



the partnership
for water sustainability in bc

Waterbucket eNews on April 18, 2023
<https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

Living Water Smart in British Columbia:

*Fifty Years – and
miraculously still here: BC's
Agricultural Land Reserve*

Note to Reader:

Waterbucket eNews¹ celebrates the leadership of individuals and organizations who are guided by the vision for [Living Water Smart in British Columbia](#)².

The edition published on April 18, 2023 celebrated the 50th anniversary of British Columbia's Agricultural Land Reserve. The ALR is a testament to the incredible foresight demonstrated in 1973.

The ALR saved the land and kept the options open for future generations. Without the ALR, there would be no prospect for food security. With the ALR, food security is achievable but only if BC also secures the water supplies needed to irrigate the land that would then provide food security.

The umbrella for Partnership initiatives and programs is the [Water Sustainability Action Plan for British Columbia](#)³. In turn, the Action Plan is nested within [Living Water Smart, British Columbia's Water Plan](#).



Cover Image Credit: photo contributed by Ted van der Gulik of the Partnership for Water Sustainability

¹ <https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

² https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/11/livingwatersmart_book.pdf

³ <https://www.waterbucket.ca/cfa/sites/wbccfa/documents/media/81.pdf>

Editor's Perspective

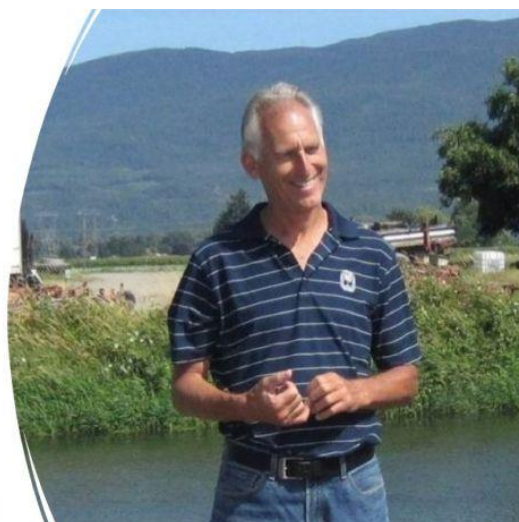
The guest Editor's Perspective for this edition of Waterbucket eNews is contributed by Ted van der Gulik, Partnership President. Two decades ago, he had a vision for a science-based approach to management of irrigation water demand in BC. As the Senior Engineer in the BC Ministry of Agriculture, he had a mandate that allowed him to put his ideas into practice with province-wide implementation of the Agriculture Water Demand Model. He continues to provide guidance, training, and oversight for program delivery.



Kim A. Stephens, Executive Director
Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC
April 2023

"We would have to increase irrigated land area by 50% to attain food security in British Columbia. The Fraser Valley alone could provide 2/3 of the area needed!"

Ted van der Gulik, President



BC's path to food security is through water security

Look back to see ahead. The 50th anniversary of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) is an opportunity for reflection followed by action. As Joan Sawicki, accurately concludes in her story behind the story, this will require equally good policy and political courage.

The ALR saved the land. Without the ALR, there would be no prospect for food security. Will today's decision makers rise to the moment and secure the water supply necessary to irrigate the land needed for food security?

In terms of risks and opportunities, the situation in the Fraser Basin illustrates what is at stake for British Columbians.

A Changing Climate Threatens Food Security

Home to two-thirds of British Columbians, the mighty Fraser River is the lifeblood of a vast watershed that stretches from the Rockies to the Pacific. The lower Fraser Valley, one of the most productive agricultural regions in Canada, is vital to BC's long-term food security.

The Fraser drains one of the most diverse watersheds in North America – for example, its vast lands contain ten of BC's fourteen biogeoclimatic zones. Yet many of the Fraser's 34 tributaries, or riversheds, have been damaged by human activity.

