



Community Dialogue #1: Issues - BACKGROUND PAPER

I. INTRODUCTION

Plan to Farm: Setting the Table for Food & Agriculture on Salt Spring is an area farm planning process initiated by the Islands Farmers Institute and the Island Natural Growers in collaboration with the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands and Islands Trust. Additional funding has been provided by the Investment Agriculture Foundation of British Columbia and Capital Regional District.

An area farm plan looks ahead and considers a community's agricultural situation in order to identify practical solutions to current issues, identify opportunities to strengthen farming and contribute to the long-term sustainability of agriculture.

The planning process works toward securing the long-term viability of a community's food and agricultural activities by opening up the discussion to consider a wide variety of issues beyond farmland preservation. *Plan to Farm* is Salt Spring Island's unique expression of an area farm plan.

Plan to Farm's Steering Committee has identified two primary goals for the process:

- Re-establish agriculture as a social, cultural and economic priority on the island, and
- Facilitate the growth of associated farming activities.

Salt Spring Island Area Farm Plan - The Process

At the end of the *Plan to Farm* process, the Salt Spring Island community will have collaborated on a plan that describes the current food and agricultural issues, explores opportunities, and recommends innovative policy and strategic approaches.

Community participation is critical to the success of the process.

The *Plan to Farm* process will involve the:

- Collection and analysis of background information;
- Identification of issues affecting or influencing agriculture;
- Identification of opportunities for agriculture;
- Articulation of a future vision for food and agriculture;
- Development of action oriented strategies and recommendations;
- Submission of recommendations to the Official Community Plan (OCP) review process;
- Consideration of implementation procedures; and
- Identification of implementation responsibilities.

Process Timeline

	Fall 2006	Jan. 2007	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Ag. Land Use Inventory													
Community Dialogues: #1 Issues													
#2 Opportunities													
#3 Vision													
Plan Development													
Review of Draft Plan													
Begin Implementation Plan													→

Community Dialogue Sessions

Given that community participation is critical to achieving the goals of *Plan to Farm*, three linked community dialogues will be held at the start of the planning process. The primary purpose of the dialogues is to establish a common base of knowledge and understanding of the issues. Participants will discuss the opportunities for agriculture on Salt Spring and collectively articulate a future vision for food and agriculture on the island. These three initial discussions are structured to build on each other. They will establish an important foundation on which the area farm plan will be built and realized.

The dialogues are designed as fun, reflective sessions where community members can discuss topics together. Each meeting will consist of a brief presentation followed by focused small-group discussions, led by a skilled facilitator. A background paper, such as this one, will be distributed prior to each meeting so that participants can prepare in advance for the meetings. We would like the meetings to be as productive and efficient as possible - preparation is key to achieving these goals.

Light refreshments will be provided at each meeting.

The following meetings are planned:

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| 1. Community Dialogue Session #1: Issues
Gulf Islands Secondary School, Multipurpose Room | Saturday, January 20, 2007
1:30 - 4:30 pm |
| 2. Community Dialogue Session #2: Opportunities
Location: TBA | Saturday, February 17, 2007
Time: TBA |
| 3. Community Dialogue Session #3: Vision
Location: TBA | Saturday, March 10, 2007
Time: TBA |

Participation in the Community Dialogue

All individuals and groups with an interest in the future of food and agriculture on Salt Spring Island are invited to participate. We are hoping for a diverse group of community members who will reflect the many people who benefit from the island's agriculture including: farmers, food processors, retailers, environmentalists, restauranteurs, tourism operators, farmers' market customers, and satisfied eaters.

Because each dialogue session is designed to build on the next we hope that most participants will be able to attend all three sessions. Participants are asked to respect the following guidelines:

1. Participants are strongly encouraged to attend all three community dialogues.
2. Registration is required for each meeting (please see details provided below).
3. Participants are welcome to join the process at any time, but must register beforehand. Background documents will be provided to inform new participants of the process up to that point.

