



# Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District

**Moving Forward** - Planning for a Strong Agricultural Community:

Issues, Trends and Opportunities for Agriculture - 2011 Discussion Paper

Prepared for: Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District

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## **Introduction**

Basically, this report describes the elements of the vision, issues and opportunities, and options for development of local agriculture. It is a dynamic report, a discussion paper that will evolve into the agricultural plan for the area in Phase 2.

The visioning discussion will help to establish priorities amongst the issues and opportunities identified in this report. For example, agricultural capability or capacity based purely on maximizing the profitability of local agriculture could be significantly higher than it will be if other factors limit available water or, if ecological values lead to increased nonfarm green space, etc.

### ***Profile – Current Situation***

A profile describing the current state of the industry in the Alberni Valley was completed as a separate document. A land-use inventory was also completed. The data from the land-use inventory and the related maps will be presented to, and stored with, the Regional District.

### ***Indicators***

Potential monitoring processes will flow out of this planning process. The visioning and other processes will identify or fine tune goals and targets. Indicators will be identified that will allow progress to be monitored towards those targets. One of the challenges is that the census only happens once every five years so some of the indicator data will only be available in five year intervals. Short-term indicators can be identified but they won't necessarily be consistent from one measuring point to another because there are likely to be based on anecdotal observations.

#### **Suggested indicators:**

- Area gross farm receipts,
- Gross margin (gross farm receipts minus net operating costs),
- Gross farm receipts and gross margin per ha and per farm.
- Membership numbers for the farmers market and the Farmers Institute.
- Food security or self-sufficiency targets/indicators.
- Activity at the Farmer's market
- Number of environmental farm plans completed

# Planning for the Future: Vision for Agriculture in the Alberni Valley

## ***Vision***

*The goal of the Agricultural Plan is to propose a vision that will establish a permanent role for agriculture as an essential component of the physical/ecological, social and economic well-being of the Alberni Valley.*

The vision should also help ensure that agricultural capability is fully realized and developed as part of a viable agriculture sector in the region.

In part it means that agriculture will thrive economically, make full use of its resources subject to conditions that ensure it is ecologically and socially sustainable.

## **1. Components of the Vision**

In the consultations that have been held to date, the following are key components towards creating a vision for the valley.

- Buy local – the 10 mile diet
- Visible, prominent, recognized and appreciated
- Efficient – making the best use of the resources available
- Increased food self-sufficiency and food security
- Consumers want to know the origin of their food and how it was grown
- Cultural and historic factors – in the past the area produced a larger percentage of the food consumed that it does now and it could be done again.
- The spirit of agriculture in the farming community is alive and well. The farm community in the Alberni Valley enjoys what they are doing and wants to maintain a level of enjoyment and build community spirit in the agricultural activities - a serious commitment with a friendly spirit.
- Sustainable – an overused word and poorly defined. The feedback suggests that a strong agriculture community for the Alberni Valley is built on the relationships of three fundamentals of sustainability: Economic Health, Environmental Responsibility, Social Responsibility.
- Desire for a secure, coordinated and integrated ecological and regional farm and food system based on sustainable farming practices.

- Sustainability means that development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
  - Organic or “more organic” than it is now = more environmentally sustainable?
  - Strong, viable, profitable = more economically sustainable?
  - Increased food self-sufficiency/food security = More socially sustainable?

The questions of what is agriculture, or what is a farmer, need to be addressed in developing the vision and the responding plan. For example, food self-sufficiency is often measured without considering the contribution of aquaculture and fisheries. If the focus of the plan is food self-sufficiency, from a consumer perspective, then these sources need to be included. Alternatively, some argue that agricultural plans needn't include the horse industry because it is primarily recreational and not produced for food. The same is sometimes said about nursery and turf production. Should agriculture consider bio-fuel opportunities?

### ***Discussion Options***

There are four suggested topics for the first set of focus groups at the public consultation. Ultimately, these discussions will identify key words that can be used to form a vision statement for the industry:

- 1) Definition of agriculture. Who should be included?
  - a. Land based farmers who produce food for sale at any scale, and
  - b. People who produce food only for their own consumption, i.e. not for sale, and/or
  - c. Non-food crops or products—horses, nursery crops, vineyards?, and/or
  - d. Aquaculture and fisheries or other wild harvested products?
  - e. Biofuels, agro-forestry, agri-tourism?
  - f. Value added foods and services associated with all of the above?

In the discussion, we need to consider that any type of crop production helps to maintain a productive land base and, generally, helps to maintain production skills and the supplier base that keeps the rest of the industry viable. Aquaculture and fisheries have not typically been included in the definition of agriculture; however, clearly they are important contributors to the food supply in the Alberni Valley.

- 2) Profitability (see the discussion below) which generally implies more intensive use of land and inputs and/or more intensive production. It should also be noted that high levels of management can allow intensive and profitable farm businesses that have less impact on the environment than poorly managed operations. Is there a specific target or targets that should be set for profitability of local agriculture, i.e. gross receipts for the area, revenue per farm, gross margin per farm, revenue per hectare or gross margin per hectare?
- 3) Food self-sufficiency—see the discussion below
- 4) Ecological impact—this discussion should consider that increased food self-sufficiency and/or increasing profitability potentially have a more significant negative impact on the environment. Theoretically, increased profitability and food self-sufficiency will require more irrigation, more land clearing and higher levels of inputs such as fertilizer and pest control, etc.

Are there specific targets that should be set for cleared acreage, irrigated area, number of farms, or area in, organic production, or degree of organic production?

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## 2. Food Security, Self-Sufficiency in the Vision

This discussion on food self-sufficiency is included in the “vision” section because it really is a common topic between producers and consumers and defining a specific target for food self-sufficiency will impact the direction of the rest of the plan.

Food security and self-sufficiency is an important element of this agricultural area plan. It has been discussed in one form or another at virtually every meeting. The “10 mile diet” map is displayed at the Regional District office. It is clearly an important topic of discussion for the community and for the agriculture industry in the Alberni Valley.

One of the huge challenges with this topic is defining it and measuring it. The simplistic measure, used in the profile, compares the dollar value of food produced in an area with the dollar value of food consumed. Using this method, the Alberni Valley produces about 5.3% of the food consumed. The problem with this is that it ignores the contribution of fish, wild and farmed, to the local food supply on the consumption side. It also really only measures the value of the primary food products produced compared to the value of processed, value-added foods and restaurant meals consumed.