Meanwhile, climate change is no longer a future scenario. It is here. At the mouth of the Fraser, for example, the consequences of summer droughts and rising sea levels combine to impact river water quality while at the same time increasing the need for irrigation water.

The critical issue, or impact, is the salt wedge and the shrinking window of opportunity for pumping fresh water from the Fraser River. This is a double whammy for agriculture.

An increase in sea levels combined with a drought flow on the Fraser River would allow ocean salt water to move farther upriver in the future. This would shut down current water supply intakes for a longer period of time. Thus, it could become challenging to extract sufficient good quality irrigation water for agricultural use in Richmond and Delta.

What does this mean, really?

Gee-whiz facts!

Simply put, the water supply window for Richmond and Delta could be reduced from between 15 and 24 hours per day for present-day normal river flows, to less than 3 hours per day in the foreseeable future – due to the combination of sea level rise and drought flows.

What else do decision makers need to know?

Facts and figures help paint a picture. The Agriculture Water Demand Model is a foundation piece for food security. The model utilizes detailed land use inventories and incorporates a 500 m gridded climate data set – the only one in North America. The Agriculture Water Demand Model quantifies what we have versus what we need with respect to land and water:

Fact - BC's farmers currently produce less than 50 percent of our provincial food requirements.

Fact - The ALR is over 4 million hectares.

Fact - To achieve food security in the Year 2025, for example, BC would require ~2.8 million ha of agricultural land in production of which over 300,000 ha must be irrigated.

Fact - This means that a 50 percent increase in irrigated farmland would be required - from 200,000 to 300,000 hectares.

Fact - Increased production would be concentrated on lands with access to irrigation – typically close to urban centers.

Fact - The amount of irrigated agricultural area in the Fraser Valley is already substantial and is about 1.4 times that in the Okanagan. Few people know this.

Fact - Also, the potential buildout for irrigated farmland in the Fraser Valley is about 2.4 times the area currently irrigated.

Fact - This means that the Fraser Valley alone could provide two-thirds of the additional irrigated land area that British Columbia needs for food security. Think about that!

Fact - The Fraser River would be able to supply much of the water required. But delivering the water would require a huge investment in infrastructure.

Fact - The Fraser Basin has more than 50% of the total provincial ALR area. And the ALR accounts for close to 10% of the basin drainage area.

Given the facts, what will today's decision makers do? Fifty years from now, will future generations be praising the foresight demonstrated in 2023?



One-Minute Takeaway

“When we think of all the changes in thinking that we have gone through in the last 50 years, the Land Commission Act really is a testament to the incredible foresight demonstrated in 1973.”

- Joan Sawicki, former MLA

April 18th, 2023 is the 50th anniversary of the passage of the [Land Commission Act](#) in 1973 and subsequent creation of Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) boundaries.

Most British Columbians do not know a British Columbia without the ALR. We take it for granted and that could be a problem because threats to food security do remain. In addition, we have new challenges such as climate change and water supply sustainability that were not even on the radar screen 50 years ago.

So, what was the rationale and justification for this unprecedented intrusion into rural land use planning? And why is the ALR a testament to the foresight of 1973?

For answers to those questions, we turn to Joan Sawicki, an original employee of the Land Commission, a career land use consultant, and a former provincial cabinet minister.

“In 1973, the Agricultural Land Reserve not only preserved the land for food production for present and future generations, but it preserved the option, our one last chance, to plan our settled communities to be more resilient and sustainable, to provide adequate housing, commercial, industrial and all the other land uses that people need.”

Joan Sawicki, former Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and former Minister of Environment, Lands and Parks during the period 1991 through 2001



Keeping the Options Open

"With only about 5% of BC's land area capable of agricultural use, 50 years ago it was estimated we were losing 6000 hectares per year to non-farm uses. It was clear that local governments could not withstand development pressures upon this scarce provincial resource," recalls Joan Sawicki.