II. CONTEXT

The history of food production and agriculture on Salt Spring Island is rich and varied. In order to understand the options for the present, it is helpful to understand how past activities have shaped today's food and agricultural systems.

Agricultural History

Pre European Contact

Salt Spring Island is part of the traditional territory of the Saanich, Cowichan, and Chemainus First Nations. Aboriginal activities on the island date back thousands of years. First Nations relationships with the island's marine and land ecosystems evolved slowly over time resulting in a culturally modified land and seascape that satisfied most of their needs. Foods were harvested, gathered, cultivated and preserved in quantities that sustained their communities and met their spiritual, ceremonial, social and trade requirements. These aboriginal communities are the closest example of sustainability ever achieved on Salt Spring Island.

Mid to Late 1800s

Victoria's population was rapidly increasing prompting Governor James Douglas to promote Salt Spring Island as a food-producing hinterland for Victoria. So in 1859 the first non-Native settlers arrived on SSI to begin farming. By 1880 many of the best-located farms were established and orchards planted. Ruckle Farm, established in 1872, is the oldest remaining example of these first farms and the oldest family farm still in operation in BC.

Early settlers used the mountainous areas of the island to graze livestock. The introduction of grazing animals marked the beginning of a number of agriculturally induced changes to the island ecosystem including the introduction of non-native forage plants, the extirpation of large predators such as wolves and bear, and the clearing of large areas for forage production. By the 1890s Salt Spring Island was exporting its first specialty crop - fruit - by boat and rail to markets in Eastern Canada. Dairy farming and poultry production had been identified as economically viable specialties.

Early 1900s

By the early 1900s Salt Spring Island was self-sufficient in forage for local livestock and started exporting feed to Victoria and other Gulf Islands. In addition, with other Southern Gulf Islands, it was renowned for its large harvests of fruit. Dairying was important and the butter produced by the Salt Spring Island Creamery, largely exported to Victoria, supported dairying on Salt Spring and in the Southern Gulf Islands. Poultry and sheep farming had also become important economic activities.

Mid 1900s

After WWII agricultural activities on Salt Spring steadily declined due to rising costs of feed and shipping coupled with the growth of more profitable farming locations in other areas of the Province. This decline was marked by the close of the Salt Spring Island Creamery in 1957.

Mid to Late 1900s

A revival of agriculture on Salt Spring was realized through the reestablishment of the Salt Spring Island Fall Fair in 1976, the acquisition of the current Islands Farmers Institute Fair Grounds on Rainbow Road in 1979 and the completion of the exhibition hall on the grounds in 1982. This period was also noted for the growth of small-scale, value-added (often organic) agricultural enterprises that catered to increasing numbers of tourists and seasonal residents.

Current Situation

According to the Salt Spring Island Local Produce Study (2005) approximately 4400 ha are currently being farmed on the island. Thirty-six percent of this land is not located in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). Just over 20% of Salt Spring Island or 2930 ha is in the ALR. Approximately 60% of the ALR is currently farmed.

The 1996 and 2001 Statistics Canada data for Salt Spring indicate a slight decline in agricultural activity and output. Once available, the 2006 agricultural land use inventory data for Salt Spring will provide a better understanding of the current situation.

Statistics Canada Census of Agriculture	1996	2001
Total number of farms	207	172
Total farm area	4108 ha	3519 ha
Total gross farm receipts	\$2.47 mil	\$3.24 mil
Total operating expenses	\$3.16 mil	\$3.77 mil

III. IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

A number of issues that face or affect the success of agriculture and agriculture-related activities on Salt Spring Island have received attention in a number of Salt Spring-focused reports (Growing Green Farmland Trust Study, Gulf Islands Livestock Processing Feasibility Study, Salt Spring Island Local produce Study, and Salt Spring Island Food Security Discussion and Planning Paper). The following list highlights some of the key issues drawn from this research. This is by no means an exhaustive list of issues; rather, it is a place to begin a discussion of the challenges facing agriculture on Salt Spring Island

Popularity

The beauty and benign environment of SSI increasingly attracts non-agricultural buyers who are eager and able to purchase farm properties for luxury home sites and estates.

