

Betting the farm



by Laurie Carter



BC's Agricultural Land Reserve is recognized internationally as a progressive tool for protecting farmland and a model for other jurisdictions. But the land it safeguards is increasingly under threat, especially here in the Okanagan.

Here's why you should care...

PHOTO BY LAURIE CARTER

The Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) was founded on a paradigm shift—away from the notion that farmland is urban land in waiting, to the view that farmland is food production land for now and the future. Some would argue that we're slipping back.

Yet food security is an even greater concern today than it was in 1973. So much is imported from California and Mexico (where farmland is also disappearing at an alarming rate) and from more distant markets like Chile and China. All are vulnerable to soaring fuel prices and there's increasing alarm over the potential for pandemic disease.

and dairy production. In 2005, the ministry estimates that only about 189,000 hectares of farmland had access to irrigation.

Already a shortfall... and the provincial population is projected to grow 30 per cent by 2025, which means that just to maintain the current level of self-reliance, farmers will need to increase production by 30 per cent. By 2025, farmers will require an additional 92,000 hectares with access to irrigation, land that's typically near urban centres.

Demographics and geography are against us. Two regions, the South Coast and the Okanagan Valley, are home to more than 80 per cent of our population but account for less than three per cent of the land base—much of it the very best farmland in the province. Those same areas continue to face the greatest pressure from population growth.

Bottom line, the amount of land being used to produce food is not keeping up with demand. So far, productivity improvements have made up the shortfall, but it's unrealistic to expect this to go on. The simple fact is that we need more farmland at a time when it's increasingly difficult just to hold on to what we've got.

QUICK FACT*
For every acre of prime farmland added to the ALR, 2.8 acres have been removed for urban development.

AT \$200,000/ACRE, PRIME LAND NEAR NARAMATA IS OUT OF REACH FOR MOST WOULD-BE FARMERS

BY 2025, BC WILL NEED 92,000 HA MORE IRRIGATED LAND TO MAINTAIN CURRENT FOOD SELF-SUFFICIENCY

A 2006 report by the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands estimates that BC farmers produce 48 per cent of all foods consumed in the province and that it takes “over half a hectare of farmland to produce the food for one person for one year. This is roughly equivalent to six city lots.”

To produce a healthy diet farmers need 2.15 million hectares of food producing land, of which 10 per cent (215,000 hectares) needs to be irrigated for fruit, vegetable



PHOTOS BY LAURIE CARTER

*Source: Smartgrowth BC

The Great Shuffle

At its founding, the ALR protected 4.7 million hectares and has remained fairly constant in total area, actually increasing slightly to 4.75 million hectares by 2005. But Smart Growth BC, a non-governmental organization that advises on land use and development, contends “since 1974, the majority of land added to the ALR has been from northern BC, where land capability is limited. Much of the land excluded from the ALR has been prime farmland from the Okanagan, Lower Fraser Valley and Southern Vancouver Island regions. In fact, for every acre of prime farmland added to the ALR, 2.8 acres have been removed for urban development.”

A report produced for the David Suzuki Foundation in 2006 says in the four years ending in March 2005, Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) statistics show that 81 per cent of the land under consideration in the Okanagan was released from the ALR, including a particularly contentious application in Penticton, which sparked vigorous opposition from the local citizen’s group SPADE (Save Penticton’s Agricultural Land from Division and Extinction).

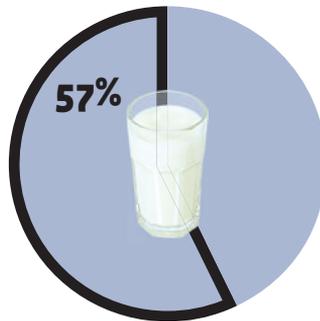
Between 1974 and 2003, 13,948 hectares were excluded from the ALR in the Okanagan. In the Central Okanagan, 21 per cent of the ALR was lost outright and these figures don’t take into account land that remains in the reserve but has been taken out of agricultural production for such uses as golf courses. In the same period, the Peace River area gained 24,623 hectares, the Prince George area gained 29,380 hectares and the Vanderhoof/Smithers region netted a whopping 67,109-hectare increase.

It doesn’t take an agronomist to figure out that you can’t grow peaches in the Peace. Losses of agricultural land in the Okanagan

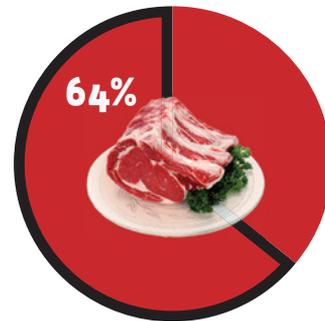
BC FOOD SELF-RELIANCE

Source: BC’s Food Self-Reliance — 2006 report by BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands using 2001 data.

