

COWICHAN VALLEY REGIONAL AGRICULTURE MEETING
Summary Report

CVRD

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SEPT 26, 2023
1PM - 4PM

**COBBLE HILL
FARMERS INSTITUTE**

PRESENTERS:


Ione Smith, MSc, PAg
Upland Agricultural Consulting


Reed Bailey
Land Use Planner Vancouver Island
BC Ministry of Agriculture & Food


Sarah Clements
Land Use Planner
Agricultural Land Commission


Nicole Mak
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Agriculture Policy
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Prepared by Upland Agricultural Consulting
for the Cowichan Valley Regional District
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Introduction

On September 26, 2023, a regional agriculture meeting was held to discuss opportunities for the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD) to provide support for the farming community. The meeting was held at the Cobble Hill Farmers Institute building from 1 pm to 4 pm.

The meeting was advertised online through the CVRD website and through social media accounts, in print advertising in local newspapers and by email.

There were more than 90 farmers and agricultural stakeholders in attendance, in addition to staff and elected officials from the CVRD's electoral areas and the Municipality of North Cowichan (MNC).

The event was organized by a planning committee that was comprised of CVRD Board Directors Alison Nicholson (electoral area E) and Ben Maartman (electoral area H), North Cowichan Mayor Douglas and North Cowichan Councillor Christopher Justice.

The meeting was facilitated by Ione Smith, Upland Agricultural Consulting, and it was chaired by Ben Maartman, Area H Director.

The event included three presenters:

- Nicole Mak and Sarah Clements, Agricultural Land Commission (ALC)
- Reed Bailey, Ministry of Agriculture and Food
- Ione Smith, Upland Agricultural Consulting

Their presentations provided clarity on key issues such as housing within the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), the effects of subdivision of farmland, and examples of best practices from other local governments that are undertaking initiatives to support the agricultural sector.

Once the three presentations were completed, the speakers participated in a facilitated panel discussion, taking questions and comments from audience members and facilitating a broad discussion regarding the issues farmers are facing.

What We Heard

Key issues and opportunities that were heard are summarized below.

Passionate Agricultural Community

The Cowichan Valley has a strong agricultural community, holding generations of invaluable knowledge about local growing conditions. The community pointed to a disconnect between local government's understanding of agriculture and the realities farmers face on the ground, particularly around the financial state of farms and the level of bureaucracy and regulation involved in running even a small agricultural operation. There is hope that the CVRD will continue to work to minimize this disconnect over time. For example, there are many small lot agricultural operations in the community and those farmers contribute significantly to the local food system, but often feel overlooked.

Water Insecurity

Water management and associated regulations is one of the key issues affecting farmers in the Cowichan Valley. The impacts of year-over-year droughts and associated irrigation restrictions are so significant that producers indicate the lack of water security is threatening the viability of the farming sector. Producers stated that there is a need for further support on developing water storage, including accessing funding for purchasing water storage equipment, and regulatory support and advocacy. Many producers also noted that the provincial government is not appearing to understand the level of urgency regarding water licensing, and that more could and should be done to advocate for these applications to be processed in a timely fashion. Producers noted that there is a need to balance the needs of urban and rural water users. For example, it is not clear how or why new subdivisions can be approved given current water quantity concerns.

Succession Planning and Support for New Farmers

The Cowichan Valley is a highly desirable place to live, and the increasing price of farmland is reducing affordability for farmers to expand their operations or for new entrants to begin financially viable operations. New entrants into farming often find it difficult or impossible to build a profitable farm, while retiring farmers do not have many avenues to pass along existing operations to new generations without being financially penalized. New farmers are often relying on grant programs and bank loans to start their farm businesses. At the same time, a wave of farmer retirements is hitting the region, presenting an opportunity to weave succession planning into the opportunity to welcome new farmers.

Need for Less Regulations and More Consistency

Producers are frustrated by the number of regulations already affecting their operations from various provincial ministries (who do not necessarily communicate with one another) and from local government. There are often inconsistencies between various acts, policies and regulations. There was concern that CVRD policies and regulations are not being updated quickly enough to keep aligned with current ALC rules and regulations. There is support for creating an agricultural coordinator/planner position at the CVRD. Some attendees expressed interest in being able to provide formal feedback on potential OCP and zoning bylaw updates before they are adopted. Many in attendance indicated that they would like to meet with representatives from Ministry of Forests, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Water Land and Resource Stewardship, Farm Industry Review Board and Ministry of Energy & Mines to be able to discuss issues around water licensing, wildlife conflicts, waste management, housing and other concerns. There was interest in providing opportunities for the agricultural community to be able to comment on ALR applications that are coming before the CVRD Board.

Recommendations

Based on the outcomes of the regional agriculture meeting, the following three recommendations are put forth:

- 1) **Continue to provide opportunities for the agricultural community to meet with provincial and local government representatives.** It was clear from the level of detailed questions and breadth of topics explored during the three-hour meeting that there is interest from the farming community in meeting directly with representatives that are responsible for a variety of policies and regulations so that they can advocate for their needs through face-to-face dialogue.

- 2) **Re-instate the CVRD's Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC).** There was an AAC previously in place that was disbanded several years ago. There is a Terms of Reference that could be updated and a call for nominations could be publicly issued. The AAC could meet regularly and be directly involved in helping to provide advice towards ALR applications, initiatives that may have an impact on agriculture in the region, and the review and update of the Agricultural Plan (see recommendation #3).
- 3) **Review and update the CVRD's 2009 Agricultural Plan in alignment with the Municipality of North Cowichan.** Some of the objectives and recommendations in the CVRD's 2009 Agricultural Plan remain relevant, while others are now outdated. The plan could be re-developed using a local government implementation lens, such that the recommended actions reflect the needs of the agricultural community but focus specifically on actions that are within the jurisdiction and capacity of local government. There is an opportunity to align this work with the MNC and its initiative to update its Agricultural Plan. The CVRD could work with MNC on complementary agricultural plan development and, when appropriate, host joint meetings with AACs from both the CVRD and the MNC (should they each establish AACs). Embarking upon these plans in a coordinated fashion may create efficiencies to ensure the plans are harmonized and complementary while also attending to specific local issues and concerns.

Conclusion

The regional agriculture meeting was well-attended and served as an opportunity for the Cowichan agricultural community to convey many concerns to the CVRD and identify potential next steps for the CVRD to increase its support for this important local sector. The recommendations provided will address many of the issues raised during the meeting. These recommendations will require support and capacity from CVRD elected officials and staff.