are for sale, not just for own-use), they have little political clout and perhaps even less free time. Rebuilding our regional food systems will need the efforts of more than just the farmers, even with pro-active measures taken by the RDCK.

During our community consultations we heard the following:

- Dating back four decades, national “cheap food” policy has devalued food for generations;
- This devaluing is manifested in the galling reality that even in the barter system, it takes 75 pounds of carrots to trade for an hour's massage;
- The irony of farm workers being paid much higher hourly wages than the farmers who hire them;⁴
- We need more young and new farmers;

“Food security is **not** a spectator sport.”

⁴ Note that this is a reality of small-lot agriculture in our Region that may not be the case for larger farms accessing, for instance, the immigrant farm labour programs.

- It is difficult to access a level of funding to do food security work well - the funding is spread too far to be effective;
- The Columbia Basin Trust has a pilot project aimed at youth entitled "Know your watershed" - what about one called "Know your foodshed"?

Engaging the broader population and other organizations and levels of government will require education and outreach. As the project moves forward, we will explore existing models, likely partners, funding options and other means of addressing the issues raised.

Conclusion

We held significantly more community meetings than we had originally proposed. Given the diverse nature of this Region, we felt that this was necessary - in part to better understand the needs and considerations particular to each community, but also to build awareness of and, ideally, citizen ownership of the eventual Agriculture Plan.

However, the focus on the community consultations meant that other tasks slid down the priority list. While talking with people may be one of the more effective means of communication, the Project would likely have been helped by more regular outreach to area media. It is our intention to address this in the coming months, with the hope that it will keep people informed and sufficiently interested that they will participate in the refining of the Agriculture Plan itself. Ongoing public outreach (which will include the Forum up on our website) will also enable us to engage area citizens in delving more deeply into some of the more challenging issues, hopefully resulting in creative, Kootenay-made solutions.

The consultations have provided us with a wealth of information to complement our research for the upcoming Background Report and drafting of the Agriculture Plan. They have also demonstrated, by the enthusiasm evident amongst the participants, that there is a genuine interest in and support for this initiative. Many of those who have had contact with the Ag Plan Project via the community consultations, the surveys and the website contact page have indicated a desire to be more involved with this project. The belief in the efficacy of local government, even with its limited purview, helps shift consumers into citizens.