

Market gardens not the answer to B.C.'s food challenges

Agriculture expert says protecting farmland more important

BY LARRY PYNN, VANCOUVER SUN DECEMBER 2, 2015



Ted van der Gulik, former provincial agriculture engineer, says protecting farmland is the most important thing British Columbia can do to make us less reliant on outside food sources.

Photograph by: Larry Pynn

British Columbians are fooling themselves if they think feel-good market gardens are the solution to making the province less reliant on outside food sources, a former provincial agriculture official said Tuesday.

Ted van der Gulik, a former senior engineer in the Ministry of Agriculture who now is president of Partnership for Water Sustainability in B.C., said that protection of farmland — including from port-related development in South Delta — is far more important, along with finding ways to better use water and to bring more irrigation to lands not suitable for growing food.

He noted that the United Kingdom has some 3,000 to 4,000 small-scale market gardens that produce only one per cent of the food consumed, which puts into perspective the comparative handful of such

operations in Metro Vancouver and a movement to convert parking lots to urban farms.

“I support market gardens, they’re good,” he said. “It’s great to grow food in parking lots, having people grow their own food. Just don’t call them food security. You’re going against food security when you are putting in (to production) two one-acre parking lots and removing 150 hectares of land at the port ... getting rid of the last large parcels of agricultural land that we have. The messaging is wrong.”

He told a Richmond conference on water and climate change that B.C. produces about 48 per cent of its current food needs. We have about 180,000 hectares of irrigated farmland across B.C. — a figure that needs to be increased to 250,000 hectares in the coming years.

Metro Vancouver has about 13,000 hectares of irrigated farmland compared with about 15,000 hectares in the Fraser Valley — which, when combined, is greater than the 20,000 hectares of irrigated land in the dry Okanagan Valley, he said.

About 85 per cent of water in the Okanagan is used for irrigation — 65 per cent for agriculture and 20 per cent for landscapes.

Blueberries are the main crop that is irrigated in Metro Vancouver, compared with forage crops in the Fraser Valley.

Van der Gulik called for more efficient use of water amid a growing population, noting that blueberry farmers have switched to drip irrigation, which has the added benefit of allowing workers to be in a field while it is undergoing irrigation.

“Farmers will do the right thing if the economics are there,” he said.

In a later interview, van der Gulik said that the Fraser River has enough water to handle future irrigation needs in the Lower Mainland if there is the government will to build the necessary infrastructure. Delta recently spent about \$20 million on irrigation improvements for its farmers, he noted. The municipality has about 6,300 hectares of farmland, of which 4,235 hectares received some form of irrigation.

“We could irrigate a lot more land,” he said. “It’s not something that’s not doable. If we had problems with food supply, we’d find the money to do it.”

Climate change is expected to increase the water needs of agriculture by an average 10 per cent by 2050, which could be accommodated through more efficient use of water, especially for fruit and vegetable crops, he added.

As B.C. warms with climate change, areas such as the Peace River in the northeast will have to switch to higher-value crops — rather than cereal crops — to justify the installation of irrigation infrastructure, he said.

lpynn@vancouver.sun.com