

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SAVING FARMLAND

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Is saving farm land an important issue? To the BC Government, it doesn't appear to be so, but to farmers and those people who choose to buy locally-produced food, the answer is a resounding, "YES!!"

There is, of course, the obvious reason: without local farms, there's no local food. More and more farmers and conservationists are committed to not only protecting our best farm and ranch land but also to improving the environmental, social, and economic viability of agriculture. They are working not only to preserve farm land but also to:

- promote small family farms and their role in the community,
- protect local food systems,
- promote sound land and resource stewardship, and
- preserve water and soil quality.

Promoting small family farms and farm land enhances the quality of life in communities, both in rural and urban areas. There are a number of reasons why preserving them is so important.

- (1) Farm land is green space, even though most people don't think of it that way. It is a significant contributor to environmental quality. Farm and ranch lands provide food and cover for wildlife, help control flooding, protect wetlands and watersheds, and maintain air quality. They can absorb and filter wastewater and provide groundwater recharge. New-energy crops grown on farm land even have the potential to replace fossil fuels.
- (2) Farmland is critical to protecting and promoting regional food system and security programs. More and more regions and urban areas are looking to create local food systems, and want to ensure there is a source of high-quality, healthy food. Not only does supporting local farms provide this, but it also provides a stable, higher paying market for these growers and decreases costs for consumers by decreasing marketing costs by farmers.
- (3) Farmland provides fiscal stability to local governments and boosts the economy. It does this by contributing to a community's infrastructure and helps a local economy through sales, job creation, and support services or businesses.
- (4) One of the most unique of these support services is tourism, or more specifically, agrotourism. There are plenty of places that people can visit to see rural scenery or to enjoy the food or drink of a specific region, including the farm tours, bed and breakfast farm stays, Christmas tree farms, corn mazes, agricultural/historical museums, petting farms, farm markets, food festivals, pick-your-own produce farms, roadside produce stands, nurseries, greenhouses, bistros, and wineries in the Cowichan Valley. Many farms can also enhance the visitor's experience with home-cooked meals, pies and desserts, gift shops, picnic areas, hayrides, trail rides, and even cooking and gardening classes.

- (5) Those of us who care about the natural environment often worry about farming's impact to native plants and animals, and wonder if farming can actually do something to promote our wildlife. The good news is that the answer again is, "Yes." Promoting healthy, viable agriculture helps protect and restore wild nature by preserving open space for wildlife species and their habitats.

Farmers are encouraged to focus on the landscape, keeping in mind the needs of native plants and animals, and looking at ways to increase biodiversity on the farm, with the goal of reconnecting our food systems and ecosystems. It basically involves everything from taking advantage of nature's services, such as pollination and rodent control, to restoring sensitive habitats with native vegetation that was previously there.

This requires going beyond organic and sustainable farming – instead of just focusing on their own borders, wild farmers look beyond at the connectivity that happens within their watershed, where wildlife are moving through. Farmers are encouraged to farm within the natural landscape, which can often result in solving problems they have had with areas that flood or marginal areas on the farm.