Another method, developed by the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, assesses food self-sufficiency based on the area of irrigated and dry land required to produce a healthy diet for one individual. The area required is estimated at 0.524 ha per person of which 0.471 ha is non-irrigated and 0.053 ha is irrigated. This method results in an estimate of about 11% local food self-sufficiency. This method acknowledges fish but doesn’t include it in the calculation.

Nevertheless, it is probably a more useful tool because it essentially implies that the ability or capacity of an area to produce food (non-fish) is directly related to the improved land base. It also recognizes the need for irrigated land to produce intensive crops like vegetables, berries and fruit.

### Levels of Food Self Sufficiency

Desired Level of Self-Sufficiency	Current prod. (5%)	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Revenue generated - gross	\$5,491,456	\$19,005,846	\$35,893,359	\$57,780,431	\$59,977,859	\$62,600,797
Revenue generated - per ALR ha	\$713	\$2,468	\$4,660	\$7,502	\$7,787	\$8,128
Water requirements (acre ft)	1,375	879	1,830	3,639	3,639	3,639
Water requirements (m3)	1,695,817	1,083,901	2,255,971	4,487,139	4,487,139	4,487,139
Cleared land (for food) required (ha)	1,793	2,037	4,102	5,338	5,989	7,522

An important piece of information illustrated in the chart above, is the current amount of \$713.00 revenue generated by each ALR hectare.

Finally, the discussion really needs to encompass all of the food produced and/or gathered locally.

The distribution system is moving towards “just in time” delivery which makes sense with perishable items. Food moves through the stores as quickly as possible to ensure quality and food safety. So, whether the six-day number is accurate or not is somewhat irrelevant. The relevant part is that, if Port Alberni and the West Coast were somehow isolated by a breakdown in the transportation system, food shortages would appear fairly quickly.

Increasing the profitability of the industry could involve consumers and producers. Consumers can help by supporting local producers— buy local; ask for local products in the grocery stores, restaurants, etc. The increased demand will motivate existing farmers to expand production and it may help attract new farmers to the area and the industry. From a vision perspective, the community probably wants to define the degree of intensity that they would support in the long-term. The revenue per hectare in the ALR for the Alberni Valley is \$713 (see food self-sufficiency table above). In the Cowichan Valley, it is \$2684 per hectare and, the Fraser Valley, \$12,832 per hectare.

Generally, the profitability of farms in these areas increases with the revenue intensity. This doesn't mean that the Alberni Valley needs to move towards intensively farming every hectare of land. There are some very good examples of well-managed small and medium-sized farms that are profitable without the production intensity of the Fraser Valley. Increased profitability could be achieved with a mix of more intensive production on some farms, increased focus on profitability and management amongst the small and medium-sized farms with a common goal of developing a thriving local industry.

We often hear that there are only three days worth of food on the grocery store shelves and another three days worth of food in the distribution system at any given point in time for those living on Vancouver Island. How true is it?

Last year, a researcher from Victoria tried to substantiate those numbers but was unable to find the source.

#### ***Discussion Outcomes***

- Recommend that relevant Provincial and Federal government programs and policies include all food producers to allow better planning and development of local and regional food security initiatives?
- Set a target for the area that will help government set priorities.

### **3. Consideration of the Issues and Opportunities**

The Alberni Valley has seen significant downsizing of the agricultural industry over the past years. These include the loss of dairy quota, downsizing of the livestock industry in general, loss of potato production, loss of fruit production, etc.

It will take significant attention and focus to develop a sustainable agricultural industry. Having said this, the valley has a number of distinct characteristics that may make it a great place to produce a wide range of products, especially if the community works together.

#### **Notable Strengths:**

- High level of human resource skills and abilities for the size of the industry—lots of people who are capable of managing productive operations, who have land and some capital to develop new enterprises and a strong understanding of how to produce (albeit mainly strong in livestock production expertise).
- Isolation—could be considered as a weakness and an opportunity. There are a number of enterprises where isolation can be an advantage: poultry production to repopulate intensive areas when disease strikes, bee production, seed production and perhaps seed potatoes.
- Relatively inexpensive land compared to other parts of the island.
- The West Coast Connection – huge traffic volumes flowing through to Tofino and Ucluelet during the growing season.
- Ideas and innovation and cooperative spirit – the discussions so far indicate that there are some innovative ideas and there is a strong network between farmers that could allow the industry to work together on projects or opportunities. There are also potential opportunities to experiment with things like grain production or grape variety trials for marginal production areas, amongst others.

## Part Two

# Planning for the Future: Issues, Trends and Opportunities for Agriculture

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A strong agriculture community for the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District is built on the relationships of four fundamentals of sustainability: Economic Health, Environmental Responsibility and Social Responsibility.

Sustainability means that development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This section will discuss the trends, the issues and the opportunities for strengthening the agricultural sector and will categorize them under the fundamental headings as noted above.

A discussion of these will lead to a strategy of how to:

- Raise appreciation of the importance of local food production
- Celebrate the agricultural industry and establish farming as an economically viable lifestyle
- Develop food production, processing, distribution, and retailing businesses/facilities
- Identify, designate, and protect prime agricultural land to develop adequate farm capacity
- Ensure that farmers have an adequate income
- Encourage and support local food production

Agriculture is a multi-dimensional economic activity beginning with production and relying on support services, processing, distribution and economic policies that span the community, the province, the country and extend internationally.

# **1. Trends**

## **Global Trends**

Global distribution systems have developed to the extent that perishable agricultural products can be competitively shipped anywhere in the world without a significant loss in product quality.

Rising incomes in India and China are leading to increasing global demand for food. Billions of dollars have been invested in farmland in Africa and South America to produce food for Asian countries.

Rising energy costs and climate change policy are increasing demand for biofuels causing land to be converted from food production to energy production.

Global climate change that is creating significant uncertainty about production in many areas.

## **Canadian Agricultural Trends**

The “foodie” movement is probably the most significant consumer trend related to agriculture. All over North America, there is a shift towards buying local food. The challenge with this is that there is still “cheap food” around and it is better quality than it has been historically because of improvements in distribution. There is stronger demand for local and organic but it is a small portion of the population.

The Canadian population is aging which will have implications on the type and quantity of food consumed. There is increasing discussion about the health benefits of foods. Environmental awareness, and public perceptions, will affect food choices in the future.