"With high reliance upon imported food from places like California and Mexico – and the increasing risks related to those sources – BC needed to safeguard its food security by ensuring our limited amount of agricultural land was available for present and future generations."

"At a time when most other jurisdictions continue to lose their food lands, BC's ALR remains the most successful agricultural land preservation program in North America. With food security now becoming a top-of-mind public issue, thanks to the foresight demonstrated in 1973 we still have "the land" – and I submit we would not still have the option for viable agricultural sectors in high growth areas like the Lower Mainland or the Okanagan without the ALR."

"The ALR has been doing exactly what it was designed to do. It is protecting the lands that can grow food and keeping our options open. That was the title of the first Land Commission brochure, **Keeping the Options Open**. Thanks to the ALR, we still have land use options moving forward."



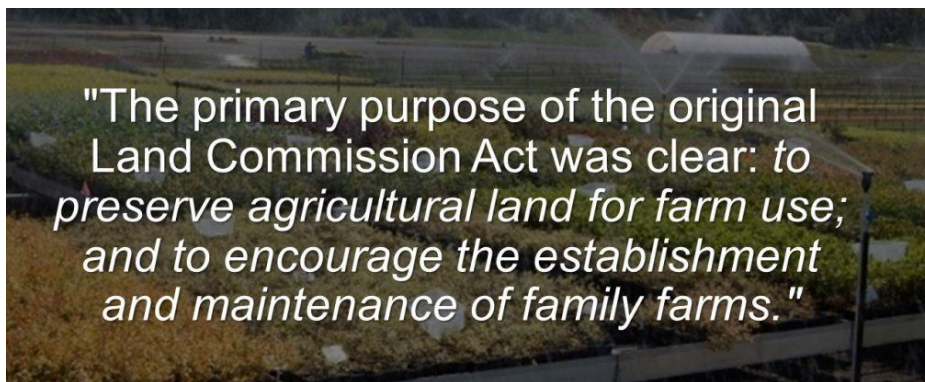
STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

Fifty Years – and miraculously still here: BC's Agricultural Land Reserve

- conversational interview with Joan Sawicki

"In August 1973, I walked into the Land Commission office in Burnaby for my first day of work, four months after the April 18 passage of the *Land Commission Act*," recalls Joan Sawicki.

"A 5-member Commission had already been appointed and my soon-to-be husband, Gary Runka, a soil scientist with the BC Department of Agriculture in Kelowna, had already been seconded to serve as General Manager."



"Our task was clear. We were to establish Agricultural Land Reserve boundaries across the province based on agriculture land capability mapping already completed under the national Canada Land Inventory (CLI) program.

"Fifty years later, I ask myself what made the ALR different and why did it last? And beyond its fundamental purpose to protect farmland, has it had a broader impact in BC?"

What makes the ALR different?

"The Land Commission Act came in the middle of the 1960s debate about **land as a commodity** that you buy and sell for the 'highest and best use' versus **land as a resource** to be managed in the greater public interest."

"The legislation made it clear that BC's scarce amount of farmland was not just a private commodity of the landowner, it was also an important provincial resource. And that provincial resource needed to be protected within a provincial zone."

"Furthermore, that protected zone would be defined on a biophysical basis – the soil/climate capability of the land to grow food. Within the ALR, food production and compatible uses would be considered 'the highest and best use'. Full stop. In my opinion, that is what makes the ALR different and is one of the main reasons why I believe it has lasted for 50 years."

"In 1973, the idea that it is in our public interest to protect farmland for future generations was pretty new. And I think it is still unique that a piece of provincial legislation mandates a rural zone based on 'science', the land's capability to grow food."

Fast forward to the present day

"While sometimes it may not feel like it, our thinking has actually changed quite a lot over the past 50 years. In the 1970s and 1980s, land as a resource continued to gain prominence – but resources were still seen in human terms. i.e., we use pieces and parts of the natural system to meet human needs. If we want or need it, then we see it as a 'resource'."

