

Envisioning an Agri-Food Staff Member

Results of ACRD staff + contractor engagement

What would a permanent agri-food staff position look like within the ACRD? Through six in-depth interviews, ACRD staff members and contractors shared their thoughts.

Activities

Key Roles

Three key roles emerged from interviews: relationship-building & engagement, policy & bylaw influence, and ACRD admin support.



Tasks

While there are myriad specific tasks this staff-member could take on, the following were mentioned most often:

- Facilitating committees
- Assistance with grants
- Climate change planning
- and many more....

Reach

Internal Reach

It was acknowledged that the work of this staff-member would permeate extensively throughout the ACRD organization.

Intersecting departments:

- Grants
- Natural Assets
- Finance
- Communications
- Community Services
- Building inspections
- Emergency Planning

Whole System Focus

Interviewees saw the role's focus extending beyond conventional land-based agriculture, encompassing the food system as a whole.

This would include:

- water-based agriculture
- alternative agriculture
- indigenous food systems
- food security
- and more...

Structure

Time Commitment

Interviewees discussed whether the role should be part- or full-time. The key points were as follows...

Full-time:

- Attracts higher qualifications
- Embeds role into ACRD structures
- Widens the applicant pool
- Reduces time constraints
- Signifies value

Part-time:

- Possibly more attractive to producers
- Idea: two part-time roles

Reporting

While many agreed that the role fits within the Planning department, the possibility of a new Agriculture department also came up.

Attributes

Skills & Experience

The below qualities were most frequently suggested to be either important or essential to the position...

Skills:

- Community engagement
- Relationship-building
- Communications
- Project management

Knowledge:

- Food systems and security
- Policy and planning
- Local and regional policy and governance
- Knowledge of local community

Experience:

- Producer experience
- Project management
- Local knowledge

Funding

Paying for the role

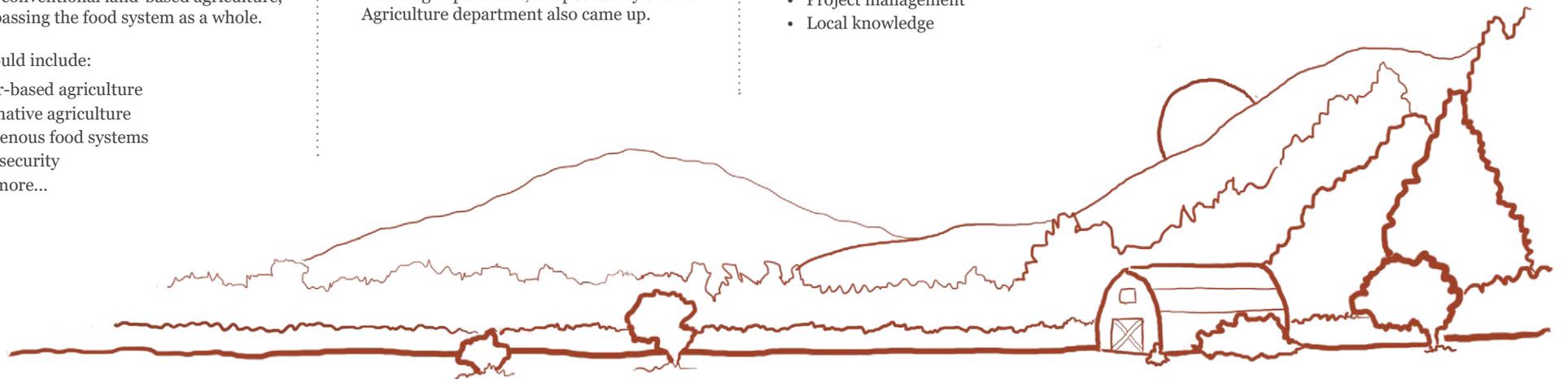
Discussion surrounded whether an existing or new ACRD service would best support this work. The key points were as follows...

Existing Service:

- Pros: easy, low risk & low cost to implement
- Con: not tailored to position

New service:

- Pro: demonstrates position value
- Pro: tailored to position
- Cons: difficult, risky & high cost to implement



Envisioning an Agri-Food Staff Member

Detailed Interview Analysis

In 2011, the ACRD adopted the Alberni Valley Agricultural Plan, which set out goals for the agri-food development of this region. To implement the plan and its coastal counterpart, two Agricultural Support Workers (ASWs) were contracted on a part-time, seasonal basis to work toward these goals.