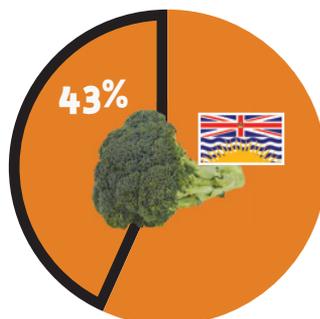
 Self-reliance — percentage of consumption



Dairy
1080 Million Kilograms Consumed



Meat & Alternatives
467 Million Kilograms Consumed



Vegetables (Grown in BC)
764 Million Kilograms Consumed



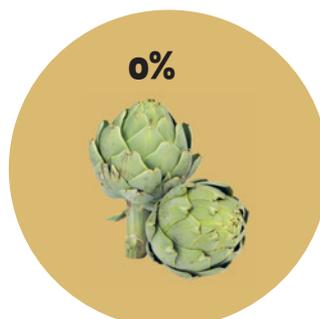
Fruit (Grown in BC)
172 Million Kilograms Consumed



Grain for Food
315 Million Kilograms Consumed



Fruit (Not Grown in BC)
310 Million Kilograms Consumed



Vegetables (Not Grown in BC)
1 Million Kilograms Consumed



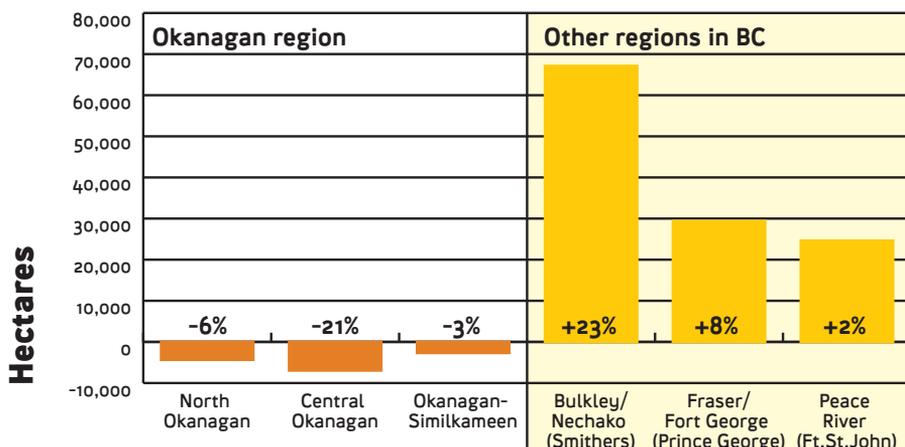
Sugar
136 Million Kilograms Consumed

Total Consumption: 3245 Million Kilograms (48% Self-Reliant)



NET CHANGE IN ALR AREA (1974 THROUGH 2003)

Source: BC Agricultural Land Commission website www.alc.gov.bc.ca



THE MAJORITY OF LAND ADDED TO THE ALR SINCE 1974 IS IN THE NORTH WHERE ONLY A SMALL RANGE OF CROPS CAN BE GROWN

are essentially irreplaceable for the crops grown here. But the pressure on a limited land base is enormous and soaring prices are affecting farmers and fueling new debate.

Land—The New Gold

Many farmers are nearing retirement age and see their land as a rightful nest egg. With current prices, they can now make more than they ever dreamed possible, but the Catch-22 is finding a market. Developers are eagerly standing by with bushels of cash, but can't use land in the ALR while people who want to get into farming can't afford the capital cost.

Ron Trickett recently sold the property east of Lumby that he started ranching in 1979. He says, "One might speculate that we may have received more value had there been no ALR restrictions on its future use.... The ALR had little impact on our ranching operation but may have had a negative impact on the sale of the business land base."

On the flip side, Joe Sardinha, a Summerland orchardist and president of the BC Fruit Growers Association (BCFGA) contends that new entrants to the industry face huge costs and that cost factor is a deterrent. The old pattern where successive waves of immigrants worked area farms until they could save up enough to buy properties of their own is not repeating. Sardinha's family was part of the wave that

QUICK FACT*
90% of land added to the reserve has been in the north while 72% of the land lost has been in the south.

*Source: *Forever Farmland* — David Suzuki Foundation

PRINCIPLES AND POLITICS — A CONTROVERSIAL HISTORY

Early 1970s Factors leading to the creation of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) and the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC):

Public recognition that in a province dominated by mountainous geography, prime farmland is scarce. Only 2.7% of the BC land base is capable of growing a range of crops and only 0.6% is rated as Class 1, suitable for the widest range of crops.

6,000 ha per year of farmland being lost to urbanization and non-farm use.

Significant food imports from California and Mexico (also losing farmland at alarming rates) causing concern for food security.

Local governments unable to hold the line against pressure to rezone agricultural lands.

Dec. 21, 1972 Provincial order-in-council (OIC) imposed a land freeze that prohibited change of use or subdivision of land assessed as farmland or deemed suitable for agriculture. Followed by a clarifying OIC in January 1973.