Consumers are more conscious of food ingredients. More people are “reading the package” to reduce choose foods with zero trans-fats, low sodium, reduced sugar, etc.

Federal policy is addressing food safety and biosecurity types of issues in ways that tend to be challenging for small lot operators.

## **Provincial Agricultural Trends**

The 100 mile diet and the “buy local” movement is apparently stronger in BC than elsewhere. Vancouver has recently made changes in policy to increase the number of Farmers’ Markets within the city – to improve urban access to local foods.

Climate change policy and environmental awareness are, on one hand, adding to the demand for local food and perhaps creating opportunities for new products but also creating challenges for producers to become greener – to meet new environmental standards.

## **Vancouver Island and Regional Trends**

The agriculture industry on the island is shifting away from commodity type production towards niche market, agri-tourism, and direct market type farming operations.

The livestock industry is declining fairly rapidly. Swine production disappeared a decade ago. The dairy industry has been shifting over the past 10 years. Quota is leaving the island; the remaining dairy farmers are increasing production. Meat inspection regulations and related policies have reduced access to slaughter and increased the price of processing.

### ***Discussion options***

It would probably be worthwhile to discuss the trends listed above and the opportunities that may arise from these trends. This discussion could include:

- Identification of any other trends that may be relevant to local agriculture
- Discuss how the trends above affect local agriculture and identify opportunities that arise from these trends. Assess whether these trends are long-term, short-term, or just fads based on perceptions
- How can the local industry capitalize on these?

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Alberni Valley in 2031

### The Three Fundamentals of Planning for Agriculture



1. Economic



The potential for making the agricultural industry profitable.

2. Environmental



The minimization of the ecological imprint of agriculture.

3. Social/Regulatory



Trends and responding governing legislation

Alberni Valley in 2011

*"When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world."  
John Muir*

# 1. Economic: Economic Health

The Agricultural industry needs to be profitable if it is to be sustainable.

To focus on the economic trends, issues and opportunities related to making the agricultural industry profitable, we must focus on the viability of the existing farms and the potential for new agricultural businesses.

Outside of the farm, the quality of place and the quality of life a place provides are important to continue to attract and retain talented agricultural people and quality businesses.

Many family farms are described as being “business focused”. They are highly specialized and support the farm operators. The majority of farms are described as “lifestyle or retirement farms” and rely upon off-farm income to maintain the family’s financial growth.

Poor profitability is a function of many factors. Profitability can only be restored if the industry can deal with, at least some, of those factors. Many are beyond the control of farmers. Those can be noted but the plan needs to focus on the issues that can be dealt with locally. The issues listed in this section are either symptoms of low profitability or causes of reduced profits.

There is no single solution to make the industry profitable although improvements could be made in:

- Management Capacity – A farmer needs to be motivated by profit to be profitable. A farmer, in this day, needs to have the capacity to operate a profitable business. Since farming is a challenging and low margin business, the ability to make money at it takes a high level of management and requires that the business does “all the little things right.”
- Information flow – to do all the little things right, the manager needs to be able to access and process information, generate new ideas, keep up with new technologies that help improve efficiency. The manager needs to “work **on** the business not only **in** the business”. Improved information flows can range from the old tools (“social intercourse” – one of the 4 purposes of the Farmers’ Institutes) to high speed internet.

## ***Profitability***

### ***Issue:***

There really is one underlying economic issue in agriculture and that is profitability. If the industry was, or was perceived to be, more profitable many of the issues would disappear or would not exist. The first step in solving a problem is recognizing for defining the problem. It is critical that the vision addresses profitability and specifically includes elements that move the industry in a more prosperous direction.

Steadily rising input costs are one of the main factors affecting profitability. Inputs such as fertilizer, fuel, and feed have been increasing over the past two decades. Loss of infrastructure adds to the impact as products must be transported further for processing.

Farmers who can reduce their input costs or increase their prices, even slightly, can very significantly increase their returns. For example, a farmer who could increase their price from \$1.00 to \$1.05, without increasing costs, would pocket 12.7 cents instead of 7.7 cents. This is an increase of 65% in return to the producer.

### ***Discussion Options***

- Identify options to increase sales, prices, overall revenues, productivity
- Identify possible ways to reduce costs
- Describe, or provide the key words which describe, the level of profitability desired as part of the vision for local agriculture, and
  - Define some targets to be achieved and measures along the way, and
  - Suggestions to improve profitability are always welcome.

## ***1. Decline of Support Industry***

### ***Issue:***

As an industry declines support businesses, like feed stores, veterinarians will close down. Fields, buildings and equipment fall into disrepair. The knowledge base needed to operate the farm also disappears over time.

### ***Opportunity:***

The Alberni Valley has experienced a decline in agricultural activity over the past 20 years or more. Fortunately, there are some excellent human resources still around who could help turn the ship around. The farms and fields and equipment (the capital base) is still in reasonable condition. The support services are still there. There is a larger and stronger consumer market in the area. There are still some processing facilities available.

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## ***2. Decline of Livestock Industry***

### ***Issue:***

The livestock industry is declining all over Vancouver Island. It is probably more pronounced in the Alberni Valley because it is more noticeable and it has been higher profile over the years.

McKinnon's Dairy was highly visible. Hertel Meats still is but has certainly changed over the years. The dairy farms were established, long-term operations.

Why have these businesses disappeared? Let's look at the swine industry to start with. In recent history, it was the first significant livestock sector on the island to completely disappear. 25 years ago, there was a healthy swine industry, with some excellent managers, producing a significant portion of the pork consumed on Vancouver Island. The quality of management in the sector was one of the reasons it was able to do this—to survive and prosper. Even so, the profit margins in the industry, at the best of times, were very slim. Small increases in the price of feed, fertilizer and fuel took a huge bite out of that very narrow profit and, eventually, all of these producers gave up because they couldn't make it pay. It is probably safe to say that the Island dairy farmers are faced with the same declining margins but have also seen the opportunity to liquidate quota at a time when the dairy industry is centralizing in areas where feed is less expensive and there is better access to processing and support services.

