

# **Is Sustainable Agriculture on Vancouver Island possible?**

*2009 the Farmer's View*

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This report is part of a Community Based Research project supported by the BC Medical Services Foundation of the Vancouver Foundation



The project was part of the Island Good Food Initiative hosted by Nanaimo Foodshare



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## ***A. Rationale for Study***

The primary goal for conducting this study was to find insights into how to increase sustainable food production on Vancouver Island. We felt the best way to learn this was to interview farmers, of all ages, experience and farming methods.

## ***B. Study Method***

An open-ended questionnaire was developed. (See appendix 2). This included several key areas to initiate discussion. Farmer's comments were kept anonymous to enhance their willingness and openness to participate. A fifty dollar honorarium was given to participating farmers to honour their time and commitment to the study.

## ***C. Researcher's Credentials***

Dr. William E. Code    Summary of Appendix 1: Code CV

B.Sc. Anatomy

MD

Canadian (FRCPC) and USA Board Exams in Anaesthesiology

Authored Winning the Pain Game

Fellowship Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona

Board Member B.C. Agriculture's ARDCORP

Past President of the Island Farmers' Alliance (IFA)

Member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers

Member of the Canadian Anaesthetists Society, BC Medical Association and Canadian MA

Member of the Association of Complementary and Integrative Physicians of British Columbia

## ***D. Themes***

### ***1. Labour***

Virtually all smaller farms and most of the medium farms require labour at peak seasons – especially seeding and harvest. This included one or two trained labour personnel if equipment was involved. In addition, none of the farmers were keen to take on responsibility for WorkSafe BC or paying Revenue Canada if they could avoid it. Farm Safety was seen as a potential obstacle by some, but not insurmountable. This discussion bodes well for Heritage Foodservice Co-op's Labour Division and their Farm Contractor License. Most producers limit their production to either what they can produce with their own labour, or their own marketing or both. They see available labour, at reasonable cost, being very key to increased food production via sustainable methods.

## ***2. Water for Growing Food***

Agricultural water is emerging as a critical piece of farming, all over Vancouver Island. The crisis varies from acute in the Cowichan Valley, especially North Cowichan Municipal District to control in the Capital region. The capital region implemented a fair rate for farmers after their residential limit was exceeded. In contrast, North Cowichan charges a higher price for water, the more you use. It is a limiting step for growth of vegetables by two of the farmers interviewed. Potable water for washing vegetables or organic farming was noted by two other farmers as a rate limiting step. The underground aquifers, which supply wells, are dropping here on Vancouver Island. As this decreases, access to water could become the number one issue in sustainable agriculture.

## ***3. Bureaucracy***

Respondents reported that regulations, bureaucracy, and government intervention are tearing apart what little farm fabric we have left. Taxation, at municipal, provincial, and federal level each takes their toll. For example, farmers are being asked to initiate a Biodiversity plan for sustainability of environment and native plants and animals by the provincial and federal governments. Meanwhile portions of farm properties are being taxed at a commercial or residential rate if it is not directly growing a visible crop. This is under review in BC at present, but these two processes are primarily contradictory. Furthermore, they are discouraging forest edges, water, and marsh habitat and organic requiring 'edges' with this policy. Why is there this huge negative impact against biodiversity in the name of a tax grab, or to legislate against the small number of abusers of farm taxation? Federal and provincial income taxes have a similar conundrum or dichotomy. Almost all farmers have one or two members working off the farm to sustain the farm, as farm income is inadequate. Yet these farmers are unable to deduct their farm expenses against their outside the farm income unless they can prove an unbroken "multigenerational" farm has occurred. This defies new farmers or returning family members if one generation broke the chain of continuous farming by a family.

Perhaps the largest regulatory impediment to local sustainable farming is the meat regulation changes of the last five years. In an effort to achieve a standard that all meat slaughtered can be exported, government has all but eliminated the ability to run a slaughterhouse at anything but the large scale abattoirs. While CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) is largely underfunded, government insists that all meat be slaughtered under their direct inspection in Class A facilities. Yet, BC's Class C facilities have continued to have their licences extended so the Class A facilities, which have invested heavily in infrastructure improvements, are going broke as farmers will use the cheapest, most convenient option available, even if turns out to be illegal to sell product from a Class C facility. The overall result is people avoiding raising livestock altogether. This is in direct contravention of sustainable food production on the island.