1973-1975 The Land Commission Act passed in early 1973 with the primary objective of preserving agricultural land and encouraging the establishment and maintenance of farms.

Independent commission (ALC) appointed to administer the newly established reserve of approximately 4.7 million hectares.

Regional districts given 90 days to produce proposed ALR boundaries with the help of the commission and preliminary technical maps from the Department of Agriculture — required to bring community plans in line with the transition, aided by a five-year buffer for growth.

More than 300 public meetings held.

Government action praised by some, but farmers outraged at the imposition of land controls staged some of the largest protests ever held at the BC Legislature.

Boundaries fine-tuned. Government programs developed to help farmers. Public opinion began to shift to acceptance and finally enthusiastic support.

By the end of 1975 most regional district ALRs approved.

1976-1996 More detailed land inventories undertaken and various financial assistance programs for farmers came and went. The commission developed a *Planning for Agriculture* manual to help local governments and handled thousands of applications as the core of its work. Successive governments tweaked and fiddled with names and regulations, resulting in significant controversy and reaction.

1988-1991 Government regulation removed the ALCs authority to refuse golf courses in the ALR. A flood of applications and storm of public protest resulted. The next government imposed a moratorium.

1992 Golf courses were removed as outright uses in the ALR and again must be approved as non-agricultural use by the ALC.

1993 Until this year commission decisions could be appealed to cabinet raising concerns about due process, technical expertise and fairness.

1994 Amendments to the act strengthened the role of local government and allowed for public input.

1996 The Right to Farm Act (Farm Practices Protection) was passed to protect farmers from complaints from non-farming neighbours.

1998 Controversy erupted when cabinet second-guessed the ALC's rejection of an application to exclude 136 hectares of agricultural land near Kamloops for the Six Mile Ranch development — and subsequently declared the project to be in the "provincial interest."

1999 An amendment to the Agricultural Land Commission Act was passed defining "provincial interest" as the public interest of all British Columbians concerning the preservation of agricultural lands; stating when the authority could be used and ensuring that agriculture is the first priority for any consideration of land use in the ALR.

2002 A new Agricultural Land Commission Act replaced previous legislation. Major changes include the requirement that the ALC consider "community need" along with agricultural capability when making decisions concerning applications for subdivisions, use change and exclusions of land from the ALR. The single provincial commission was replaced by six three-person regional panels to deal with regional applications. Some additional authority was delegated to local governments.



JOE SARDINHA,
PRESIDENT OF THE
BC FRUIT GROWERS
ASSOCIATION SAYS,
"IF FARMING ISN'T
ECONOMICALLY
VIABLE, THEN THE
ALR HAS MISSED
THE MARK."

arrived from Portugal in the 1960s. Indo-Canadians followed in the 80s, but the next wave is not materializing.

"We have a lot of grey-haired operators who would like to retire and they could get more than they ever thought possible for their land, but who's going to buy?"

Often the answer is cash-rich Canadians from outside the Valley who dream of a rural lifestyle. But the Suzuki Foundation report contends that increased hobby-farm and rural residential use of ALR lands just drives up the cost even more and reduces agricultural productivity.

Dan Ashton, chair of the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen, sees both benefits and problems. "Hats off to the grape industry for taking land not worth a lot with red delicious apples on it and those lands are now worth a fortune — look at the Naramata Bench," he says. "However, that's a problem...it's not a poor man's game...It's been taken out of the hands of ordinary people in certain areas."

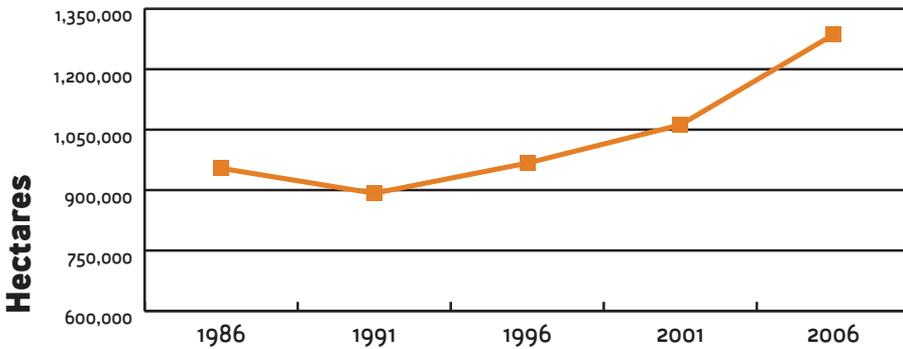
Summerland native and orchardist Lorraine Bennest summed up the situation at a Kelowna conference (Forever Farmland) in January 2007. "The farmland business is all

PHOTO BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR

BC TOTAL FARM AREA RENTED OR LEASED

Source: Statistics Canada (1986 to 2006 Censuses of Agriculture)

NOTE: Local figures from the 2006 Census was not yet available.