Increasing Land Prices

The average price of non-waterfront property on the Gulf Islands exceeded the average price paid for land in Victoria. Land prices have escalated far above values based on farm incomes. These high land prices:

- Make it nearly impossible for new or young farmers to buy land to get started;
- Reduce the opportunity for existing farmers to purchase additional farmland;
- Reduce the ability of farm families to transfer property to the next generation as they are forced or enticed to consider their properties as assets and/or potential retirement income thereby reducing the possibility of 'passing on' these properties through inheritance or donation.

Shrinking Farming Community

Viable farming communities require a critical number of farms to sustain supporting infrastructure (processing facilities, feed stores, veterinarians, etc.). Each time a farm is taken out of production, the viability of every other agricultural operation on the island is threatened. The reduction in the Gulf Islands' farm population reduces the ability of farmers and their associated organizations to provide and secure support for their members.

Economic Viability

In spite of property tax incentives, increasing land, transportation, and agricultural input costs, and limited access to skilled seasonal labourers is making it difficult for farmers to maintain economically viable farm operations. The limited size of local markets makes it that

much more challenging for farmers to succeed. As a result most Salt Spring Island farmers rely on off-farm incomes.

Farming on the Edge

Rural development is affecting the continuation of certain farm practices. The uncertainty that accompanies farming at the edge of the sprawling and increasingly urbanized Capital Regional District may be contributing to declining agricultural investment, productivity, and income. While farms located within the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) are protected by "Right to Farm" legislation, farms located outside the ALR are subjected to zoning and bylaw restrictions that may not support farming practices. The effect of these 'restrictions' can negatively affect the economic viability of a farm operation.

Local Support

Local economic support for agriculture is undermined through increased availability of cheaper foods sourced from outside of the community and the belief that locally grown food is more expensive. There can be a perception that economically viable farm operations are noisy, smelly and polluting - that they make poor neighbours and negatively impact property values. When this perception exists within the minds of the public and government, it can negatively affect agricultural land use decisions.

Limited Federal and Provincial Government Support

As a result of policy, budget decisions and staffing cutbacks small farmers receive very little in the way of government assistance or support. What little support farmers receive can be undermined through the introduction of regulations and policies brought in to address issues and concerns associated with large farms and food processing facilities. The effect of these policies and regulations on small rural farms and farmers is often overlooked or ignored.

Federal and Provincial Regulations

Government regulations geared toward large, commercial agricultural and food production facilities make it increasingly difficult for small island food producers and processors to continue. These regulations also inhibit the continuation and development of high-value artisanal production and processing initiatives, which were behind Salt Spring's most recent agricultural revival.

Farm Practices

With increasing environmental regulations and a growing market demand for organically produced food, farming practices on Salt Spring are increasingly becoming more environmentally sensitive. However, there is currently no established overall approach or direction for island farming practices. In addition, there has been limited support available to encourage farmers to adopt more environmentally considerate farm practices

Meeting Local Food Needs

Salt Spring's farms do not meet the current food needs of the island's residents. As a consequence the island is now almost entirely reliant on distant, off-island food sources. In addition, most livestock feed now comes from off-island. This has contributed to a significant reduction in commercial meat production.

All of these issues combine to make it difficult for the continued economic survival of small farm operations on Salt Spring Island.

IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE JANUARY 20TH, 2007 COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

Please come to the Community Dialogue prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. *In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges facing agriculture on Salt Spring Island?*
2. *What are the most valuable local assets for agriculture on Salt Spring Island?*
3. *Given this context what is your reaction to the goal of this process, "To re-establish agriculture as a social, cultural and economic priority?"*

Registration

In order to assist with event coordination and planning invited and interested participants are asked to register via email or phone for the first Community Dialogue Session by **January 15, 2007**.

To register please contact:

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