

**SPECIAL MEETING
PENINSULA & AREA AGRICULTURAL MEETING
HELD BY ZOOM
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2020, 7:00 PM**

In attendance: Phil Christie, Chair; Carol Davidson; Linda Geggie; Bev Marley; Terry Michell; Larry Sluggett; Robin Tunnicliffe; Dianne Williamson; and Isobel Hoffmann, recording secretary.

Guests: Sam Charlton; Emily Carmichael, Ministry of Agriculture.

Regrets: Larry Kimmett; Satnam Dheenshaw. Councillors Taylor (Saanich), Smyth (North Saanich), Graham (Central Saanich).

Minutes: The Minutes of March 12, 2020, and ZOOM minutes from May 15 and October 8, 2020, were adopted.

Treasurer's Report (Carol Davidson) –

- Balance in the chequing account is \$1,586.07. The cashable Term Deposit at 1% interest is \$20,691.30

AGRICULTURAL ISSUES: NEW

Monitoring Pests & Beneficial Insects – Samantha Charlton

A slide show was presented and Samantha stated:

- This is a small project led by the Comox Valley Farmers, in partnership with Pollinators Canada.
- The intent is to determine the key gaps, find opportunities for collaboration and prepare an implementation plan, hopefully in time for the start of the next growing season.
- The provincial government, private agencies and farmers are involved in the study.

Samantha asked some key questions, as follows, with responses from PAAC noted:

1. How do you survey for pests and pollinators on your property and crops you grow?

- Beehives on the property and planting cover crops to feed them is beneficial. Pollinators love kale flowers.
- Mason bees can be more successful than honey bees as they can withstand cooler spring temperatures. Bumble bees can overwinter in forested areas (arbutus).
- Deer and geese are the most common “pests” rather than insects.
- Slugs are a normal occurrence in some crops but easy to control if monitored closely.
- Pests such as span worms and caterpillars in orchards.
- Bob Maxwell would be a good resource in this regard.

- With the growing demand for locally grown food, an interest in better horticultural controls will also increase.
- Starlings can be an issue, especially with the strawberries and corn.
- One farmer has trouble with the asparagus beetle and picks them off by hand as she doesn't want to use pesticides.
- Often problems with nematodes in the spring and wire worms in the garlic.
- Keeping the area around plants clean helps with control of insects.

2. Do you have knowledge of other crops where monitoring pests on a wider scale would be beneficial – such as hiring a private consultant?

- The CRD continues to conduct egg addling programmes to control the geese populations, which have been growing for decades.
- Samantha acknowledged the problem with geese, but noted they are not part of this particular study.
- It has been a particularly bad year for wire worms, red worms, army worms and aphids. Apparently the Ministry of Agriculture has been monitoring these pests.
- Wire worms have been known to bore deeply in to the soils in the winter, then surface in the early spring. Tilling deeply in the spring helps as the birds eat the worms.
- Once wire worms are established in the fields, they are difficult to control, particularly on nightshade crops. The worms can also be carried easily on farm equipment.
- Sometimes cover crops could increase the wire worm issue.
- Some potato growers up-Island in the Cobble Hill area have been having issues and there are limited insecticides that can be used.
- Noted there has been an increase in flea beetles, however, a decrease in numbers has occurred in areas where populations of small (non-native) lizards have been seen.
- Ladybugs are a proven answer to dealing with aphids and they are readily available for purchase; Terry Michell stated he uses millions on his farm for the berry crops every year.
- Using remay on newly seeded crops can help with the flea beetle.
- Russian thistle is a hard weed to control, especially when growing on neighbouring properties. The Noxious Weed Act can help with control measures if necessary.
- The federal government has been collecting samples of the golden nematode for the past few years, but unfortunately they do not share the results of their studies.
- Murder hornets are a new and serious problem on the Island as it is well documented they can quickly destroy bee colonies.
- The CRD takes steps every year to control the mosquitoes using BT pellets in areas with standing water.
- Farmers used to receive technical support from local agrologists through the Ministry, but that assistance stopped many years ago unfortunately.
- Noted sometimes it is difficult to get information and specific supplies, as well as professional help.
- Relationships can be developed at trade shows, such as with pest control sales people as they understand the different range of products. Organic farmers have limitations on what they can use. *Terralink* in Kelowna is a good company.

Samantha thanked the Commission for its input; she will keep the group informed on the progress of the study and any possible action plan and workshops.