SOARING PRICES ARE FORCING MANY FARMERS TO LEASE LAND

about land values, mortgage payments and who actually owns the land.” Escalating land prices have caused her “to let someone else carry the capital cost burden.” But she says, “Most leases are short term and far too often the landowner places significant obstacles in the way of the operator’s ability to farm (residential use, appearance issues, deer fence gates, rental housing, term of lease...). Short-term leases do not allow for long-term investments in perennial crops.”

Yet for many people who want to get into the business, there are few options. Statistics Canada figures show that between 1986 and 2006 the total farm area in BC that is rented or leased from others increased by 26 per cent.

One fact is inescapable. Not only are high land prices effecting farmers, they are also putting enormous pressure on the ALR and by extension, planners, city and regional governments and the ALC.

Local Focus

While most municipalities have an official community plan (OCP), many cities and regional districts have also developed an agricultural area plan (AAP). Kelowna adopted an AAP in 1998 followed by the Regional District of the

Central Okanagan (RDCO) and the city of Penticton in 2005 and Spallumcheen in 2006. As well, Kelowna, Penticton, Summerland, RDCO, RDOS, Lake Country and Spallumcheen have created Agricultural Advisory Committees (AAC).

Sardinha says governments at all levels play an important role in preserving farmland and “they have to realize their decisions have a bearing on farmers’ ability to farm.” The fact that there are a lot of small parcels of agricultural land around Summerland, Sardinha blames at least partially on high turnover in civic government. He says new councils make revisions to community plans and land-use plans. They “put satellite communities out in the middle of farmland, causing a leapfrogging of development.” You end up with small agricultural properties surrounded by housing and urban/rural issues develop, putting the squeeze on farmers’ ability to farm. (Just the sort of conflict that forced the provincial government to pass the Farm Practices Protection Act.)

On a provincial level, the ALC was originally conceived as a single oversight body charged with the responsibility of making decisions regarding the reserve in the context of the overall best interests of British Columbia. A new Agricultural Land Commission Act became law in 2002, which included several significant changes.

The single provincial commission was replaced by six three-person regional panels to deal with regional applications. Some additional authority was delegated to local governments and consideration of “community need” was added as a factor when making decisions concerning applications for subdivisions, use change and exclusions of land from the reserve.

The shift to regional panels has prompted organizations like Smart Growth BC and FarmFolk/City Folk to question how the new act can be “more regionally respon-

QUICK FACT*
In 1988 government removed the ALC’s authority to allow or refuse applications for golf courses in the reserve. By 1991, there were 181 proposals — many involving residential and resort development. A new government imposed a moratorium, but 89 proposals were allowed to proceed.

*Source: Agricultural Land Commission - History of the ALR

sive to community needs” while “reinforcing the commission’s role in preserving agricultural land for farming.” FarmFolk/City Folk executive director Herb Barbolet made a prophetic observation in 2002: “It is possible that regional and local authorities will resist the pressures from speculators, land developers and industry as well as public users like hospitals, schools and community centres to access less expensive agricultural land for other purposes, but it is hardly assured.”

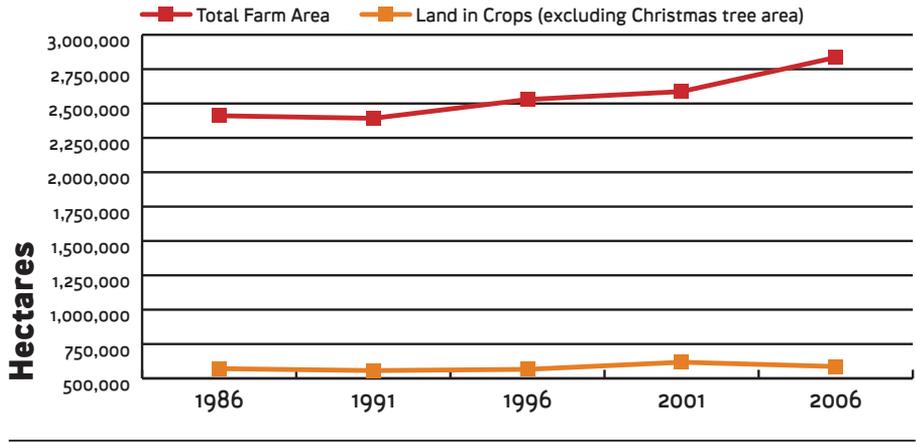
And sure enough, an Interior Health press release on April 4, 2007 announced that a letter of intent had been signed with a view to purchasing a 9.2-acre parcel of land in Westbank for the proposed Westside Health Centre. The release says, “Interior Health, working together with the Central Okanagan Regional District, will work as expeditiously as possible to get the property released from the Agricultural Land Reserve as the project is based on community need.”