"In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, there was a growing recognition that there are some ecosystems that should be valued in their own right, quite apart from humans. This was the era when BC dramatically increased parks and protected areas."

"Then we get to today. All of a sudden, (but not without warning), the realities of climate change are upon us. And we need to change our thinking yet again to recognize that, not only do ecosystems have a value unto themselves, but we also actually NEED healthy functioning ecosystems for human survival."

“That brings us back to whole foundation of the ALR – that we need to ensure the availability and health of productive lands in order to feed ourselves, now and in the future.”

Where do we need to go next?

“How many British Columbians have even considered that the ALR has probably been the single greatest influence on community planning in BC over the past half century? “

“It was Mary Rawson, a member of the first Land Commission in 1973 who kept repeating the mantra that the best rural planning is good urban planning. Mary was the first woman planner in BC.”

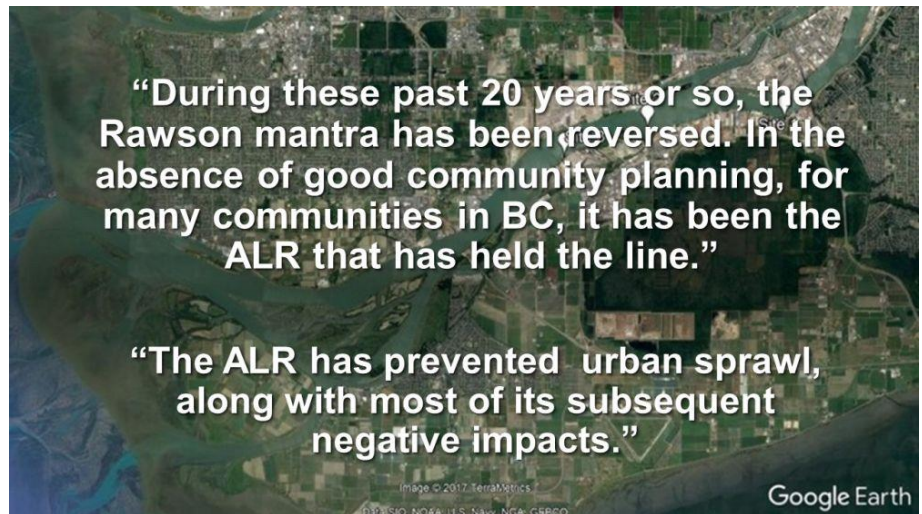


“There were several government initiatives implemented in parallel with the ALR in the 1970s through 1990s that were about good community planning. A prime example was the Georgia Basin Initiative. The ALR was the catalyst. We had the ALR, but we still had to accommodate other uses, like residential, industrial and transportation corridors. The ALR meant we had to plan our settled areas better.”

“During the early 2000s, however, there was an emphasis on smaller government and reduced budgets. The loss of planning capacity within local and regional governments has had consequences for community planning, especially in the rural areas of the province.”

“During these past 20 years or so, the Rawson mantra has been reversed. In the absence of good community planning, for many communities in BC, it has been the ALR that has held the line.”

“The ALR has prevented urban sprawl, along with most of its subsequent negative impacts.”




Importance of keeping our options open

"There are new issues that were not even on the radar screen in 1973, like climate change, biodiversity and Indigenous Reconciliation. All are complex and all demand a much broader understanding of agricultural use and ecological sustainability."

"We don't know what will face us in the future. But surely, the message of the last 50 years and the ALR is that we need to hedge our bets and keep our options open for the next 50 years too."

"In 1973, the Agricultural Land Reserve not only preserved the land for food production for present and future generations, but it preserved the option, our one last chance, to plan our settled communities to be more resilient and sustainable, to provide adequate housing, commercial, industrial and all the other land uses that people need."

"When we think of the changes in thinking that have occurred over the past 50 years, the ALR really is a testament to the incredible foresight that was demonstrated in 1973. With all the challenges we now face, it will require equally good public policy, political courage - and foresight - to guide BC through the coming decades," concludes Joan Sawicki.