## ***4. Marketing Boards***

The majority of farmers had some experience with marketing boards. Most of their comments were negative. These comments ranged from personal frustration with their own operation within marketing boards or others that felt they limited their ability to expand their own chicken, egg, or vegetable operation. One farmer perhaps summed it up best. He stated if marketing boards were truly set up to maintain the family farm, then they have failed. Instead they have insisted on industrial farming techniques to produce large volumes while sacrificing quality, taste and animal well-being due to factory farming. Perhaps we need to ask whether marketing boards are to provide cheap food to consumers or are they pitting small and medium farmers against large industrial farms. If the latter, which I believe is the case, then marketing boards do not support sustainable farming. In addition, the

small broiler chicken quotas currently available end up with the worst of both worlds. The low fixed price for these broilers is a recipe for going broke, as stated by a young farmer doing it for two years.

### ***5. Insurance***

Insurance, "what if" and similar "cover my backside" issues are a major impediment to value adding of food and even fresh vegetables, fruit and meat. A good example is one farm, after participating in Saanich Fair's Direct Farm marketing section for twelve years, have had to withdraw in 2009. Their insurance company will not cover them for Fairs, without commercial insurance, which is very expensive for a 3-day event. There is a major need for reasonably priced insurance (e.g. less than \$2000/year) to cover farm, residence and liability issues in addition to product sales. One example cited was the Horse Council provides very reasonable insurance for all transportation of horses and donkeys. Several farmers sincerely need dental and extended health benefits for their families. This is critical unless one of their off-farm jobs supplies it. In summary, most stores and institutions have downloaded most of their insurance issues on to the producer. Meanwhile, each producer must negotiate a "one off" policy at considerable time and expense investment.

### ***6. Succession Planning***

Succession planning is a key piece for several medium farms. This is a complex issue. On one hand the farm value is the older farmer's only retirement nest egg. Meanwhile, for the younger farmer, it is the huge capital outlay which is daunting for them. Complications include Capital gains tax and credit choices. Farm Credit Canada offer high interest rates and Credit Unions will not lend to farms. One farmer stated the need for inexpensive capital to purchase farm or for enhancing it with wells, ponds, deer fencing, barns, greenhouses, drainage and soil enhancement. It is a minimum of ten, or even twenty years, for significant return on investment. There probably needs to be government assistance in this area to encourage young farmers to get started. This may be partly solved with backing of mortgages or rental-to-own agreements.

### ***7. Smaller Farms and Sustainability***

Smaller farms distribute the risk, per different sites and ecosystems. For example, if there is a late frost in Comox or Cedar areas, then often the Cowichan Valley or Metchosin will be spared. In addition, this increases the options of healthy seed and harvest, as these diverse (10 – 30) vegetable farms, using integrated pest management will reduce the risk of crop failure per disease, pests, drought and flood.

One of our bigger producers, nearly 100 acres, stated categorically we need both medium and small farms. The crops that lend themselves to commercial production, such as potatoes, carrots, and parsnips benefit from larger fields and mechanized farming. Meanwhile, other crops, suited to the high-end restaurant market are best suited to organic, intensive labour and attention to detail, all of which enhance sustainability of farms especially small farms. These crops include lemons, eggplant, salsify, purple carrots, sweet potatoes and herbs such as cilantro, dill and tarragon. Let us not forget specialty animals in this consideration. This would include Blue State Turkeys, emus, heritage chickens geared for pasture, docile rooting Large Black or Berkshire pigs, sheep for optimal wool or meat production, and smaller easier to handle cattle such as Dexter. Each of these species can have a place in a sustainable, non-factory, farming system.