Former Kelowna mayor, Walter Gray, who is president of

BC TOTAL FARM AREA/LAND IN CROPS

Source: Statistics Canada (1986 to 2006 Censuses of Agriculture)

NOTE: Local figures from the 2006 Census was not yet available.



the numbered company that now owns the land, says that part of this parcel was slated for development when the ALR was created. “We were caught in the land freeze,” he says. “But since that time, since the land commission was created, our company wound up acquiring the other half (of the parcel), but only to discover, I guess it would have been in the late 90s, that the piece of property was simply too small for agriculture. We tore out the trees (older variety apples and pears) because nobody was prepared to farm it.”

Maybe not economically viable in certain tree fruits, but what about other forms of agriculture. This parcel is almost twice the size of Suncatcher Farm in Kelowna,

TO BE FOOD SELF-SUFFICIENT TODAY, BC FARMERS WOULD NEED 2.15 MILLION HA OF FOOD PRODUCING LAND

AGRICULTURAL LANDS PROVIDE GREENSPACE AND HABITAT IN AN INCREASINGLY URBAN ENVIRONMENT



PHOTO BY LAURIE CARTER



SUE IRVINE, GRAPE GROWER AND CHAIR OF THE ALC'S OKANAGAN PANEL, SAYS, "WE NEED STRONG SUPPORT FOR A PROVINCIAL GROWTH STRATEGY WITH PRESERVATION OF AGRICULTURAL LAND AT THE CORE."

where Tony Cetinski, a member of the Central Okanagan AAC, makes a living farming organic vegetables. One thing is certain, once there's a building on the site, it won't be growing anything. And that agricultural capability is something the commission will have to weigh when balancing the pressures of community need.

Regardless of this contentious clause, local support is strong for the move to regional panels. Ashton says they "provide a better opportunity for local input" to people who "work in the Valley, probably grew up in the Valley and have a very good knowledge of what transpires in the Valley."

While Sardinha thinks that "by and large, they have made sound decisions," he says there's potential for discrepancies in decisions where one regional panel may be more lax than another, leading to finger pointing. He also warns that if there is no opposition to exclusions, it's easier for the panel to be swayed. Individuals or community groups

serve a watchdog role and he advises, "Don't keep quiet, voice your opinion. I encourage anyone who has an opinion on a potential decision to take up the fight if they're not in favour of it."

As chair of the Okanagan panel, it's not surprising that Sue Irvine favours the change. The Naramata grape grower says the workload facing the single nine-member panel meant that they were making decisions without viewing the land. "We view every property," she says. "We know our decisions can be life altering."

ALC in Action

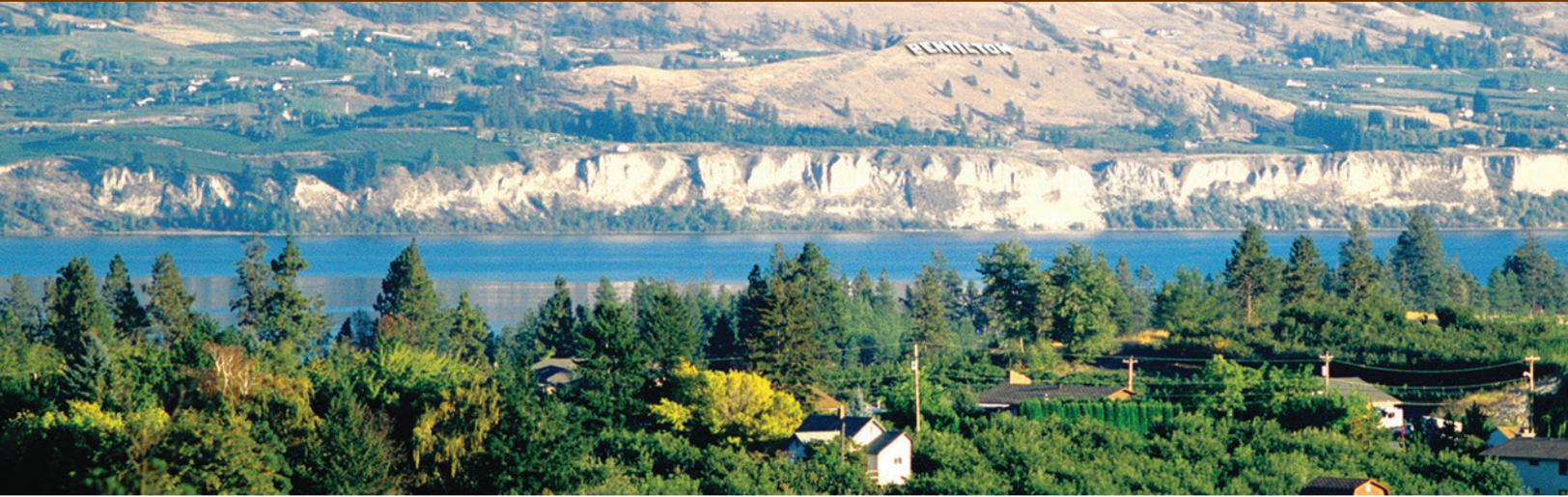
The ALC process is onerous and based on specific criteria: agricultural potential of the subject land and adjacent parcels; agricultural capability rating (Class 1, 2, 3); agricultural suitability and current use; does the proposal benefit or restrict land use and how would it impact existing or potential agricultural use. Other considerations include precedent, regional and community planning objectives, alternative location outside the ALR, local government and AAC recommendations.