"The Agricultural Land Reserve is a unique and amazingly successful program. And hopefully the lessons of the first 50 years will provide us with the wisdom and courage to forge ahead based on similar land-based principles."

- Joan Sawicki

BONUS! As an appendix, this document also includes a copy of the article that Joan Sawicki wrote for **Orders of the Day**, the newsletter of the *Association of Former MLAs of British Columbia*. This is an enlightening narrative of defining moments in the 50-year history of BC's ALR.

APPENDIX

Fifty Years – and miraculously still here: BC's Agricultural Land Reserve

An article by Joan Sawicki that was published in the April 2023 edition of *Orders of the Day* newsletter of the *Association of Former MLAs of British Columbia*

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BC's Agricultural Land Reserve turns 50

(Editor's note: In the 1960s and '70s, almost 6,000 hectares of prime agricultural land were lost yearly in British Columbia. It was recognized that the province lacked arable farmland, and food security was dwindling. The Land Commission Act was introduced on April 18th, 1973, creating the Agricultural Land Commission. The Commission identified 4.7 million hectares to be included in the Agricultural Land Reserve. In this issue of OOTD, Joan Sawicki – NDP MLA Burnaby-Willingdon (1991-2001), Environment Minister (1999-2000) and Speaker (1992-1994) – examines BC's love/hate relationship with the ALR.)

By Joan Sawicki

I walked into the Land Commission office in Burnaby for my first day of work in August 1973, three months after the April 18th passage of the Land Commission Act. I was greeted in a large room with a green carpet, stacks of 1:50,000 maps along the walls and little else. Ten telephones were sitting on the carpet. Most of them were ringing, with people at the other end of the lines angry at being caught in the land freeze and now unable to subdivide their land or use it for non-farm purposes.

A five-member commission had already been appointed. My soon-to-be husband, Gary Runka, a soil scientist with the BC Department of Agriculture office in Kelowna, had already been seconded to serve as general manager.

The purpose of the original Land Commission Act was clear: To preserve agricultural land for farm use and to encourage the establishment and maintenance of family farms. Our task was also clear. We were to establish Agricultural Land Reserve boundaries across the province based on agriculture land capability mapping already completed under the national Canada Land Inventory (CLI) program.

Over the decades, there has been much misinformation about what lands were included in the ALR and how the boundaries were drawn.

CLI mapping is a Class 1-7 system based on the soil/climate capability to grow a range of crops. It – and therefore the ALR – does not consider current land use (like being forested), jurisdictional status (whether private, Crown or federal lands) or economic viability (recognizing that market opportunities are ever-changing).

There have been suggestions that the line was shoddily drawn with no regard for regional agricultural differences. Nothing could be further from the truth. The process was an exhaustive one. Each regional district was asked to forward their suggested ALR boundaries based on agriculture capability maps provided. The guideline was to allow five years of expansion space to give local governments time to redirect their land use planning away from prime farmlands.

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The ALR – Still here, miraculously, after 50 years

By Joan Sawicki

More than 300 public hearings were held throughout the province to allow landowner input on the proposed boundaries of the Agricultural Land Reserve that the Dave Barrett government had created in 1973.

Only then did our staff's technical work begin, reviewing every mapped inch of the boundary to make further additions or deletions. While our instructions were to include all Class 1-4 lands within the ALR, regional agricultural differences meant that some Class 5 lands (important to blueberry farmers in Richmond and forage producers in Bulkley Valley, for example) were also included. In the ranching areas of the province, some non-arable Class 6 grasslands were included based on their critical importance as spring grazing lands for the livestock industry.

Once finalized, maps were forwarded to cabinet for designation. Most regional district ALRs were designated by the end of 1975.

