

BIODIVERSITY MUSEUM BLOG

The Odd Couple: The Agricultural Land Reserve, Biodiversity, and Species At Risk in BC.

Perhaps no one knows the link between humans and the environment better than a farmer? But we often forget the link between agricultural land and biodiversity. That is why the recent decision by the BC government to amend the Agricultural Land Commission Act jeopardizes not only the future of one of BC's premier industries but also imperils biodiversity in general and species-at-risk in particular.

The changes would do two things: First it would split the Agricultural land reserve (ALR) into two pieces. The first the government calls Zone 1 and it contains 10% of the current ALR reserve. The remaining 90% is contained in Zone 2. This area is generally further from major population centers and garners less agricultural revenue than Zone 1 and is thus thought of as marginal. Second, the changes would alter the process through which decisions about agricultural lands is made, threatening scientific and public input into land use decision making. For biodiversity and species at risk both these parts are worrisome.

Agricultural lands hold many values including agricultural output, and calling the grasslands and agricultural areas of BC interior marginal doesn't account for all the other values agricultural lands hold. First the 90% of BC's agricultural land that would be Zone 2 might not be suitable for growing blueberries, apples, or potatoes but it supports a thriving and healthy ranching industry and it holds a multitude of non-agricultural ecological values. For anyone who has seen a yellow-breasted chat, burrowing owl, great basin spadefoot toad, toothcup meadowfoam, westslope cutthroat trout, or American badger you know that these so-called marginal agricultural lands are important for species at risk. Not to mention the many species at risk that live downstream of farms so that the types of practices undertaken on agricultural lands can either hurt or support many species. There are also many common species associated with agricultural lands; these species are often in decline. Dick Canning's recent Biodiversity Lecture pointed to a few avian species, like barn, tree, and bank swallows, Common nighthawks, and western meadowlarks that are all dependent on agricultural lands. But I'm sure you can imagine many more.

The way that the government has introduced this legislation and its ambiguity around how future decisions about agricultural lands will be made is troublesome. This legislation was introduced with no consultation of agricultural groups, is being fast tracked through the legislature, and the suggestion that political and closed door processes could be used to decide the future of agricultural lands seems to further erode both the ability for public comment and the role of science in land use decision making. I currently work in collaboration with the BC Agricultural Council, the BC Cattleman's Association, and Grassland Conservation Council all groups striving to find ways to support agriculture and biodiversity within the current ALR structure. These groups have sought the advice of scientists to improve the agricultural industry and remove many of the conflicts that exist between agriculture and biodiversity today. They are working to improve science and garner information so they can help their membership manage ecosystem services like carbon sequestration, water quality and quantity, and biodiversity on agricultural lands. They feel that yes, producers need help in making a living at agriculture but that

cannibalizing agricultural lands to survive does nothing but make it harder for farmers to make a living now and remove opportunities for agriculture in the future. It does this by destroying biodiversity.

Farmers are integrally linked with the land, its ecosystems, and the biodiversity that supports it. Farmers know the value of the land they steward. They know biodiversity is important and that they rely on it for their livelihoods, if they didn't they wouldn't be farmers. They are concerned that development pressures from urban centers and oil and gas industries, as well as more typical pressures like drought, floods, and commodity prices. The ALR has served to elevate many of these fears for over 40 years. During that time the pressures to industrialize farmlands have grown, not lessened. Now is not the time to change that path in a month long week legislative session. Improving and strengthening the links between agriculture, science, and biodiversity can do nothing but help sustain healthy ecosystems, communities, industries and in turn help promote the recovery of many rare and endangered species. These are the collaborative and science-based processes that should be promoted.

If you would like to learn more about the Agricultural Land Reserve, the Commission that oversees it here are some links:

Vancouver Sun Article

<http://www.vancouversun.com/Bill+would+ease+rules+taking+some+land+Agricultural+Land+Reserve+with+video/9670289/story.html>

Tyee Article describing the importance of the ALR

<http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2013/11/25/BC-Agricultural-Land-Worth-Saving/>

Video of Richard Bullock Chair of Agricultural Land Commission presentation to BC Institute of Agrologists.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFD0wka5oJQ>

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