### ***8. Agriculture extension: Education & Training***

Agriculture extension by Agriculture Representatives has all but disappeared in B.C. The three left on Vancouver Island are virtually told not to leave their offices and are not even paid mileage to visit

farms. Farmers are now flocking to agriculture presentations of interest to them. For example, over 100 attended Cowichan Agricultural Society's "Soil Food Web" all day seminar in Duncan with farmers from as far as Comox, Saanich and even Abbotsford.

There is a major deficit in training on growing vegetables on a market garden scale. Many farmers would adapt to starting this if they knew how. Trained workers are also a problem here.

Dairy farmers are also chronically short of trained personnel. A soon to be reported study by Dr. Jenny Horn, of Duncan, contracted by Vancouver Island University with support by a number of farmer groups, including the Island Farmers' Alliance, outlines very well where this education and training could be addressed.

We have huge powers in the hands of Fisheries and Oceans re: native species but virtually no funds to agriculture for education, extension, farm visits, or field days. Consequently most farmers feel isolated and keep doing what they are doing or what they learn from fertilizer, pesticide, herbicide and now even hybrid seed suppliers. These non-farmer groups have a profit for their shareholders agenda. Also, these corporate representatives are usually trained in "get-big or go home" or export agriculture pattern. What does this do for sustainable agriculture? It decimates it, through salinization of soils, chemical residuals, and seeds that cannot be re-grown. On the Island our major issue is hybrid GMO corn, so what can you do if your neighbouring dairy farmer grows it and uses "Round-up" to farm it? Those who farm GMO crops are at odds with those that oppose these practices. This issue has separated farmers on the island into uncomfortable 'camps'.

### ***9. Increased Animal Production***

Increased animal production would be an important component of more sustainable farming. Animals are needed not only for their meat, hides and wool, but also for their manure which is necessary for soil recovery. Large animals, raised on grass, are limited by access to economical pasture and hay. Cattle and sheep farmers are limited in their expansion by access to pasture. Vancouver Island has no 'community pastures' as the prairies do. Yet modern electric fencing and mobile handling gates would permit use of much idle land. For example, one sheep farmer does 90% of his grazing on other people's land. This is a superb model to follow. One cattle farmer could double his output if he had separate grazing land for his young heifers (females).

Smaller animals such as chickens, turkeys, pigs, and rabbits are limited due to high cost of grain, as a supplement to their pasture diet. Grain production on Vancouver Island would help solve this dependency on grain imports. Some farmers are once again developing grain crops on the island but this is far below the demand.

### ***10. Equipment***

Equipment was very frequently noted as being an important issue by vegetable and fruit farmers. I will outline this in two areas.

The first is the equipment that would best be shared. This model is successful in the Comox Valley equipment co-op. In fact, until 25 years ago the Cowichan valley had one as well. This would include expensive items – equipment which has a critical role, but is only needed a limited number of days on each farm. These would include: 1) tractors, 2) sub-soiler, 3) walking tractor, 4) wheel hoes, 5) transplant equipment, 6) dryers for beans, garlic and grains, 7) coolers, 8) root crop harvester, 9) raised bed makers which also lay down irrigation drip tape and cornstarch based mulch.

The second area is general farm infrastructure, coupled with sharing purchasing power and knowledge. The farm "equipment" would include deer fence, irrigation ponds or wells, drip irrigation, greenhouses and hoop houses. The purchasing power needed is a group of farmers united, as in

Heritage Foodservice Co-op, so they can better group purchase irrigation equipment, vegetable boxes, greenhouses, organic animal feed, crop row cover, and even garden tools. I was very impressed that all farmers are willing to share their knowledge in all of these endeavours. This spirit of cooperation will serve us very well.

### ***E. Researcher's Experience and Personal Learning***

I enjoyed completing this work even more than I had expected. I found farmers anxious to be heard and keen to contribute to a survey to help "fix" farming. In addition, the hope still present, even in those on the edge of despair, was heart-warming. I also learned how much older (average age of 60) farmers are across Vancouver Island and why this seems to be the case. In many cases sons and daughters have been encouraged to leave the farm for better job prospects elsewhere. Also, others have left not wanting to suffer the long hours and major financial risk farmers live under. I believe we have maintained cheap food in Canada primarily on the backs of the producers themselves. They are almost all heavily mortgaged and the only option left for retirement is sell the land to the highest bidder, which is often the real estate developer. I further believe we are at risk of losing the fabric of what built much of Canada i.e. the family farm.