Over the past 8 years, the ASWs, working side-by-side with agri-food stakeholders, have made significant strides. Numerous organizations have partnered on agricultural programs and committees; critical research and programs have been undertaken, such as abattoir work, water work and armyworm support; and a 3-year grant project was secured.

In 2021, Enhancing Agricultural Development was listed as a key goal in the ACRD Strategic Plan. This, in addition to the above achievements, clearly demonstrates the key role that agricultural support work has played in the region and will continue to play in the future. Accordingly, the ACRD has come to feel that the role of agri-food support work has outgrown its contractual basis and is deserving of a permanent staff position, enabling agriculture to become more deeply embedded within the organization.

With this in mind, the current project pursues the notion of hiring a permanent agri-food staff member within the ACRD. To frame the possibilities surrounding this, it begins by looking internally, asking staff members and contractors “what could an agri-food role look like?” The answers, obtained through 7 in-depth interviews, are outlined below.

Activities

KEY ROLES

While a wide variety of key roles were brought up in interviews, they consistently fell into three main categories: community engagement and relationship building; policy and program influence; and ACRD Support.

1. Community Engagement and Relationship-Building

The importance of both community engagement and relationship-building with this role was emphasized frequently. The narrative of historical and ongoing division and distrust between government and agri-food actors was frequently recalled. It was stressed that this staff member must build upon the progress made by existing contractors

in repairing these relationships, allowing for trusting and collaborative community development that runs deeper within the ACRD.

Most frequently, interviewees stressed engagement with local agri-food stakeholders, particularly producers. Many voices touched on the need to develop stronger relationships within the agri-food community in order to more accurately understand existing needs. The importance of boots-on-the-ground outreach was emphasized, as well as the utilization of existing committees, such as the Agricultural Development Committee (ADC), Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAR), and Coastal Agricultural Roundtable (CAR), to gather and share information. Acting as a liaison within the community was also highlighted; helping to ensure that information is shared in a timely way between the community, ACRD Board of Directors, ACRD staff and committees. Finally, interviewees saw the value of improved communications with local organizations, such as the Tofino Culinary Guild, Farmers Institutes, and agri-food organizations.

Another stakeholder discussed often was local First Nations. Interviewees stressed the importance of developing more robust relationships with local nations and working to understand how their agri-food interests can be supported. It was acknowledged that this may begin with a slow process of trust-building and emphasis on bottom-up processes, with the ACRD offering additional capacity and support to First Nations-led initiatives.

Interviewees also saw the importance of engaging with provincial and federal levels of government and working to foster stronger relationships with these entities. Interviewees mentioned that such relationships could help improve higher-level supports for larger farming operations and also increase awareness of available agri-food grants.

2. Policy and Program Influence

Most interviewees identified the key role of influencing agricultural policies and bylaws, suggesting that existing ACRD policies must be updated through an agricultural lens and that new policies should be developed with food security in mind. It was mentioned that the staff member should draft related reports and recommendations and present them to the ACRD Board of Directors. Also brought up was the forthcoming Official Community Plan update, requiring the development of both agricultural and climate change sections, which the staff member would play a key role in drafting.

Two interviewees also touched on the need for this staff member to contribute to various programs and events related to agriculture in the region, such as local agricultural shows and the armyworm monitoring program.

When it came to the focus of policies and programs, one goal that commonly arose was supporting the economic viability of local farm operations. Larger farms, in particular, were discussed as they have the potential to generate significant revenue. An agri-food staff member could work to engage these stakeholders more deeply and advocate for the greater provincial-level supports they require. Generally, reducing stresses faced by farmers and helping to ensure their operations are successful emerged as a key theme in the interviews.

3. ACRD Administrative Support

A final role commonly mentioned was the general support of ACRD administrative tasks. Three interviewees suggested that this staff member could provide additional capacity within the ACRD to alleviate some existing administrative burden, such as supporting the processing of development applications and completion of grant applications. It was pointed out, however, that they will need to be mindful of preventing this general planning work from overtaking their workload at the sacrifice of their agri-food work. One interviewee also emphasized the need for strong administrative and project management capabilities as a key responsibility of the staff member would be ensuring projects are kept on track.