Applications are first submitted to local government where they are reviewed by staff and the AAC (if there is one). Those that gain approval move on to the Board or Council and if authorized, make the final step to the commission. At that point, staff and planners assemble precedents, highlight references to the OCP, and provide maps, soil and agricultural data. Panel members read the material then head out on a three-day road trip to view the properties and meet with the applicants. After the trip the panel convenes and makes decisions.

Irvine says it's hard to get exclusions because it's not part of the commission's mandate. "Our job is to preserve and protect agricultural land and enhance it if we can." Not that she will speak for

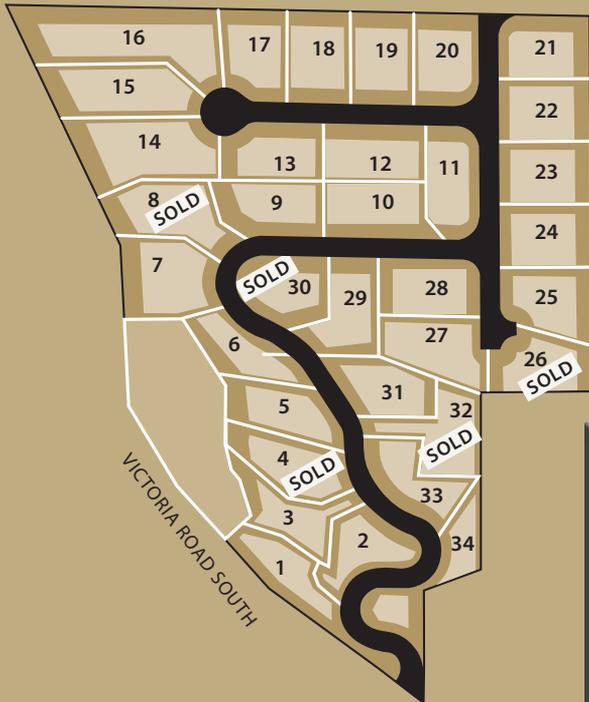
Spectacular!

Okanagan View Lots, Summerland, BC



approx. 1/3 acre lots starting from \$159,900

ONLY 28 LEFT!



- renowned Okanagan Valley allure
- discerning architectural guidelines
- 5 minutes from golf, beaches and boat launches
- country living 3 minutes from downtown Summerland
- rambling orchards, lush vineyards and natural setting

www.sedonaheights.com

**COLDWELL
BANKER**

OKANAGAN REALTY INC.
TODD GILLARD

1.877.490.8808



TONY CETINSKI, A KELOWNA ORGANIC VEGETABLE FARMER AND MEMBER OF THE RDCO AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE SAYS, "IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE NAME OF THE PERSON WHO GREW YOUR FOOD, HOW DO YOU KNOW IT'S SAFE?"

the period before the changes in 2002, especially around Kelowna where some decisions were made with cabinet override during the period when that was possible. "Our decisions are based on soil, what is the capacity of the land and the viability of the farm — not the ability of the farmer."

However, Irvine feels that the reserve still needs fine-tuning in poor soil regions where her panel spends unnecessary time — and there's no question that the group is pressed. In 2002 the Okanagan panel received 95 applications. The number climbed to 140 in 2006, although Irvine says, "that's not necessarily a trend."

Time pressure plays out on both sides of the process. Coldstream Christmas tree farmer Pat White's application took a full year. Then "when the ALR group came and viewed the property they had already seen four or five and still had the same number more." White says they were "here less than an hour" and he felt that one of the staffers was already

decided and not open to discussion. "I felt they didn't take time to examine my application in a businesslike manner." It was rejected.

While it would be understandable for a guy like White to slam the reserve, he says, "I'm totally in favour of the ALR and don't mind a hard-nosed approach. Rather than urban sprawl, we the public want to preserve agricultural land. We have to look at how we live — high-density."

Ashton agrees. "If it wasn't in place, I wonder what the Valley would look like today.... Look at Surrey and Richmond. I don't want to see that here." He underscores the importance of city governments taking a proactive approach in pushing densification. "Pop out those vineyards and orchards and what have you got. People aren't going to come here to look at houses."

People in the cattle industry are less certain. Trickett says, "BC Cattlemen's Association directors are now trying to determine a policy regarding the value, positive or negative.... Certainly, within the cattle industry there is a wide range of opinions."