Personally, I learned that everyone has some insights to offer as to the problems and solutions of more sustainable farming on Vancouver Island. Nearly half of the farmers interviewed were medium size i.e. thirty or more acres. We have no large farms on Vancouver Island. Most of these medium farms have been there for generations and they are proud of it. I also learned that innovation, creativity, and "making do" are still a key part to successful farming. This has not changed since I grew up on a small mixed farm in Saskatchewan in the 1960's. The "local food" and "100 mile diet" has given renewed hope to farmers when they desperately need it. However, the economic crisis of late 2008 and continued now to summer 2009 has taken its toll on farm gate prices and eliminated many jobs which supported the farmers directly. Hence, we must all strive to maintain our farms, encourage sustainable agriculture and increase, even double, what we pay for our food – closer to the Europeans.

### ***F. Conclusions***

Farmers, in general, are optimistic about the future, perhaps unreasonably so. Most are trying to include marketing, distribution and management of labour in their already busy life of growing food. This coupled with the high cost of land, buildings, seed, breeding stock and skilled labour are daunting with regard to expansion of their food production. Virtually, all are keen on sustainable methods and recognize they are critical stewards of the land, water and its ecosystems. In addition, almost all are frustrated with increasing regulations from all three levels of government, municipal, provincial and federal. This varies from water issues, land taxation, meat regulations and personal income tax. These constraints, which they feel put them at risk, are perhaps their greatest frustration, or stumbling blocks, as they generally feel helpless against it.

In summary, farmers are a cautiously optimistic, independent group who choose to farm for lifestyle, and sustainable, healthy food. However, for new farmers to begin, or current farmers to continue and/or expand, we need to address their issues as a society, or we will lose a critical piece of our health and society.

### ***G. Recommendations***

I see the need for an action plan for sustainable food on Vancouver Island to include farming, business, health groups and government, all at the table. This could begin with a Vancouver Island Economic Alliance initiated conference, as soon as possible. It would include input from current farm

groups such as the Island Farmers' Alliance, District A and their constituent Farmers' Institutes including Cowichan Agriculture Society and the Peninsula Agriculture Commission.

I also recommend presentations at municipal and provincial bodies to explain the gravity and possible solutions to this accelerating crisis. Included in this must be the discussion that if our current infrastructure of such pieces as local abattoirs, domestic animal feed, sheep shearing, seed houses, and farming experience are lost we will have a desperate, perhaps impossible challenge to replace them.

We must make farming profitable. Today farmers continue to borrow on their land values simply to pay increased input costs. They, i.e. farmers, are subsidizing our low food costs in Canada, at their expense. We must be creative in solving this. We cannot wait for world drought crisis and the end of cheap oil to be our solution. Instead, we should focus on local solutions, i) the health of seasonal food ii) local food processing, with profits to farmers iii) local people employed gainfully and respectfully in food production – on farms, in abattoirs and food processing iv) enhanced farm rent solutions for new farmers v) inexpensive capital for today's or future farmers.

I believe we are at a critical crossroads. I also believe that not only can we do this, we must, if not for ourselves, then for our children's and grandchildren's health and well-being.

## Appendix 1: Code CV

Curriculum Vitae/Biographical Sketch

Dr. William E. Code

5816 Menzies Rd.

Duncan, B.C.

1975 University of Saskatchewan, (Saskatoon, Canada) B.Sc. Anatomy.

1975 Married Denise Joubert, graduate of the Nutrition and Dietetics Program, University of Saskatchewan.

1978 Obtained medical degree, MD,; valedictorian at medical graduation.

1979 Chief Intern, St. Paul's Hospital, Saskatoon, Sask.

1979-1983 Family Practice, Hudson Bay, Saskatchewan

1980-1983 Clinical Lecturer, Family Medicine, University of Saskatchewan.