Proposed Grape & Fruit Atlas for Vancouver Island – Phil Christie (Chair)

The Chair stated:

- Kelowna produced a grape atlas for the Okanagan some years ago and he suggested that Vancouver Island would benefit from producing a similar atlas for grapes and other fruit.
- PAAC could lobby the provincial government to look into an atlas for the Cowichan Valley and the Peninsula.
- He believes this would be a good initiative and not very expensive.
- A soil inventory has already been completed in the 80s, as well as climate maps.
- Having information on the suitability of certain locations and best climates for varieties of grapes and fruits would be very helpful.
- Duncan and parts of the Peninsula, for example, have a micro-climate.

Discussion ensued:

- It would be worthwhile approaching the provincial government asking them to pursue.
- The atlas would be beneficial to future farmers.
- Noted that past Chair Bob Maxwell has already done some research work in this area.
- Bev suggested we approach the Grape Growers Association and the Cideries before proceeding to get their opinion.

ACTION: It was agreed that PAAC contact the Grape Growers Association and the cideries on the Island to ascertain whether they support the production of an atlas for grape and fruit growing on the Island. The Chair will speak to Bob Maxwell for some input and ideas.

50th Anniversary of the establishment of the Agricultural Land Reserve (1972)

The Chair stated:

- The government introduced the protection of agricultural land in 1972 and developed the Agricultural Land Reserve – this was a very progressive move at the time.
- The Agricultural Land Commission was formed in 1973.
- He suggested we ask the Ministry of Agriculture to plan a 50th anniversary celebration in 2022.

Discussion ensued, noting we could get the agricultural fairs & farm associations involved. Perhaps fun and educational clips could be produced and shown via social media, on TV and in print media. We could contact Lana Popham also.

Emily Carmichael, MoA, stated she wasn't aware if the Land Commission was planning anything but she will look into it. Things are stalled right now waiting for the official government to be sworn in.

Continue discussions at the next meeting.

Referral from Central Saanich – Proposed Tree Protection Bylaw Amendments

The Chair stated:

- He reviewed the proposed bylaw and found it to be similar to most other tree protection bylaws. It creates more regulatory work for farmers however.

Discussion noted:

- Why should a farmer have to apply for a permit to cut down a tree on his own property in order to grow food?
- There should be a difference between an active farm within the ALR and land that is non-ALR in terms of applying for a permit.
- We can all agree that trees are an important part of the eco-system, particularly with climate change. Trees also help prevent erosion of land and help with water retention.
- One member noted she has 400+ alder trees growing in one area of her property; if she doesn't regularly remove some of them, they will take over and continue to increase shade on the property. There needs to be a balance: planting new trees in a different location.
- The decision to issue a permit or not for trees on farmland should not be left to someone who knows nothing about farming.

It was noted that a farmer can request to clear the land for farming purposes and the permit cannot be denied by the municipality. On a practical basis, farmers are busy and they don't want a lot of paperwork every time they need to take down a tree. It can take years to get land into active production and ensure there is good drainage. Present day farmers are farming on the backs of farmers who cleared the land over 100 years ago. We have to be responsible land stewards.

Discussion continued:

- In some areas people buy agricultural land with no intention of ever planting. They clear and flatten the land and add turf. Then they sit and wait hoping they can subdivide. If you are not actively farming the property, you should have to apply for a permit to cut trees, whether or not the land is in the ALR.
- By the same token, should active farmers not be exempt from applying for a permit?
- Removing 3 or 4 trees is not a problem – but clearing an entire hillside may be.
- The tree canopy is vital. In rural Saanich, a certain amount of trees can be removed on a property, and after that a permit application has to be made.
- In general, farmers do not take trees down unless it is absolutely necessary.
- We want to legislate against the lowest common denominator – those who want to do what they want without thinking of future generations.
- It is understood the bylaw can be another burden on the farming community, but we must take extra precautions to help climate change and protect the environment.
- If you look at a map of the Peninsula, most of the cleared areas are actively farmed. It takes a long time to get land ready to farm. Active farmers should not have to apply for permits.

The Chair noted it was unfortunate that Mr. Van Der Kamp could not attend this evening; perhaps another meeting would be set to Mr. Van Der Kamp can brief the Commission on the bylaw before it goes to Council.

Agreed the secretary will try to arrange another meeting, possibly in January.

Emily Carmichael, Ministry of Agriculture and Food, noted:

- Central Saanich is looking into ALR regulations. If you are within the ALR, a municipal government cannot prohibit tree removal. What the revised bylaw is proposing is if you want to remove trees within the ALR, you just have to write a letter confirming removal is needed for agricultural use and you are actively farming the property.