### ***Opportunities***

- Collaboration. Volume of product is needed to maintain or justify some of the infrastructure necessary to keep a sector viable. One example is red meat. Most of the land in the Alberni Valley is really only well-suited for forage production. Currently, there is not enough beef and sheep production to support a red meat abattoir. Based on conversations with local producers, there is a strong demand for local red meat products, especially grass fed. However, to meet this demand and maintain it, producers probably need to produce a constant and uniform quality of product and, to sustain that production, enough volume is probably needed to justify establishing a local processing plant. It is not likely that any single producer will be able to do this or want to do this on their own. A group of producers could do it.
- Increase scale of operations. In other parts of the island, the medium and large sized farmers are increasing the size or revenue-generating capacity of their farms. Total gross farm receipts in most other areas are increasing as this happens. Farmers who want to expand could potentially rent resources, especially land, from those who may want to scale down or retire. Large farmers, who want to retire, could mentor or support those who want to expand by providing land for lease or help with expertise and equipment, etc.
- Support local suppliers. In the same way that farmers want consumers to "buy local", it is important for farmers to support local businesses to help ensure that those businesses survive, or better yet thrive to provide goods and services for new or expanding farm operations. Mutual support, amongst businesses, will help maintain the existing industry, and, ultimately, help turn the ship around.

### ***3. Loss of Infrastructure – Access to Value Added Facilities***

#### ***Issue:***

Over the past 20 years, there has been a decline in value added processing and the related infrastructure in the Alberni Valley. The lack of infrastructure and/or access to value-added facilities has been raised as an issue by people in discussions and by farmers in the Farmer’s Institute session that occurred before the plan started.

As the size of the agricultural sectors within the valley decline, the related infrastructure closes down or disappears. The production volumes, products like milk, pork, potatoes, are no longer there to support related processing.

#### ***Opportunities:***

There are, however, opportunities associated with new products which could lead to increased demand for different value-added facilities in the future. The winery is one example.

Commercial kitchens are often discussed as something that is needed by small lot operators who want to add value to excess product. Changing regulations result in higher standards for construction of these facilities and for the improvements within, i.e. food safe surfaces etc. so the production facilities of the past may not be suitable today. The food safety concerns and the associated liability make it even more important to develop the facilities and processing systems to a fairly high standard. In an area like Port Alberni, where there is likely to be many potential users with relatively small volumes of product, it is highly likely that a “shared use” facility would be the only viable option. Processing equipment is being developed, or has been developed, that allows cottage industry scale processing to be done viably and, unlike 10 years ago, this equipment can be found online fairly quickly and, in many cases, at reasonable prices.

Development of a cooperative or shared use processing facility, of any kind, would require a feasibility study and/or a business plan. A focus group about this option could discuss:

- The factors that would need to be considered in a business plan, and
- Whether or not there are facilities or resources that are not used anymore or are underutilized. These could include anything from waste heat to coolers and freezer space that may have been used by other sectors, i.e. maybe there is cooler space that was used by fish processing? Could those facilities be used by agriculture for storage and/or processing?

## **4. Access to Markets**

### ***Issue:***

There are significant and increasing, challenges for food producers trying to distribute their product through the major chain stores. From the producer side, the challenges are price related– the price to the producer is too low. From the distributor side, there are increasing concerns with liabilities associated with food safety. Distributors need to be able to guarantee food safety and/or be able to trace product back to the farm. Few producers have been prepared to, or able to, put systems in place to meet these conditions.

From the Ground Up has done an in-depth study of the distribution system in the Comox Valley which is very similar to Alberni. Even if the producer feels they can get a fair price, selling into this system is a complex process. Most of the large chain stores now distribute their product from warehouses on the mainland. Farmers wanting to sell to them need to get their product on the distributor's product list which may require developing a spec sheet detailing portion sizes, packaging, etc. Generally, you must go to them. They don't come to you. Some seasonal products may be easier to sell to these chains but it takes time and energy and the return to the producer is inherently lower than selling direct to the consumer. Even restaurants and small chains, that can buy local if they choose, express concerns about knowing that the product they are purchasing will be delivered on time, is consistent quality, and will not create food safety problems for them. Some restaurants want the product insured because they can't afford to deal with the liabilities associated with a food safety problem. One small store that wants to buy local said they even had a producer drop off a sample box of product for them to try but he left the store without leaving a name, address or phone number. Some of these establishments say that some producers want to be paid in cash without any paperwork.

Restaurants, who need fresh food and, who have high demand for their product at certain times of the week, need to know that they will get their deliveries, as ordered, at a specific time on a specific day, so they can prepare it in advance for peak periods. They don't want lunchtime deliveries.

The issue of access to markets is a two-way street. Given the huge concerns with food safety, it is certainly understandable that food vendors want some assurance that the products they are purchasing are safe and consistently meet their quality standards.

### ***Opportunity:***

In BC, sales at Farmers' Markets and the number of Farmers' Markets have been increasing at a steady rate over the past decade or more. This increase is driven by a growing demand, by consumers, to buy local foods–the 100 mile diet, or in the Alberni Valley, the 10 mile diet. Farmers markets allow producers to sell their product at full retail price, if not more. They provide a forum for consumers to connect with the producer so they know and understand where their food is coming from. Producers can "test drive" new products and use the market to bring consumers to their farms on nonmarket days. Farmers' markets are destinations for food conscious consumers. Even so, only a very small percentage of the food consumed in the area is sold through the Farmers' market–in the Comox Valley, it is less than 0.5%. And, there is a limit to the growth in sales. Despite the benefits described above, well over 90% of the food purchased by consumers is bought at large chain stores. Farmers' markets will need to work diligently to continue to maintain or increase sales.

### ***Opportunity:***

The Farmers' Market is one outlet for direct farm marketing but, one of the shortcomings of the Farmers' market is that it is only open one day a week. People eat every day and shop every day.

Convenient direct farm markets that operate throughout the week provide another of lead for people to buy local food direct from the producer. The Farmers market can be used to promote farm gate sales on other days of the week. There is also an “Alberni Valley Farmer’s Directory” to direct consumers to farms that sell direct. Increased effort to promote direct farm sales should help local farmers increase their profits. The directory, for example, could be expanded to include addresses for those producers who are selling. There may be some, who sell by appointment, that would prefer not to have an address in it but others would benefit from this information. It certainly is a credit to the local farm community that the directory includes 46 listings with only 89 farms reporting in the census. The Comox Valley directory lists 62 farms with 497 farms reporting.

