

Mmm, MADE IN BC?¹

Colleen Kimmett[©]

When former agriculture minister Steve Thomson went on a trade mission to China last month, he brought offerings of B.C. beef, wine and fruit. The goal of the trip was to increase British Columbia's agricultural exports to burgeoning middle-class markets in China and Japan. Meanwhile, the council that represents producers across the province says the ministry is missing an opportunity to market B.C. products in our own backyard. Although the demand for local exists -- as does the environmental imperative for creating a robust local food system -- industry insiders and observers say the provincial government is not investing enough in B.C. agriculture at this critical juncture.

In mid-October, the B.C. Agriculture Council (BCAC) met with the standing committee on finance and government services as part of the consultation process for the 2011/12 provincial budget. The BCAC, which represents 33 producer associations across the province, put forth 13 recommendations to the standing committee to support the B.C. agriculture and agri-food sector, which generates \$35 billion in revenue each year and employs 300,000 people. These included tax breaks for industry, including exemption from the carbon tax, fuel tax and portions of the Harmonized Sales Tax. But number one on the list was that the ministry provide \$6 million over three years to help develop an industry-led marketing program; a way of identifying and promoting made-in-B.C. food to consumers. "The BCAC strongly supports initiatives to further develop our export markets. . ." the submission stated. "We must also, however, make more of an effort to develop our markets closer to home."

Lagging Behind Ontario, Manitoba

The buyBC program was launched in 1993 with funding from the provincial government. Essentially, the program identified made-in B.C. products and provided retailers with the resources to promote it. The exercise was estimated to have contributed to an additional 1,900 jobs over a three-year period. BCAC executive director Andrew Dolberg says provincial funding for the program was cut in 2001. At that time there were approximately 1,200 companies and associations using the logo in their advertising, and 5,000 buyBC products identified in major grocery stores. In the 2008 agriculture plan, the provincial government announced its intention to allocate funding towards a local food marketing program.

"That was agreed to by cabinet," said Dolberg. "The funding was never implemented." The province has already extended its licensing agreement with the BCAC for the buyBC logo. Now, what the BCAC wants is funding for a revamped program. Dolberg said that B.C. is lagging behind when it comes to promoting local food. In Ontario, the McGuinty government funded a four-year Market Investment Fund to "promote consumer awareness of Ontario-produced foods and encourages Ontario to buy locally." This year the Manitoba government provided \$741,100 to start a buy-local campaign, with funds being matched by the food processing industry. "Given the interest in local food the timing would be right to make an investment that so we can work with all the players in the food chain," Dolberg said. "There's a lot of good work going on to promote local products, but there's no real coordinated effort right across the board. Without that core funding, it makes it more difficult."

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BC, a Centre For Organics, Cut Funding For Agent

A spokesperson for the ministry of agriculture wrote in an email that the B.C. agriculture plan originally requested \$3 million to develop and promote a local food brand. "Funding has not been secured for the development of a B.C. brand," wrote public affairs officer Patrick Vert, "but ministry staff continues to work with industry to direct market locally, add value to their products, and promote B.C. products to domestic and international markets." Vert noted the minister's recent trade mission, as well as its support for farmers' markets and funding for the B.C. Association of Agricultural Fairs and Exhibitions and an "\$87, 000 grant to B.C. 4-H, to continue youth agriculture awareness and management of the 4-H program."

Another key recommendation in the BCAC's budget submission was that the province increase agricultural extension support, and specifically re-instate funding for a provincial organic extension agent. Agricultural extension programs provide farmers with practical information in their sector, keeping them up to date on relevant standards, practices, policies and legislation. According to the ministry, there are currently 45 employees who provide strategic services and specialized information to local producers, agriculture associations and stakeholders, and local governments.

In 2007, at the request of the Certified Organic Associations of B.C., the province funded an organic extension agent to help farmers comply with new organic standards and respond to a growing market demand for organic. British Columbia consumes more organic produce, eggs, milk and meat per capita than any other province. British Columbians represent just 13 per cent of the Canadian population, but buy 26 per cent of all Canadian certified organic food in the country, according to *StatsCan*. Rochelle Eisen served as the provincial organic extension agent from 2007 to 2010. "It looked like the beginning of a wonderful relationship, where industry-driven services were supported by the provincial government," she told The Tyee.

Explaining organic standards was a huge part of her job, not just to farmers but also wholesalers, retailers, media and the public. When provincial funding for her position was cut -- making B.C. the only province in the country without an organic extension agent -- there was an outcry from within and outside the organic community. A petition signed by farmers, wholesalers, academics, large grocery retailers and food security activists was sent to Premier Gordon Campbell. Eisen said this is just one example of how the province has downloaded its responsibilities to the agricultural industry.

Where Climate and Food Security Meet

"I don't think [organic farmers] would mind paying for extension services if that's all the person ever did was service their needs," said Eisen. However, in her experience, the job entailed dealing with many links in the organic (and non-organic) food chain; wholesalers, suppliers, retailers, even the public and the media. Therefore, farmers shouldn't be expected to bear the whole cost, Eisen said. British Columbia has one of the most diversified agricultural sectors in the country. This is advantageous when it comes to food self-sufficiency, but makes coordination among the industry difficult, according to both Eisen and Dolberg. And food security goes beyond the agricultural and agri-food sector; it is intimately connected to health, social services, labour and the environment. This is part why a "made in B.C. food strategy" can't be left to market forces alone, said Marc Lee, co-author of a new report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives called *Every Bite Counts: Climate Justice and BC's Food System*.

The report outlines the importance of an integrated, provincially-mandated approach to food and agriculture, and links not only the chains in the food system, but in other spheres of governance as well. Building a resilient food system and economy is especially important in light of climate change and the implications it might have for agriculture. According to the report, B.C. imports half its food from outside the province, and about 60 per cent of those imports are from the U.S., mainly California. Although the province is almost entirely self-sufficient in milk, eggs and poultry, only 15 per cent of the vegetables grown here are consumed here. If all vegetables grown in B.C. were consumed here, that share would rise to 60 per cent.

The report estimated that by shifting 1.5 per cent of its overall consumption to local sources each year, it could be 80 per cent food self-reliant by 2030. In order to achieve this, the report outlined key policy levers at the provincial government level, including a provincial food planning and climate framework, local food procurement policies in public institutions, support for small-scale infrastructure like abattoirs and processing facilities, and protection and expansion for the Agricultural Land Reserve. "We source a lot of imported food from California. . . which is already facing drought conditions," said Lee. "Ten, twenty years down the road production levels there are going to decline. That should be a wake-up call."