But fruit grower Sardinha says, "The ALR is still a vital tool to support the industry because of its ability to regulate land use.... The BCFGA has generally supported the ALR but always said there has to be a link between the ALR and government policies and regulations, which are in place to make farming viable. If farming isn't economically viable, then the ALR has missed the mark."

Buy Local

And there's the rub, the economic viability of the agriculture industry.

Cetinski says, "I worked my whole life so I could afford to farm." In middle age, he and his wife moved here from Vancouver and bought a parcel in the ALR, actually within Kelowna city limits. Tony is proud that the property, part of

CANADA'S MOST RELIABLE WIRELESS NETWORK[†]

CANADA'S HOTTEST NEW PRODUCT



BlackBerry Pearl.

Visit www.rogers.com/reliable

It's here! The BlackBerry experience on a fully-featured phone

- The smallest, lightest BlackBerry ever
- Real-time e-mail, calendar and contacts
- 1.3 MP camera
- MP3 media player and expandable memory
- Quadband world phone

Your wireless e-mail advantage with Rogers

- 24/7 technical support
- Fastest wireless coast-to-coast network
- E-mail access in over 90 countries only from Rogers
- Exclusive time-saving applications

SOLUTIONS FOR SMALL BUSINESS:
VOICE • DATA • INTERNET • WIRELESS VOICE AND E-MAIL



CASTLEGAR
Zibin Innovations
1402 Columbia Ave.
250-365-2355

GRAND FORKS
Sunshine
Communications
7474-19th St.
250-442-5844

KAMLOOPS
Cellcom Wireless
114B-1320 West
Trans Canada Hwy
250-372-5521

Cellcom Wireless
930-1210 Summit Dr.
250-377-3902

Omega Cellular Ltd.
921 Victoria St.
250-374-3005

KELOWNA
Cellcom Wireless
350 - 2271 Harvey Ave.
250-762-6400

Metro Pacific
Cellular Inc.
13- 515 Harvey Ave.
250-862-3010

Sun West Cellular
Products Ltd.
2419 Hwy 97 North
250-861-8400

NELSON
Zibin Innovations
502 Front St.
250-354-1010

PENTICTON
Fraser Valley Wireless
114-2111 Main St.
250-770-8900

PRINCE GEORGE
Advantage Wireless
701 Victoria St
250-562-7612

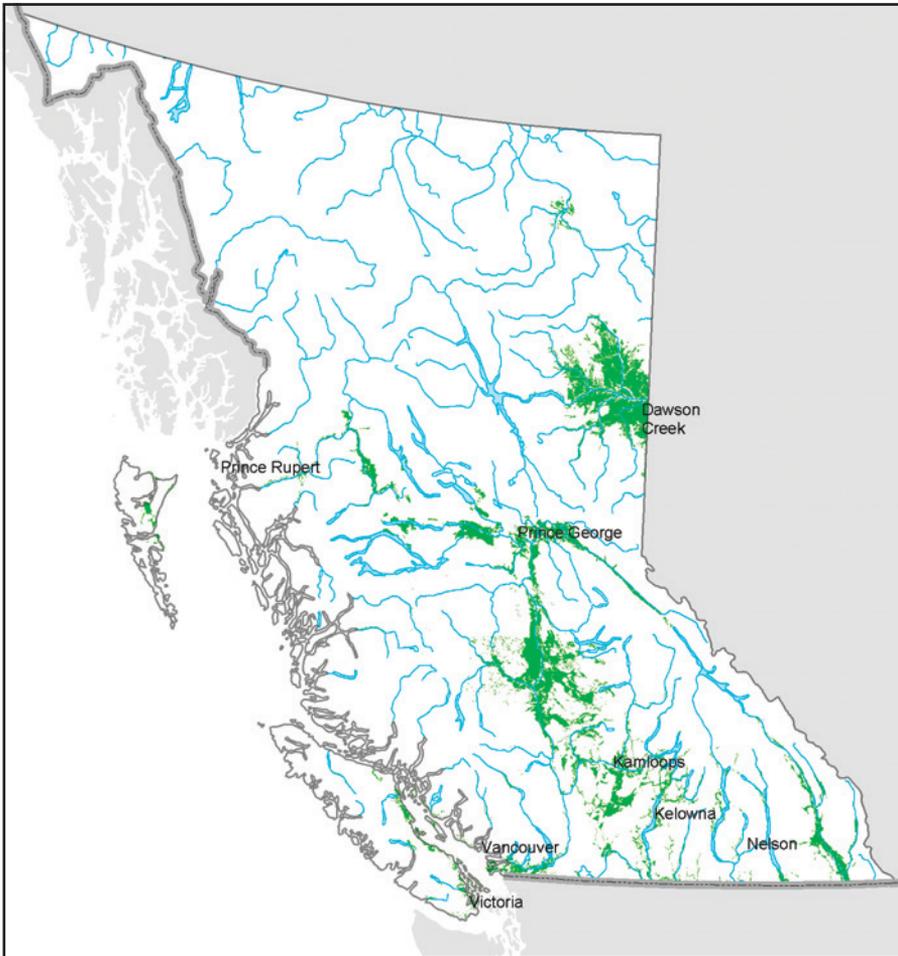
SALMON ARM
Ross Communications
875 Lakeshore Dr. S.W.
250-832-2239