1983-1988 Anesthesiology and Intensive Care Residency, University of Calgary. In 1987, completed Canadian (FRCPC) and USA Board Exams in Anesthesiology.

1986 Fellowship, Alberta Heritage Medical Research Foundation.

1987 Clinical Fellowship, Alberta Heritage Medical Research Foundation.

1986-1992 Awarded 12 Research Grants.

1987 Best Research Project, Calgary Anesthesia Residents' Day.

1987-1988 Two year neuropharmacology lab-based research.

1988-1992 University of Saskatchewan, Department of Medicine, Research Director for 40 member Anesthesiology Department.

1989-1992 Residency Program Director of 16 MDs. Our residents were selected for 5 out of 10 research presentations from 16 Canadian training programs in 1990.

1989-1992 One of 3 founding members of the Center of Excellence for Stroke Research, receiving a million dollar grant from the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada.

1988-1992 Joint appointments in Physiology and Pharmacology with teaching students from the colleges of Medicine, Nursing and Pharmacy. Supervisor of Master's student in Neuropharmacology. Joint Coordinator of Satellite meeting of Neurosciences with world-wide representation.

1991 Awarded "Honorary Flight Surgeon" for services to Air Canada Flights 837 and 171.

1991 Promoted to Associate Professor, from Assistant Professor.

1992 Awarded tenure at the University of Saskatchewan.

Awarded 12 research grants from 1986-1992.

Invited anesthesiology lecturer throughout North America.

Over one dozen articles published in peer-reviewed medical journals. Over 50 papers in refereed medical journals and in conference proceedings.

1992 August, moved from a research, teaching and clinical role to mainly a clinical role on the West Coast for issues of health and family. Maintained role as Clinical Associate Professor for a further five years.

1993 Named "Quintessential Baby Boomer" in the Canada's Fortune 500 edition of the Financial Post Magazine.

1993 Began to farm emus.

1994-1996 Chief of Anesthesia and Pain Management, Cowichan District Hospital, Duncan, BC.

1996 Invited to present a paper to the 11th World Congress of Anesthesiologists, April 14-20, Sydney, Australia. Presented "Non-opiate Centrally Acting Analgesics" to 2500 delegates. Paper was published in the conference book, 150 Years On.

1996 August, diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis which led to retirement from clinical anesthesiology. This led to the exploration of complementary and nutritional solutions.

1997 Invited to speak at the American Emu Association Conference on the biomedical potential for emu oil as a transdermal carrier for anesthetics.

1999 Invited to write a book on healthy nutrition for chronic illness. Published Youth Renewed: A Common Sense Approach to Vibrant Health at Any Age.

1999- present: Health Seminars presented to Health Professionals and the public on complementary choices to maintain or restore health.

Speaker outlining Whey Protein Isolate's place in Health Recovery throughout cities in Canada and the United States, 2003-August 2006.

August 2003: invited speaker, American National Naturopath's Annual Convention, Portland, OR, outlining the role of Whey Protein Isolate in Wound Healing, AIDS, Cancer and Hepatitis B & C.

August 2003: Presentation on Whey protein Isolate's role in wound healing to Mariner Nursing Home Regional Group, Austin, TX, dietitians and nursing home managers.

October 2003: Presentation re Whey Protein Isolate's role in wound healing at the American Dietetic Association Conference in San Antonio, TX.

2003 Attended the International Oil & Fats Meeting, Bordeaux, France and the Joint Meeting of Irish & Canadian Anesthesiologists in Killarney, Kerry, Ireland.

2005 Authored Who's in Control of Your Multiple Sclerosis? Pieces of the MS Recovery Puzzle, which guides people with MS through alternative approaches to help them with their health journey.

2006 Published the following paper: "Nutritional Characteristics of Emu Meat and its Value-Added Products. Food Chemistry 97(2006)193-202, Ronald B. Pegg, Ryszard Amarowica and William E. Code.

2006 Invited to be a member of the Specialty Bird Committee at the Avian Research Centre, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, University of British Columbia.

2006 In November, his company, Canadian Emu Oil Limited, was awarded the MISTIC Science Technology and Innovation Award for Health. This was awarded for work with emus, emu oil and research in these areas.

