June 8, 2020

Honourable John Horgan,
Honourable Lana Popham, Minister of Agriculture
Via Email: Premier@gov.bc.ca, AGR.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Regarding: Agri-tech Industry and the use of Agricultural Land Reserve

Dear Premier Horgan and Minister Popham,

I write to you indicating BC Nature’s support for the 23 authors of the Open Letter (May 19, 2020) urging government to redirect its promotion of an agri-tech industry outside of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), rather than irreversibly converting farmland to non-farm use.

BC Nature (the Federation of BC Naturalists), represents more than 50 naturalists’ clubs and 6000 members province-wide. Our membership consists of dedicated naturalists, including scientists, who are connected to, have expertise in, and have concern for the preservation of British Columbia’s landscapes and the diversity of organisms inhabiting them. We support any effort to promote the integrity of our natural ecosystems, not only to protect their biodiversity, but also to protect our lives and the lives of future generations in British Columbia.

Only 5% of BC’s land base has the soil, climate, and topography suitable for agriculture. The mandate of the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) must continue to include the preservation of BC’s agricultural land resource for our food security, and the ALC must remain integral to any discussion regarding the fate of ALR lands.

While agricultural lands do not fit the definition of “natural” ecosystems, they nevertheless perform important ecosystem services. The soils and plants of farmlands provide habitat and food for many organisms that farmers do not consider pests and contribute to stemming the extinction crisis that confronts the planet. Properly managed croplands can help mitigate climate change and support the biodiversity necessary for our economy and our health. Furthermore, many believe that small-scale organic farms will better protect soils and prove more sustainable than industrial farms, including production level and reductions in GHG emissions. Organic farming at smaller scales can be cost-effective and provide ample food, while at the same time increasing employment opportunities, fighting the climate crisis by eliminating pesticide and fertilizer production, and fostering better health. Once covered with concrete and buildings, the soils and their services disappear forever.

Marginal lands are important to the operation of many farms, and those marginal farmlands that are not presently productive constitute a reserve for future farming, especially as the climate warms. If not presently farmed, the “wilding” of this land can be beneficial not only to wildlife,
but as a means of stabilizing soils and reserving water. When planted with grasses and/or trees, these lands can sequester significant amounts of carbon. Agri-tech industries that cover the land with concrete and buildings forever remove these lands from soil-based food productivity and ecological service and yield a greater carbon footprint than agriculture.

BC Nature urges you to act with long-term thinking and great caution guiding any new policy initiatives or changes that might not adhere to the government’s core values of promoting and protecting farmland.

In particular, BC Nature expresses concern that the principles of the Agricultural Land Reserve not be eroded and that the Agricultural Land Commission retains its mandate and independence. Our food security, along with biodiversity and climate mitigation, depends upon it.

Yours truly,

Harry Crosby
President, BC Nature

References:


Open Letter from 23 signatories to Premier Horgan and Minister Popham, May 19, 2020