

LAND USE

INTRODUCTION

Protecting farmland is vital to the future success and sustainability of B.C. agriculture. Without land dedicated to agricultural production in the province, it will be difficult to ensure access to safe, affordable food for British Columbians.

THE ISSUE

Recognizing the need to preserve the limited amount of land in the province suitable for agricultural production, the Government of British Columbia adopted the Agricultural Land Commission Act in 2002. This Act established the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) as an independent administrative tribunal comprised of appointed Commissioners who make important decisions regarding the use of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). The ALR, comprising just 5% of B.C.'s total land base, is a provincial land-use zone where agriculture is the priority use. The Act has since been revised and is supplemented by Regulations.

The agriculture sector continues to support the protections guaranteed by the ALR and the critical work of the ALC. These provide opportunities for coordinated and collaborative planning with local governments, as well as certainty for farmers and ranchers that a certain portion of land will continue to be dedicated to agriculture production.

However, there are many other policies and regulations that can impact land use, including taxation, municipal zoning, land-use planning and municipal bylaws. This variety of rules can make it difficult to understand how farming practices are affected in different regions of B.C. or how well that farmland is preserved for agricultural use.

BACKGROUND

Encroaching urban development, rising land costs throughout B.C., increased demand for other uses, and a growing regulatory burden on farmers and ranchers have placed considerable strain on the ALR and could further reduce the already limited amount of land available for agricultural production. Furthermore, efforts to limit or restrict water use in agricultural production could undermine the integrity of the ALR. These land constraints also impact the competitiveness, growth, and long-term viability of the agriculture sector in B.C.

KEY POINTS

- Farmers, ranchers, and relevant industry associations need to be consulted on rules, protocols, and guidelines for projects that impact farmland.
- Rules and regulations that apply to lands in the ALR should support agricultural production.
- All levels of government should focus on the goal of halting land degradation to protect farmland for generations to come and ensure food security for British Columbians.
- Consistent and transparent enforcement of ALR Regulations is needed, particularly regarding non-conforming use of land.

THE SOLUTION

The agriculture sector is seeking support from the Government of British Columbia and municipal governments to ensure that the integrity of the ALR is preserved through the adoption and implementation of policies that ensure these lands remain dedicated to agricultural production and have access to adequate water for that use. As stewards of these lands, it is vital that farmers and ranchers are consulted by all levels of government regarding any legislative or regulatory changes that could impact agricultural production in the ALR.

WHAT COULD GOVERNMENTS DO?

- Set a longer-term vision for the ALC and ALR that outlines clear goals and objectives in collaboration with farmers and ranchers.
- Provide assistance with land improvement costs that keep farmland productive.
- A thorough review of the legislation and regulations related to farm classification is necessary to ensure that agricultural land is primarily used for agricultural production for years to come.
- If access to water for agricultural use were to be curtailed within the ALR, it would significantly diminish the utility of the ALR for preserving local food production. As such, any watershed governance initiative should acknowledge agricultural use as a separate and vital category of use.

WHAT IS BCAC DOING?

- BCAC actively participated in the establishment of the ALC and will continue to work with the Government of B.C. to ensure the ALC is equipped to fulfil its important role.
- BCAC is part of the housing inspection process for working housing located in the ALR.
- BCAC is establishing a Land Use Committee to coordinate industry input on issues related to the ALR and access to land for agricultural production.