KEY TASKS

Within the key roles performed by this staff member, many specific tasks were highlighted. All interviewees brought up the importance of this staff member facilitating committees within the ACRD, such as the ADC, AAR and CAR. One interviewee mentioned how the committees would benefit from having a continuous ACRD point of contact who will be reliably present, as opposed to more precarious contractors. They suggested that this could ensure both committee knowledge and capacity are fully-utilized. Another interviewee suggested that, given a permanent staff member’s embeddedness within the ACRD and increased knowledge of its internal activities, they could help committees be more aware of all ACRD opportunities and initiatives relevant to them.

While most interviewees felt that the staff member could chair

such committees, one suggested that such committees would more appropriately be chaired by community members. It was also expressed that the role of chair requires a significant administrative burden that may be too much to ask of this staff member. The possibility of co-chairing to divide these responsibilities was mentioned, as well delegating some administrative tasks to other committee members.

Another task that frequently came up was planning for climate change. Several interviewees acknowledged the growing importance of this area and the agri-food work that will arise for mitigation, adaptation and resilience, such as improving collaboration between producers. Others mentioned the need for agri-food support on development of the forthcoming Climate Action Plan and Climate Change section of the OCP. This staff member would also play a role in emergency preparedness activities.

Another frequently mentioned task was related to grants. Most interviewees mentioned the need for the staff member to provide relevant expertise on grant applications, relieve some of this administrative burden, and seek out new grant opportunities within their networks.

Many other tasks were touched on, including developing solutions for local water systems, helping to identify natural assets, investigating agri-food use of airport lands, agri-business development and responding to inquiries about the PremisID program. This, however, is by no means a comprehensive list.

Funding

Interviewees offered a variety of ideas surrounding how to fund the position. While no clear path emerged, the following summary provides a number of points for ongoing discussion.

GRANT FUNDING

The existing ACRD Agricultural Support Coordinator contractor positions are funded partially via a Vancouver Foundation Grant and partially via the ACRD Planning budget. When it comes to a related permanent position, all staff members feel that supplemental grant-based funding should continue into the future.

ACRD SERVICES

In terms of ACRD funding, some interviewees felt that the agri-food position falls squarely into the planning service, and therefore, should be funded under this. Others felt that a new service could or should be established specifically for agriculture. A number of benefits to this were mentioned, including the fact that this service would be highly tailored to the needs of the agricultural community and that it would demonstrate the high value placed on agriculture in the region. Drawbacks were also mentioned, however, including that its creation would be expensive and resource intensive, and that it may not be supported by the electorate.

Three staff members also proposed the creation of alternative services. Two interviewees suggested that the creation of a climate change service would be very timely, may be more accepted by the public and could include within it agricultural support. Another staff member pointed out that this individual may want to take on a key economic development role. This could be enabled by the creation of an economic development service, as has been seen in the Squamish-Lillooet Regional District which is directing this toward agriculture.

TAXATION

Should a new tax be sought to fund this position, many interviewees weighed in on the pros and cons of a parcel tax versus property value tax. Overall, most interviewees saw a parcel tax as being preferable given that the higher value properties in the region are not those that would see themselves as benefiting from an agricultural tax, and thus may not be supportive of a property value tax. Additionally, a parcel tax based on land area would see large farms, the greatest beneficiaries of the tax, paying more for the service.

Attributes

SKILLS & EXPERIENCE

The following staff-member attributes and their levels of essentiality were identified by interviewees:

Skills

- Relationship- and trust-building (essential)
- Community engagement (essential)
- Project management (important)
- Communications
- Organization
- Multitasking
- Problem solving
- Trauma-informed practice

Knowledge

- Agriculture, including alternative, non-land-based, and

- indigenous food systems (essential)
- Food security (essential)
- Local and regional policy and governance
- Knowledge of local community (asset)

Experience

- On-the-ground agricultural experience (important)
- Project management

Education

- Minimum Bachelor’s degree in agriculture, food security, food policy, planning, or related field; or
- 5+ years related experience

Qualifications

- Based on recent changes to the *Professional Governance Act (2022)*, this staff member may need to hold a *Professional Agrologist (P.Ag)* designation if the role provides a service that “requires the experience or technical knowledge of an agrologist...” Thus, depending on the scope of the role, a P.Ag may be required, for example, if the individual is tasked with providing operations advice to individual farms. Given the newness of these policies, however, there is a lack of clarity surrounding their application. Further time and research should yield better understanding.