There could be increased emphasis on “a drive in the country” to lure some of the tourists off of the main highway and into areas like Beaver Creek and Cherry Creek. There were also comments about increased promotion of the Alberni Pacific Railway and other rural tourist draws to benefit both sectors and to sell experiences to visitors.

### **Gateway to the West Coast**

Statistics from the Pacific Rim National Park indicate between 700,000 and 800,000 tourist visits per year. Tofino reports 22,000 visitors per day during the summer months. There is a clear opportunity to sell food directly to these visitors as they pass through en route to the West Coast or to sell to food service establishments in Tofino and Ucluelet.

### ***Discussion Options***

A focus group on marketing could discuss a number of opportunities and issues related to marketing of local products including. The discussion should include how these can be achieved, suggested courses/workshops, targets and ideas on how to measure progress:

- Continued growth of Farmers’ Market sales.
- Increased sales to tourists heading for the West Coast.
- Improved access to grocery store chains for local products.
- Increased direct farm sales from the farm gate, including agri-tourism activities.
- Are there opportunities to export food products through the port?
- The shift to internet marketing – not just websites, Twitter, blogs, Craigslist, etc

## **5. Farm Succession**

### ***Issue:***

Farm succession or business succession in general, is a significant issue everywhere. The average age of farm operators in Alberni is 54.4 years and it is increasing. Only five of the 130 farm operators reported in the census were under 35 years old. High land costs and lack of interest in farming have, in the past, resulted in few new entrants into the industry. The dairy industry was one sector in agriculture where returns were high enough to keep the next generation on the farm, however, even this has changed. Throughout Vancouver Island, fewer younger generation dairy farmers are taking over the farm and those that are, often are choosing not to milk cows but to shift to other products. The challenge with succession is likely very closely related to the “hard work” image of agriculture and reduced profitability. Increased profitability and/or a change in perception, amongst the younger generation about the image of agriculture, could, perhaps, change this issue.

### ***Discussion:***

- Succession and recruitment strategies – how to attract new farmers to the Alberni Valley?
- How to increase interest amongst young people about farming? This could include discussion about access to land for new farmers who may not have significant capital—leasing, etc.

## ***6. Recruitment of New Farmers***

### ***Issue:***

Recruitment of new farmers is very much related to the succession issue. As noted above, farm kids are less likely to stay on the farm than they were in the past and nonfarm young people have tended to view agriculture as very hard work with low returns although there seems to be a bit of a shift in this mindset.

### ***Discussion topics***

Food for thought about succession and recruitment: more often than not, the message that is delivered, in the media and public meetings, is more negative than positive about agriculture. Who would blame the younger generation for staying away from it when all they hear is complaint?

From the Ground Up has taken a good look at who the new farmers are in other areas of Vancouver Island—looked beyond the statistics. In many cases, if not most, the new farmers are early retirees, with professional backgrounds, who are changing lifestyles. They bring management experience, equity/reasonable levels of capital, and fresh energy to their new enterprises.

Discuss:

- Succession and recruitment strategies—how to attract new farmers to the Alberni Valley?
- How to increase interest amongst young people about farming? This could include discussion about access to land for new farmers who may not have significant capital—leasing, etc.

## ***7. Accessible Farm Land***

### ***Issue:***

Larger farms are for sale, on Vancouver Island, for several million dollars. There are few aspiring farmers who have that much capital available. It seems fairly clear that the business structure of farms will change in the future. There may be cooperative ventures, corporate farms (ultimately privately held or certainly that would fit the Alberni Valley more so than large corporate farms), perhaps strata titles or agricultural industrial parks where several smaller farm businesses operate in a certain area and share some of their resources.

### ***Discussion:***

- Are there opportunities for people who are interested in farming to work with retiring farmers to develop new businesses on existing farms with some type of revenue sharing agreement or business structure?
- Should the Alberni Valley go looking for new farmers elsewhere? If so, where? Early retirees from the city? Prairie farmers who want a change of pace? Other countries?
- Are community gardens a tool to increase interest in food production amongst young people? There was considerable interest expressed by young people, customers at the Farmers' market, who wanted to grow their own food.
- Farm size. There is an ongoing and significant shift away from livestock production towards crops and horticultural types of farms. This is happening all over Vancouver Island. It is significant because livestock operations tend to be much larger or use much more land than horticultural operations.

## 8. Farm Management

### *Issues:*

- Management Capacity – Some farmers are not motivated by profit and there are also others who do not really have the capacity to operate a profitable business. Farming is a challenging and low margin business. Making money takes a high level of management and requires that the business does “all the little things right”. As harsh as it is, in some cases, the answer is to replace the manager!
- Information flow – to do all the little things right, the manager needs to be able to access and process information, generate new ideas, keep up with new technologies that help improve efficiency and “work on the business not in it”. Improved information flows can range from the old tools (“social intercourse” – one of the 4 purposes of the Farmers’ Institutes) to high speed internet.

### *Opportunities:*

Farmers who can reduce their input costs or increase their prices, even slightly, can very significantly increase their returns. For example, a farmer who could increase their price from \$1.00 to \$1.05, without increasing costs, would pocket 12.7 cents instead of 7.7 cents. This is an increase of 65% in return to the producer.

## 2. Environmental: Responsibility

*“When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.”*

*John Muir*

All human activities have an impact on the environment. Conversely the relative health of the environment will determine and will contribute to the nature and scale of activities in the other areas of this plan: economic and social. Without a life-sustaining environment, the other two variables cease to exist.

There are global challenges that international strategized need to address such as climate change, dwindling non-renewable resources, shrinking natural habitats, diminishing biodiversity, ocean acidification; and increasing human population pressures.

We can however address local environmental conditions and establish a plan on the best ways to work to resolve them.

Environmental issues will relate to the minimization of the ecological imprint of agriculture.

### 1. ***Ecological Benefits of Agriculture***

#### ***Issue or Opportunity***

Accepting that the current landscape in Alberni is the starting point, and then what are the ecological benefits of agriculture? What is the value of the industry’s green contribution? Bob Collins<sup>1</sup> noted a study done in Metro Vancouver that suggests that the average Metro Vancouver household was prepared to pay \$73 annually to protect farmland. The article also notes that, at a recent meeting in Montreal, Ian Campbell, of AAFC’s Agri Environmental Services Branch, “outlined current government initiatives to determine what constitutes an environmental service, how much that service is worth and what mechanism might compensate those farmers providing it”.