So, what was the rationale and justification for this unprecedented intrusion into rural land use planning? With only about five per cent of BC's land area capable of agricultural use, it was estimated we were losing 6,000 ha/year to non-farm uses. It was clear that local governments could not withstand development pressures upon this scarce provincial resource. With high reliance upon imported food from places like California and Mexico – and the increasing risks related to those sources – BC needed to safeguard its food security by ensuring our limited agricultural land was available for present and future generations.

Our first public brochure was titled *"Keeping the Options Open."* It was never envisioned that every acre of the ALR would be farmed; other compatible uses were permitted, providing they did not destroy the inherent capability of the land to grow food.

There was also a recognition that, while saving the land was critical, it would not be enough. We also needed to save the farmer and protect the integrity of rural farming communities. (One could argue we have not lived up to that part of the social contract during the first 50 years of the ALR.)

While the original act's primary focus was preserving farmland, it also included secondary objectives related to parklands, greenbelts and industrial land banks. Many Lower Mainland greenbelts were established through purchase by the land commission during these early years.



If 1973 to 1975 were "The Formative Years," the next 20 years could be labelled "The Refinement Years." While successive governments tweaked the legislation at their pleasure, none dared rescind it. As an independent commission, the ALC was left to roll with the punches while burdened with thousands of applications for further subdivision/non-farm use of farmland or outright exclusion of land from the ALR.

Some significant legislative/regulatory changes happened during this period:

- In 1977, the act was changed to delete all references to parkland, greenbelt and industrial land bank provisions and renamed the Agricultural Land Commission Act.
- That same legislative change introduced appeals of commission decisions to cabinet. It was a disaster. Putting decision-making back into the hands of politicians undermined the scientific basis of the ALR, the source of its strength and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. After several high-profile cabinet decisions, the provision was eliminated in 1993.

This was also a heyday of collaboration between the ALC and local governments across the province. It included joint fine-tuning projects (often related to updating official community plans) and planning assistance to help local governments support and protect their farming communities from the negative impacts of non-farm use.

From about the mid-1990s onward, the next 20 years of the ALR can only be called "The Uncertain Years," when the original spirit and intent of the ALR/ALC was challenged, then fuzzified, then blurred almost to destruction.

- The invoking of the hither-to unused "provincial interest" clause of the act resulted in the Six Mile Ranch case being traumatic for me. I eventually resigned from my Parliamentary Secretary position over it. Subsequent to the exclusion of 300 acres of Six Mile land outside Kamloops, the clause was amended to give clear priority to preserving agricultural land. With such a high bar, this provision has never again been used.