CARRY FORWARD

AGRICULTURAL ISSUES: CURRENT

Update on the SIFarmHub & future development - Linda Geggie

Linda stated:

- The South Island Farm Hub was one of the initiatives from the *Closing the Supply Gap* programme.
- When Covid hit, a number of farms already had their crops in the ground, and restaurants were either closed or restricted.
- Emergency food relief and related activities were put into place, and all the agencies involved, including school lunch programmes, were very interested in receiving locally grown produce.
- The programme has been operating for over 6 months now and is very successful.
- Within the first 6 months \$150,000 worth of produce from 26 farms was distributed.
- 80% of the sales were to charitable food markets and schools.
- We have partnered with the Victoria Foundation; they provide funding at 50% of the costs.
- Farmers are paid full price for the product and the agencies pay 50%.
- We also have a relationship with restaurants; good feedback has been received.
- There is a concern that some restaurants who had a pre-existing relationship with farmers are now ordering directly from the Hub instead. This is not desirable.
- We need to ensure smaller producers can still supply some of the smaller markets.
- Home delivery has also been initiated; farmers are happy with this development.
- There were lots of bumps along the way to figure out distribution protocols, but mostly we have received good feedback.
- The hub warehouse is located at 808 Neufield Road and expansion is contemplated.
- The Mustard Seed gets food directly from the grocery stores, but over 2 million pounds of food was prevented from going to the landfill this year by being donated to the food hub.
- There is interest from farmers to use the warehouse to process and freeze an over-abundance of seasonal produce. The Red Barn has expressed an interest in doing some of the processing (eg: making pesto).
- The SIFarmHub is looking at doing some of the work in this respect as well and they wanted to get some feedback from PAAC about how the food hub and distribution could best continue to support the farming sector in future growth and development.
- Linda requested that the farm hub continue to use PAAC as a sounding board and also for advice, particularly regarding storage and processing needs.

In response to a question about how the hub is funded, Linda stated:

- We are fundraising for the facility and the equipment; revenue from sales cover operating costs. It is not a huge financial debt load to carry.

- Funding is received from the Investment Agriculture Fund and the Ministry of Agriculture Food Hub Network Programme. As well, the Victoria Foundation gave a large grant which allowed the charitable agencies to buy food at 50% cost.
- Most food hubs fail because they cannot cover start-up and development costs.
- The programme is similar to the Salt Spring Island abattoir, a facility owned by the Mustard Seed and its on-going operations are supported by the revenue from the business activity, providing a benefit to the community in exchange for the contributions.
- Pickup from the participating farms is twice a week.

OTHER BUSINESS

Update on the 2020 Growing Season

Terry Michell stated:

- It was a slow start to the year and when the Pandemic hit, he was holding conference calls with farmers throughout the province.
- Once the farm labour situation was figured out, it was full steam ahead.
- Farmers were reluctant to plant unless it was guaranteed there would be help with the harvest.
- The provincial government stepped in to help with getting foreign workers to the farms, and paying for hotel accommodations for the 14-day required quarantine.
- Some issues, mostly on the mainland, about trying to get local farm workers to come to work because the government was paying them to essentially stay home.
- There has been a higher demand this year for local produce.
- His regular workers all showed up, and many of those will be working up until mid-December.
- All the crops did very well this year, although hay crops were late due to the wet spring.
- Still a lot of crops to harvest from the fields as long as it doesn't freeze.
- Even though restaurant trade was down, the high demand from the public made up for it.
- The farmers he has spoken to all agree it has been a good year considering.
- He thinks people like the lack of handling for the farm directly to farm market sales compared to the stores.
- Prices have increased between 5% and 7% at the market, but people didn't seem to notice or mind as sales were strong. The prices were still better than what they would be paying for some products in the grocery stores; he felt there was definitely some price gouging due to Covid.
- Wholesale prices for some products were up considerably. Lettuce in particular, mainly because of the recall of Romaine in California due to salmonella, a box of 24 heads increased from around \$24 to \$80.

Robin Tunnicliffe stated she has not raised her prices yet, but was shocked at the prices in the local grocery stores. For many years, local farm gate sales were higher than stores, but not any longer.

Small Farm Acceleration Programme

Emily Carmichael, Ministry of Agriculture stated the Ministry will be launching a pilot programme intended to assist small or new farmers which will allow cost sharing for infrastructure. The intake window is small: December 7th to 15th. A business plan will be required. A webinar is planned to provide information on the programme and will indicate who is and who is not eligible.

Here is the link to find information on the Ministry Small Farm Accelerator Pilot Program

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/agriculture-seafood/programs/small-business-acceleration-pilot-program>

Here is a link to the recorded webinar about the pilot:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdxqzAYmOiM&feature=youtu.be>

Next Meeting: Thursday, December 10, 2020, 7:00 pm by ZOOM

Adjournment: The meeting adjourned at 9:00 pm