#### ***Discussion options***

How does this subject fit into the agricultural plan? Is it part of the vision for agriculture in the Alberni Valley? If it is, will farmers be expected to provide those ecological benefits for nothing? Or, will consumers pay extra for product produced by eco-friendly farmers? Or, should this be left out of the vision and discussed for the purpose of generating recommendations for changes in policy at higher levels of government? Or, is it all of the above?

Regardless, it would be worthwhile to discuss and list the ecological contribution that farmers make. It would also be worthwhile to identify potential downsides to either option, i.e. the negative implications of including it as part of the vision statement or developing policy around it, if any.

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<sup>1</sup> “Compensation plans for environmentally-savvy farmers”, The Back Forty by Bob Collins, Country Life in BC, October 2010.

## ***2. Environmental Impact of Individual Farms***

### ***Issue:***

Farming practices, done on small or large scales, can adversely affect the environment, and most often unknowingly. There are situations that may end up in litigation as a result of specific farm practices.

### ***Opportunity:***

**Opportunity/ Plan monitoring factor:** Environmental Farm Planning (EFPs) is the detailed planning process, subsidized by the provincial government, that reviews existing farm practices on individual farms, recommends change that will minimize environmental impacts and, in some cases, will help pay for improvements needed. Completion of a plan will help protect farmers against liabilities that may arise from environmental problems on their farm. The plans cover a very wide range of farm practices, the legislation affecting the practices and guidelines or beneficial management practices, in the following areas:

- buildings and roads
- farm waste
- chemical fertilizer
- petroleum product management
- woodwaste
- composting
- energy use
- on farm processing and sales
- livestock housing and livestock management including grazing
- management of outdoor livestock areas
- manure management
- disposal of mortalities
- crop management including buffers, cover crops, crop quality soil erosion control, wildlife habitat, nutrient management
- greenhouse, the container nursery and mushroom production practices
- pest management and pesticides
- soil amendments and their impact on the environment including nutrient application
- stewardship areas including buffers and riparian areas
- soil quality and soil management
- water quality and water management including irrigation and drainage and runoff factors as well as leachate issues
- air-quality including gas emissions, dust and particulates, odours, open burning
- biodiversity and habitat including aquatic biodiversity and terrestrial.

The number of environmental farm plans completed in the Alberni Valley would be a reasonable method of measuring progress towards improved ecological impact. There may even be ways that targets for improvement could be set within those plans that would lead to a method of determining the economic value associated with environmental improvements.

### ***Environmental Opportunities for Farmers***

There are a number of new opportunities emerging for farmers to produce for, or complement their existing production in, the green market.

### ***Beneficial Re-use of Wastes***

Combining waste products to produce compost is one example of beneficial reuse of waste products which replaces expensive imported nutrients. Some farmers on Vancouver Island are beneficially reusing fish waste products as nutrient sources. Bio-solids are another potential source of nutrients for non-food crops.

### ***Biofuels and Other Emerging Products***

Climate change policy is quickly increasing the level of interest in bio-fuel production. Many of the products used in energy production in Europe are widely produced in the Alberni Valley. A recent trade mission to the island, by Austrian biomass energy producers, identified many different opportunities to use these systems to provide energy to businesses and residences on the island.

### ***Discussion options***

Ecological impacts - How does this subject fit into the agricultural plan? Is it part of the vision for agriculture in the Alberni Valley? If it is, will farmers be expected to provide those ecological benefits for nothing? Or, will consumers pay extra for product produced by eco-friendly farmers? Or, should this be left out of the vision and discussed for the purpose of generating recommendations for changes in policy at higher levels of government?

Regardless, it would be worthwhile to also discuss and list the ecological contribution that farmers make. It would also be worthwhile to identify potential downsides to either option, i.e. the negative implications of including it as part of the vision statement or developing policy around it, if any.

Review the environmental subjects covered by the environmental farm planning process and discuss how these can be used to reduce the environmental impact of agriculture and develop measures for improvement within the Alberni Valley.

Can the environmental farm plans be used as a marketing tool to convince the public that farmers are true environmental stewards of the resources that they use in their business?

Discuss potential new products that may emerge because of programs related to climate change. Are there opportunities to develop or produce these products within the Alberni Valley?

### 3. Social: Responsibility

Social and Regulatory issues and opportunities will relate to the current local, provincial, national and international trends in agriculture and the governing legislation that has been put in place to facilitate the trends.

A growing awareness in the importance of local food production is a current trend. Because of this trend, regulations and policy may be being adopted that impact the ability of farming as an economically viable lifestyle.

Food production, processing, distribution, and retailing businesses/facilities are all impacted by policy and regulations.

Access to training, education and information.

Identified in the Vision section of this discussion paper, is the desire to strengthen the agricultural roots in the valley.

## ***1. Training, Education and Access to Information***

### ***Issue:***

Education and consumer awareness were certainly issues that were identified in meetings and discussions in the first phase of a plan. There seemed to be very few educational programs available for, or targeted towards, agriculture. North Island College has offered a few courses over the years at the Courtenay campus including: a small farm development program, a greenhouse management diploma program, and some courses in organic production aimed more at backyard gardening but commercially applicable. North Island College has a new president and there seems to be a renewed interest in developing programs to support agriculture.

No specific courses were identified in primary or secondary schools in the Alberni Valley.

The internet has certainly helped improve access to information but those who rely strictly on the web will likely make some serious errors especially related to the lack of local knowledge. It is far too easy, for example, to not get the message that you need to carefully select crop varieties to suit the purpose and location of your farm business – potentially a very expensive error.