Reach

INTERNAL REACH

Interviews suggested that the work of this staff-member will intersect and forage partnerships with many other ACRD departments and personnel. This shows the extent to which agri-food activities permeate the many aspects of the regional district. The following intersecting areas were discussed:

- Grants: providing expertise to support the Grants Manager in grant writing
- Natural assets: supporting Natural Assets manager in identification of natural assets and development of related policies, including climate adaptation initiatives
- Finance: as with all other roles, assisting finance department with budgeting
- Communications: working with communications dept on community engagement, outreach, etc
- Community services: working alongside community services, including waste management
- Building-inspections: working on policy development with building inspectors to ensure they suit farm uses
- Emergency planning: taking part in emergency planning activities, including those related to climate change and food security

Other mentioned areas that this role could extend into are economic development and engagement with non-agricultural lands, such as airports, landfills, parks and trails.

FOOD SYSTEM FOCUS

It was frequently mentioned how this role should take on a whole food system approach, extending beyond merely a conventional agriculture focus. It was mentioned how different types of agriculture are both important and often under-recognized within the ACRD and should be further emphasized. Those touched on were water-based agriculture (fish, oyster and kelp farms, coastal fisheries and sea harvesting), and alternative farming methods. Indigenous food systems were also frequently highlighted with the acknowledgment of the ACRD’s partnership with Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council to work towards food sovereignty solutions and support the reconnection and stewardship of land and marine-based food systems. Finally, food security was emphasized as an important aspect of this role with increasing importance as the impacts of climate change on food availability grow more concerning.

Structure

REPORTING

Interviewees agreed that this position would fit well within the planning department of the ACRD. There was also the suggestion, however, of creating a new Agriculture department, which this position would fall under.

TIME COMMITMENT

Most interviewees favoured a full-time position, with various justifications. They felt that full-time work offers a living wage, tends to attract workers with higher qualifications and would significantly open the applicant pool. Full-time would also allow the staff member to secure deeper roots in the community and help embed agri-food work more fully into ACRD structures. Worker time constraints was another common point, with suggestions that past agri-food contractors have had insufficient hours to meet the work required of them. It was mentioned that this is typical of part-time positions, which tend to become overwhelmed quickly.

In considering a part-time position, two points were raised. One interviewee expressed that starting with a part-time role could allow the value of the position to be demonstrated, building the case for a future full-time role. Another pointed out how the agricultural community, in particular, has expressed a desire to have an active producer take on this position. To support the balancing of these multiple demands,

How is a new service created?

A service establishing bylaw must be adopted by the Regional District in order to create a new service. This is done through the following steps:

1. The district seeks approval from participating areas. This is done via four possible routes:
 - a. Referendum (assent voting): electors in each participating area vote on the proposed bylaw. A majority is required for assent.
 - b. Alternative approval process: electors may submit response forms opposing the bylaw. If 10% or more of the electorate are opposed, approval is not received. Alternative approval may only be used for a service establishing bylaw in the following cases:
 - d. the maximum requisition amount is equal to \$0.50 for each \$1,000 of net taxable value of land and improvements included in the service area; or
 - e. the bylaw relates to a service for sewage, water, solid waste or recyclable material (Citation).
 - f. First Nation Consent: participating First Nations may provide consent on behalf of their electors if their governing body passes a resolution to adopt the bylaw.
 - g. Electoral Area Consent: regional district electoral area directors may provide consent on behalf of their electors if the regional district board receives a sufficient petition from property owners for a service.
2. The Inspector of Municipalities conducts a provincial review and gives statutory approval.
3. The regional district board votes on the bylaw. A majority vote is required for it to be adopted.

this position could be shared by two individuals acting in part-time capacities - a structure proven successful through the work of the existing agri-food contractors.

CONTRACTORS AND ALTERNATIVE STRUCTURES

Many interviewees expressed interest in hiring contractors in addition to the staff position to allow for small, niche projects to be taken on. One such interviewee suggested that working within a team reduces burdens; “two brains are better than one”. Another interviewee suggested that the agri-food portfolio could be a component of another less-specialized planning position, and this staff member could bring in contractors to offer specific agri-food expertise.

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