

## WHY THE VANCOUVER ISLAND FAMILY FARM MAY BE IN PERIL<sup>1</sup>

Jennifer Squires<sup>©</sup>

Ian Jones has been farming his entire life. His father, who farmed well into his 80s, his grandparents and his great-grandparents all made a living from working the land. But times have changed, says Jones. As he loads the last of this season's carrots into a woman's bag at the final Cedar Farmers' Market of the year, he seems pleased with his sales. "Cleaning up today," he says, smiling. "It's been a good year, though. This market's picked up a lot."

As a Yellowpoint farmer, Jones, 51, has been selling his goods at the Cedar market for five years. He also works as a landscaper and takes other small jobs to make ends meet. He says it's a hard life with long hours and few rewards. He hasn't had a day off since Mother's Day, when market season began. He says he farms because he enjoys it, but also because he thinks it's the right thing to do. Big agriculture and big oil are not sustainable practices and local production is necessary for future generations, says Jones, adding the food also tastes better. "You know, people come here because this is good food. This is good quality, it tastes fresh, it's nutritious and they come for that."

With increased interest in local, organically grown food and the advent of the 100-Mile Diet, the need for a sustainable food system on Vancouver Island is clearer than ever, according to many local farmers. Since the Island has become more reliant on imported foods and grains and Agricultural Land Reserve acres are lost to development, local farms face many hurdles to increase production and meet future needs. The expense of land, especially on the Island, and lack of financial support makes it hard for farmers to make ends meet. Most have secondary offsite incomes. The average age of farmers in B.C. is greater than 60 and because it's not financially feasible for most young people interested in farming to own land or live off the earnings, there is a lack of labour to replace these aging workers.

Jones's son Ewan, 19, hasn't yet decided whether he'll continue in the family tradition. By taking environmental planning at the University of Northern B.C., Ewan hasn't closed any doors, says Jones. "I wouldn't stop him if he wanted to do it (farming), but he should have some other training, just to fall back on," he says. "It's best to have a lot of skills these days to make a living." The Agricultural Land Commission, currently under review by new chairman Richard Bullock, has been in place since 1972 as a way to preserve agricultural land for farmers. Jones said that as the global population continues to increase, the sale of reserve land for development is going to hurt future generations.

"You just can't keep destroying the farmland; it's like suicide," says Jones. "It's all about making a bunch of money on developing instead of thinking about the future and future generations and what they're going to be able live on and how they're going to produce their food. It's ridiculous." A report by B.C. Auditor General John Doyle that came out in September suggests there are serious flaws in the current system. "In 1994, my office examined the commission's performance and found that there were a number of improvements needed if the commission's

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mandate was to be met," says Doyle. "Sixteen years later and upon re-examination, I found that significant challenges continue."

He found that the budget for the ALC has declined significantly, affecting its ability to effectively protect the land, and that the quality of land in the ALR has decreased even as the number of acres remain basically the same. When acres of the ALR are removed for development, they must be replaced. But often, the replacement land is not as good for farming. Since the ALR was introduced, protected farmland on Vancouver Island has decreased by about 13%, according to Doyle's report.

Dr. Dolores Gottenberg has found a way to work around the expense of owning land. A Nanaimo urban farmer who runs Dee's Harbour City Farm, she is also the director for the Nanaimo-Cedar Farmer's Institute, the Island Farmer's Institute and two local farmer's markets. As a full-time farmer, Gottenberg earns her living entirely through seasonal production of more than 70 varieties of vegetables, selling them at farmer's markets and through a home-delivery service. As an urban farmer, Gottenberg farms on borrowed land and has six gardens in different sectors of Nanaimo. From her perspective, farming must be viewed as a business. "Farming is no longer a way of life," says Gottenberg. "Anyone interested in farming also has to be entrepreneurial. That's the only way they're going to survive."

She said many people living on land in the Agricultural Land Reserve aren't actually farmers. "Unlike the rest of Canada, a farm in B.C. is identified by the land on which you live. It's not identified by the farming activities that you are involved in," says Gottenberg. According to a report conducted by From the Ground Up Rural Resource Consultants in Comox, 65% of farmers in the RDN have sales of less than \$10,000 per year. Gottenberg said the results of the ALC report will likely be skewed by the interpretation of a farmer. "I think (Bullock) will meet the people, but most of the people that live on ALR land who say they are farmers are not farmers. So what's the point of meeting with them?"

Gottenberg said the problem with maintaining food sustainability on the Island lies both with the lack of government support and with a lack of training for young farmers. Keith Wyndlow, a Cedar farmer in his late 70s, said he has found it hard to find qualified help because most young people just don't have the experience. Vancouver Island University's Dr. Jenny Horn was the lead researcher on a study conducted in December 2009 called the Agriculture Resource and Innovation Centre Feasibility Study. She said teaching children in grade school about agriculture is a good way to get future generations interested in farming. "We need to get kids and teachers more engaged with where their food comes from." Also a farmer, Horn agreed the affordability of land is one of the biggest difficulties faced on the Island. "It is a symptom of our location. We're the most desirable place to live in all of Canada," says Horn.

ALC executive director Colin Fry said Bullock's review is near completion. In July 2010, Agriculture and Lands Minister Steve Thomson asked Bullock, who took over as chairman of the ALC in June, to undertake the first review of the 4.7 million hectares of land in the ALR in several years. "As part of Mr. Bullock's review there were meetings with stakeholders held around the province. I believe he met with over 60 groups from Burnaby all the way to Fort St. John," says Fry. "He's been making progress in his report and it's well on its way to being completed." Fry said members of the public who want to give their opinion should write directly to the ALC. "Any comment from any party is welcome and if it fails to get in time for his consideration as part of his review it will always be kept and retained for further reference."

B.C. imports about half the food we eat, according to a report released Tuesday by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Every Bite Counts: Climate Justice and B.C.'s Food System*. It recommends the province increase the size of the ALR to become 80% food self-reliant by 2030. For this to happen, some major changes would be needed. Vancouver Island produces less than 5% of the food we consume. Jones said the answer lies with our local farmers. Despite the possibly bleak future, he says interest in agriculture has picked up over the last few years. "It's become a bit cooler to be a farmer, especially if providing a local product," says Jones. "More young people are interested, which is a good sign because if you don't have farmers, you have nothing. You don't have any kind of sovereignty or security at all."