### ***Opportunities:***

Brainstorm potential training and education needs in the community including:

- Consumer awareness. There are a few different forums for increasing consumer awareness already - the Fall Fair, the Transition Towns Society, the Coastal Community Credit Union BBQ, among others. Are there specific topics that the industry would like to see further effort to improve awareness more?
- Political awareness. This is an issue that may have more of an impact on farmers than lack of awareness elsewhere. The idea of an organized tour was raised by at least one individual. Tours, for local politicians, have been held elsewhere on Vancouver Island on a number of occasions and have had very positive results. A little bit better understanding of the issues, by the decision-makers, tends to make a big difference. If nothing else, the tour allows people to meet each other and network and better understand their respective positions.
- Potential School Programs. A number of people suggested that there is a need for more education in primary and secondary schools about agriculture. Has anyone contacted the Agriculture in the Classroom Foundation to ask for help in incorporating agricultural programs in the schools? At what level should this happen and what specifically should be taught?
- College programs. North Island College's agriculture programs have tended to be in the Continuing Education department and have been targeted at new farmers and organic production or similar topics. As a matter of note, the college in Courtenay has offered a Small Farm Development Program, regularly, over the past 20 years. More often than not, it is cancelled because there are less than six registrants. Last year, the same program was offered in Powell River, where there are less than 20% of the farms in Courtenay; 25 people registered for this program. Perhaps, and it is needed more and more value in the areas that are less developed agriculturally? Are there specific programs the college could offer in Alberni?
- Producer Training. In the past, the Ministry of Agriculture provided extension services to help producers keep up with changes in the industry. These services have more or less been cut. There are larger agricultural shows, like the Pacific Agricultural Show in Abbotsford, that provide workshops and showcase equipment and technology for the industry. What other courses, short courses, workshops, presentations would be of value to local producers? Suggestions include:

small farm development, software training in accounting, spreadsheet applications for farmers, direct farm marketing, food safe, how to sell to grocery chains and restaurants, succession planning, SR&ED.

- As a matter of interest, there are a couple of provincial government programs that could be of value to the number of producers. One is the BC Farm Business Advisory Services program which pays for 95% of the cost of a farm business assessment at the tier 1 level and 85% of the cost of a business plan to a maximum of \$3000. The other program is the Environmental Farm Plan program which assists farmers in developing an Environmental Farm plan that will help to ensure that their operation has a minimal impact on the environment. There is also a Revenue Canada program, called Scientific Research and Experimental Development, or SR&ED, which will provide tax credits for on farm research and development of new technologies; farmers are receiving tax refunds in the tens of thousands of dollars through this program.
- Who should make these happen and how? Would it be worthwhile to have a local agricultural education committee? Would it be worthwhile to dedicate a Farmers' Institute meeting, occasionally, to specifically address training and education needs?

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## 2. Water Related Issues

Water management is included as a social and regulatory issue because the primary hurdle is regulatory. This is certainly an issue that extends well beyond the agricultural plan. The goal and discussing it should be to identify small steps can be taken towards resolving water management issues.

### *Issue:*

Water was raised as a “huge” issue in the initial meeting of the project steering committee. To deal with this, it is suggested that “water management” be the subject of one focus group but it includes several sub issues as follows:

- Competition for water resources. In the Alberni Valley, agriculture is competing with several other users, however, the main competition comes from the mill, which has legal access to large volumes of water and fisheries which has priority use under the Fisheries Act.
- Water distribution or localized access to water for irrigation. If the agriculture sector could secure more water, it may need to develop infrastructure to distribute and apply irrigation water. Farmers, in other areas, have expressed concerns about the cost of developing this infrastructure. Even, on their own farms, they are being required to pay extremely high engineering costs for some components i.e. water storage dams.
- Drainage issues and infrastructure. Drainage issues are not as significant in the Alberni Valley as in some other areas, however, where there are drainage problems, improvements are often needed that involve several landowners and require regional infrastructure and ongoing management of the improvements.
- Protection of fish habitat. Landowners often express frustration about the expectations, by regulatory agencies (and in some cases stewardship groups and the general public), that they develop, maintain habitat or set aside land for habitat.

There are only 554 ha of irrigated land in the Alberni Valley. CLI maps indicate that 5184 ha (more than 2/3 of the ALR) could be improved to Class 3 or better with irrigation. Even if all that was irrigated, the Valley would not be 100% food self-sufficient. The challenge is that there are other significant users of water – mainly fisheries and the pulp mill – who have had stronger access to water than agriculture. Fish need the stored water to maintain cool water temperatures in the Somass system during salmon migration periods – especially in the late summer. Salmon are certainly an important food source and economic generator for the Alberni Valley. The mill has a license to use large volumes of water. They are not using it but they will not lose it if they don't use it. Agriculture has been forced to find its own water – groundwater or tributaries to the system downstream of Great Central Lake.

### *Discussion options*

A focus group on this topic could discuss the following:

- Identify other sub issues related to water management that are not discussed above
- List potential water sources. These could include regional sources i.e. Great Central lake and Sproat Lake, as well as local streams, rivers, aquifers, groundwater, etc. this discussion could also identify storage options and relative volumes of water, i.e. estimates in acre-feet

- Discuss the distribution options. Even though, it is unlikely that there will be capital available for large infrastructure costs for distribution, these should probably be included as they may be eligible for future reference. Brainstorm any ideas that could help make these happen.
- Identify areas where drainage systems may be required that affect multiple landowners in the Valley. Lists ideas on how those systems could be developed or the drainage issue resolved.
- Discuss the habitat expectations. What is the cost of these to landowners? These are ecological benefits provided by farmers, to society. These costs could be included in the ecological section below. Are there ways that farmers can recover some of these costs through programs, regulatory agencies, stewardship groups, the general public or service groups?

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### 3. Land and Resources

***Issue:***

The issue of land availability for agriculture is raised everywhere on Vancouver Island. Young people expressed concern about the cost of land and how it is prohibitive for entry into the industry. One option that seems obvious is leasing the land, however, it doesn't seem to happen as often as would be expected. Clearly, there is a large amount of underutilized land in the Alberni Valley. There are also issues with succession; the average age of farmers is increasing steadily and some of those farmers want to retire, presumably. Are there ways that people who want to farm can access lands from those who don't want to farm?

***Opportunities:***

This could include discussion on the following:

- Identify landowners who may no longer want to farm, or who are not interested in farming their land. It is suggested that this list should really only include landowners with cleared, developed farmland. It is unlikely that, other than government, lease arrangements could be negotiated that would make it worthwhile for a tenant to clear and develop farmland.
- Identify areas where community gardens could be established, i.e. unused public lands, or private lands that may be available. Could these community gardens be up-scaled so that participants could actually produce enough volume to sell?
- Discuss methods for identifying potential farmers/tenants.
- Discuss the types of legal agreements that might be required to accommodate some of the ideas above. How could these be established and/or distributed to the landowners/tenants that would use them?