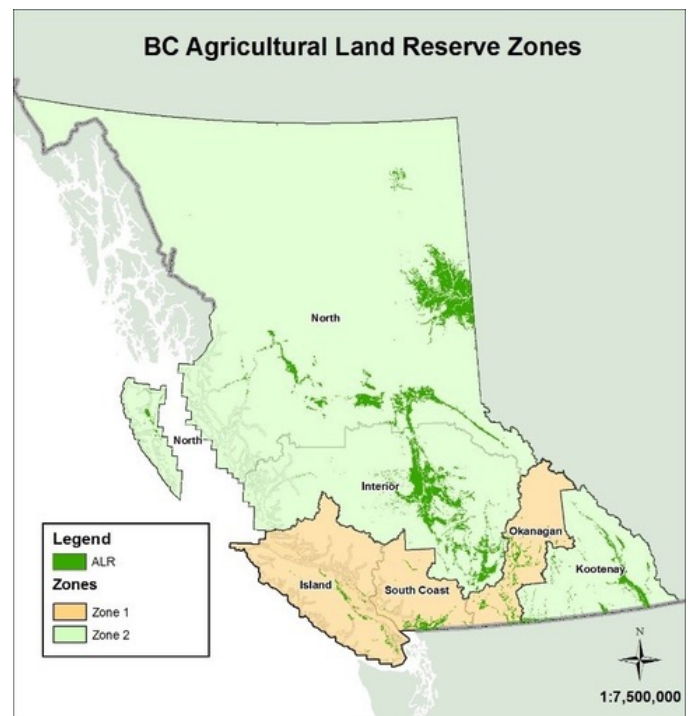
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- The 1996 Right-to-Farm Act was a positive step towards protecting farmers using standard farming practices from non-farm neighbours unhappy with such things as farmyard smells and tractor noise.
- In 2000, the legislative purpose of the ALR was 'fuzzified' when Forest Land Reserve was formally amalgamated with a subsequent renaming as the Land Reserve Commission. It was an illogical coupling as the FLR was based on tenure, and the ALR was based on science. The marriage did not last long.
- When the entity was returned as the Agricultural Land Commission in 2002, the legislative purpose was again blurred by requiring the ALC to address community needs. It was also restructured from a single provincial commission responsible for a provincial zone to six three-person regional panels. This virtually returned us to the situation that had led to the formation of the provincial zone in the first place – the fact that local or regional considerations alone could not be relied upon to protect scarce provincial agricultural lands for present and future generations of British Columbians.
- This undermining of the original spirit and intent of the ALR was further exacerbated in 2014 by dividing the ALR into two zones based on the premise that the Lower Mainland (Zone 1) was dominantly "good land" and should be subject to stricter rules while the Interior/North (Zone 2) was dominantly "poor land" and should have more flexible rules. It offended the principles of fairness, equity and consistency upon which 40 years of ALR management had been based.

This brings us to the current era, which I have temporarily labelled "The Hopeful Years."

An advisory committee on "Revitalizing the Agricultural Land Reserve and the Agricultural Land Commission" tabled its final report in December 2018. With its primary message being "agriculture first" within the ALR, subsequent legislative amendments addressed several of the committee's recommendations, including reinstating a single provincial ALR zone and re-establishing the precedence of a provincial quasi-judicial body over regional panels. However, other important recommendations remain to be dealt with.

There are new issues that were not even on the radar screen in 1973, like climate change, biodiversity and Indigenous reconciliation. All are complex and demand a much broader understanding of agricultural use beyond our



current emphasis on dominantly large-scale enterprises dedicated to planting/fertilizing/harvesting of single crops and intensive livestock. Embracing the concepts of regenerative agriculture and traditional Indigenous food systems can help us make the required shift in thinking.

However, none of this should detract from celebrating the ALR's undeniable success to date. At a time when most other jurisdictions continue to lose their food lands, BC's ALR remains the most successful agricultural land preservation program in North America. With food security now a top-of-mind public issue, thanks to the foresight demonstrated in 1973, we still have "the land" – and we would not have even our traditional agriculture sectors in the Lower Mainland or the Okanagan without the ALR.

By boldly grounding a political program on science – i.e. the inherent combination of soil, water and sunshine that is the essence of the land's productive capacity to grow ... anything – the ALR set us on the right path. It got us to here. But it will require equally good public policy and political courage in the years ahead if history is to label our current era as "The Recommitment Years" for BC's ALR.



the partnership
for water sustainability in bc

Celebration of Our Story: Genesis / First Decade / What Next

November 19th 2020

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About the Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia

Incorporation of the Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia as a not-for-profit society on November 19, 2010 was a milestone moment. Incorporation signified a bold leap forward.

Over two decades, the Partnership had evolved from a technical committee in the 1990s, to a “water roundtable” in the first decade of the 2000s, and then to a legal entity. The Partnership has its roots in government – local, provincial, federal.

The Partnership has a primary goal, to **build bridges of understanding** and pass the baton from the past to the present and future. To achieve the goal, the Partnership is growing a network in the local government setting. This network embraces collaborative leadership and **inter-generational collaboration**.

The Partnership believes that when each generation is receptive to accepting the inter-generational baton and embracing the wisdom that goes with it, the decisions of successive generations will benefit from and build upon the experience of those who went before them.



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