2007 Authored Winning the Pain Game, which provides information on alternative ways to manage pain in chronic illness.

2007 Accepted to the Fellowship Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona, under the direction of Dr. Andrew Weil.

2008 Invited and presented the 1st Annual Heggie Lecture on Integrative Medicine Conference, University of Saskatchewan

2008 Presentation World Poultry Conference, Ratite Symposium, Brisbane, Australia

2008 Graduated from the two year Fellowship Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona

2008 President Island Farmers' Alliance

2009 Board Member Vancouver Island Heritage Foodservice Cooperative

September 2009 Board Member B.C. Agriculture's ARDCORP

## Appendix 2: Study questionnaire

### Increasing Sustainable Farm Production on Vancouver Island Farmer Outreach and interviews, Winter/Spring, 2009

The partners in the Island Good Food Initiative have been working with publicly funded island institutions and agencies to encourage them to buy more Vancouver Island food. This work has been very successful. 2009 will see purchasers favouring Vancouver Island food. Some, led by the University of Victoria, are planning specific Requests for Proposal for Vancouver Island foods early in the year!

These institutions and agencies spend millions of dollars on food—Vancouver Island producers have only been able to fulfill a tiny proportion of this in the past. Our past research has shown that farmers were very interested in this market 'in theory.' Many partners have been working to make it possible for Vancouver Island farmers to actually be able to reach this market at price advantage to Vancouver Island producers. Now the crunch is upon us. Are Vancouver Island farmers ready to take advantage of this new market by increasing production in 2009?

Furthermore, the rationale that has helped open up these new markets is based upon the increasing awareness about the need for public purchasing to promote sustainable practices. As well, there is increasing pressure on them to reduce the 'carbon footprint' of their purchases. So the purchasers will be requiring information about sustainable practices of the producers—economically, environmentally and socially. Again, partners in the Island Good Food Initiative are working on how to 'measure' and 'track' these variables in a straightforward fashion.

Thank you for being willing to participate in yet another interview—but we are getting close to making big changes—we need to find out how to best support farmers to respond to these new markets!

Interview # \_\_\_\_\_

Questions:

1. How are you feeling about farming these days?

- cynical and jaded
  - really discouraged
  - planning to leave farming this year
  - hopeful
  - other
- 

2. What difference do you think that rising demand for Vancouver Island grown food with measurable sustainability practices will have on Vancouver Island farming?

- none
- won't make much difference to me
- should help a lot

3. Are you interested in increasing production of food products for the institutional and high end restaurant market that is measured for sustainability?

- Yes
- Depends upon the price points
- Depends if I get a solid contract
- Not this year but will consider it for next year
- No—I am happy with my current production plans

4. What would help you increase your production of sustainable food in 2009?

Being sure what to plant and produce

Understanding what sustainable practices that will be measured

- Financing for seed and animal purchase
- Access to casual labour
- Help with my business plan
- Help with a succession plan
- Access to equipment \_\_\_\_\_
- Access to affordable insurance
- Access to affordable distribution services
- Access to affordable warehousing services
- Access to meat processing facilities
- Access to marketing services
  - Branding
  - Labelling
  - Packaging
  - Sales
  - Record keeping
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Would you be interested in planning your crop in co-operation with other farmers to meet this institutional and high end market

Yes, I will attend a crop planning meeting

I would respond to an order for the following products: (please sign consent form to this effect)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I am interested in hosting a field day for other members

I am interesting in attending a field day to visit other farms

6. Do you produce any value-added products that might be of interest to this market?

Are you considering scaling these products up to commercial levels for Vancouver Island demand?

Do you need access to a co-packing processing facility to process your value-added product in a registered food safe environment?

Do you have ideas for other value –added products?

Could you use help in any way with getting your value-added products to a consistent market?

7. I use ecological methods to produce my products

certified by \_\_\_\_\_

non-certified

8. I am concerned about marketing board issues.

Yes

Explain any experiences or concerns.

No

9. Other comments, concerns or issues that you feel would be a barrier to you to increasing your production to meet this demand.

Thank you very much.