## 4. Land Use Planning

Maintaining a viable agricultural industry requires a coordinated approach from all levels of government and industry. It is not exclusively a regional district nor a municipal issue but both entities have an important stake in the viability of agriculture since agriculture forms such an important part of the rural landscape and supports a significant component of the local economy.

There are 6 Official Community Plans (OCPs) in the ACRD and 1 in the City of Port Alberni as follows:

There are 6 Official Community Plans (OCPs) in the ACRD as follows:

- 1) Bamfield OCP (May, 2000)– no agricultural land use or impact, outside the plan area.
- 2) Beaufort Official Community Plan Bylaw No. P994 (amended in January, 2001 - see below)
- 3) South Long Beach OCP (February, 2007) – outside the plan area, no agricultural land use or impact
- 4) Sproat Lake OCP (adopted February, 2005)
- 5) Beaver Creek OCP (adopted November, 1999)
- 6) Cherry Creek OCP (updated December, 2005)

The City of Port Alberni has also adopted an OCP in 2007. There is agricultural land in four of these plans: Beaufort, Sproat, Beaver Creek, and Cherry Creek.

The Regional District has an Agricultural Advisory Committee which provides input on issues related to agriculture and to regional developments, applications, plans, etc that impact the industry or ALR lands in the area. The AAC deals primarily with requests from the Regional District but is, occasionally, asked for input on agriculture issues within the City of Port Alberni.

Generally speaking, the language in the Regional District's OCPs is strongly supportive of agriculture within the respective areas. Some of the older OCPs have not been specifically edited or amended to include policy recommendations that have been developed under the Strengthening Farming Initiative but they are not far off anyway.

The City of Port Alberni OCP contains only a brief section on agriculture which states that there are only two ALR parcels within the city—part of the mall property and part of the estuary property owned by the Tsechah First Nation. The city policies express support for urban agriculture, value added activities to support local products, the Farmers' market as well as education and promotion related to local products. The City also commits to working with the Agricultural Land Commission to identify opportunities to enhance and/or promote agriculture in the community.

The City Zoning Bylaw has at least 4 zones that permit agriculture. The Market Garden zone (A1) allows for agricultural uses such as market gardens, nurseries and facilities – minimum lot size is 2 ha (4.94 acres) with maximum coverage of 40% including greenhouse area and farm market area maximum of 200 m<sup>2</sup> of floor area. The Urban Agriculture zone (A2) has a minimum lot size of 2 ha (4.94 acres) with 10% coverage. Lots less than 0.4 ha (0.99 acres) are not to be used for livestock and 0.2 ha (0.49 acres) must be available for each horse, cow, goat, sheep or similar animal. Rural Residential zones (R5 and R5A) allow limited agricultural use.

### ***Discussion options***

- Identify known issues related to local government policy and discuss options for resolution of those issues.
- Review the Statement of Goals for an Official Plan:

- i. Protect the agricultural resource base and areas identified as prime agricultural areas.
- ii. Encourage a sustainable form of agricultural and farming through land use policy and economic development activities.
- iii. Promote a diverse range of farming activities and agricultural support uses throughout the Municipality.
- iv. Explore the Municipal role in achieving locally viable farming both in terms of land use, economic development activities and cooperative efforts with adjoining agriculturally related communities.
- v. Review Municipal service delivery to ensure that it meets the special needs of the rural areas and particularly the farming community.
- vi. Evaluate the impact of Public Policies such as the protection of Natural Heritage Areas on farm practices and explore mechanisms to address inequities.
- vii. Review/promote local dispute resolution mechanisms for regulations which affect farming practices e.g. nutrient management, source water protection, Municipal infrastructure improvements.
- viii. Acknowledge the mixed use nature of the rural area in the City and develop policies and approaches to recognize and manage conflicting objectives of the various rural users and uses.
- ix. Recognize agriculture and farming practices as legitimate uses within the urban portion of the Municipality particularly for large holdings.
- x. Clearly identify the prime agricultural areas and provide for their protection.
- xi. Create a rural policy which will also provide protection for ongoing farming operations. Create a policy for both agriculture and rural areas which reflects the need to provide for secondary uses to protect animal operations and to provide a limitation for consent activity and other competing and complementary uses within the rural area.

## **5. Meat Inspection**

### ***Issue:***

The BC Meat Inspection Regulation, adopted in 2004 and amended in 2010, has created challenges for Alberni Valley red meat producers who must now haul their animals to Courtenay for processing in a provincially licensed plant. This adds significant costs to the producer in a sector that has very narrow margins. Also, a large percentage of the agricultural land in the area is only suited to forage production so, if there is no economic use for that forage, beef and other red meat production will inherently decline.

### ***Opportunity:***

If the meat inspection issue can be resolved, there is a strong demand for local grass fed beef and many of the existing producers have excellent resource bases (experience, equipment, buildings, and productive forage lands) that could be used to produce a consistent branded grass fed beef product.

## **6. Regional Allocation of Quota**

### ***Issue:***

Access to quota and regulatory issues related to supply management were briefly identified that the Farmers' Institute session. The loss of milk quota in the area has certainly had a negative impact on gross farm receipts and is impacting the critical mass of agriculture in the area. There are a number of reasons that milk production has declined in the area, however, the change in policy that allowed quota to be sold off island seemed to be the beginning of the end for Island milk production. There has been a steady decline since that time.

### ***Opportunity:***

The system for allocating quota has resulted in a more centralized production of supply management – generally production has moved to the Fraser Valley. Reallocating, or gradually shifting quota into the rural regions of the province would:

- Improve food self-sufficiency of the rural regions
- Create economic development opportunities
- Spread the risk associated with disease outbreaks and allow faster repopulation of areas affected by disease outbreaks

## 7. Preserving the Character of Rural Communities

Collectively, the characteristics of the population of the Alberni Valley have great diversity, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, genders, and age. Alberni's history illustrates strong roots in agriculture.

The importance and celebration of the foundation of the community can build a better society grounded in a common understanding of shared ideals. There are many comments in the consultation that relate to the history of the valley and the agricultural roots.

Strengthen the whole community by recognizing and celebrating the roots in agriculture and contributing to the spirit and the culture of the community.

### ***Opportunities:***

- Demonstrating a shared vision of sustainability through actions
- Participating in improving and implementing the Agriculture Plan
- Strengthening farming organizations
- Continue and strengthen agricultural events such as the Fall Fair
- Sharing best practices and lessons learned

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