VERNON
Cellcom Wireless
700-4900-27th St.
250-260-6688

Real-time delivery of e-mail and wireless calendar/contact synchronization is only available when using corporate e-mail. When using POP3 or other e-mail, new e-mail will be delivered approximately every 10 minutes and calendar/contact synchronization will not be available. [†]Most reliable network claim refers to call clarity and dropped calls test results as conducted by Rogers and a recognized third-party research company in the major urban Canadian centres within the Rogers Wireless footprint, comparing voice services of the major wireless providers. The BlackBerry and RIM families of related marks, images and symbols are the exclusive properties and trademarks of Research In Motion Limited – used by permission. [™]Trademarks of Rogers Communications Inc. used under license, or of Rogers Wireless © 2006. All other brand names and logos are trademarks of their respective owners; all rights reserved.

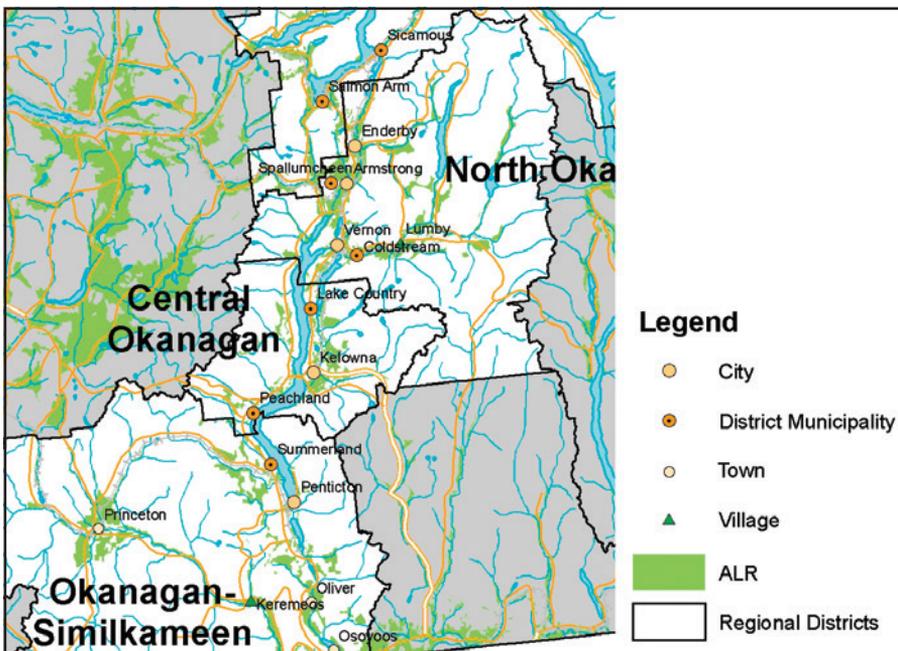
AGRICULTURAL LAND RESERVE IN BC

Map courtesy of the Agricultural Land Commission



ALR IN THE OKANAGAN REGION

Map courtesy of the Agricultural Land Commission



the original Lequime grant, has been in continuous agricultural production for 128 years. “This land would have been covered with development 30 years ago if it weren’t for the ALR and that’s true of all the land around us.”

Proving that small holdings in urban areas can be viable farms, the Cetinski’s make their living on five acres growing “everything from asparagus to zucchini.”

“Small farms need the right markets,” he says, explaining that Suncatcher Farm sells direct to upscale restaurants, local markets and Urban Harvest, nothing farther away than Westbank. He says transportation costs are killers. “You’ve got to have that local support. It starts with local consumers asking at their grocery store for local product—the wallet speaks.”

Cetinski says, “If you don’t know the first name of the person who grew your food, how do you know if it’s safe—remember e-coli in spinach?” On average, food travels 2,500 kilometres from producer to consumer. “There’s this big disconnect from the production of your very sustenance of life...You can build houses anywhere, but you can only farm on good land. If you want to protect a secure food supply for the future, you’ve got to have some local farmland.”

Priorities

Sue Irvine voices the opinion of many. “On the one hand we have continually increasing pressure for exclusions because of population growth. At the same time there is continued and even increased public support for the program. I think local governments will continue to put pressure on us. I don’t think the ALR alone is the solution. It’s a hand in the dyke. We need strong support for a provincial growth strategy with preservation of agricultural land at the core...firm growth strategies on the part of regional government and strong legislation for the right to farm.” *OL*