

Backgrounder - Agriculture for a Food Secure B.C.

British Columbia is fortunate to have an abundance of natural resources. We have access to fertile agricultural land, clean water and renewable sources of energy.

However, many British Columbians might be surprised to learn that we source 70 percent of our vegetables from the United States. Half of that comes from California, where the agricultural sector is under strain from extreme weather events like droughts and, more recently, flooding.¹

Across the world, as the effects of climate change take hold, food security is projected to become a major issue.² To ensure the long-term food security of the people of BC, we must develop an agricultural sector that can provide for us all.

However, the agricultural sector in B.C. has not been getting the support that it needs. Total farm area in British Columbia decreased 7.9% between 2006 and 2011 to 6.5 million acres.

BC agriculture also faces labour issues. There were nearly 30,000 farm operators in B.C. in 2011. But, worryingly, the average age of farm operators was over 55, and less than 6% were under the age of 35.

On top of this, valuable B.C. farmland is under threat from developers, speculators and the wealthy who wish to appropriate it to construct elaborate country estates.

The B.C. Green Party's plan is to make a significant investment in B.C.'s agricultural sector:

1. To enhance access to farmland and develop new models of farm tenure;
2. To increase production of food in B.C., and enhance food security;
3. To increase the number of British Columbians choosing farming as a career option;

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<http://www.mercurynews.com/2016/04/01/stanford-study-california-moving-toward-more-extreme-weather>

² <https://www.wfp.org/climate-change/climate-impacts>

4. To address labour shortages; and
5. To build strong communities.

A strong agricultural sector is a key part of the B.C. Greens' approach:

- **Economic Security** — Because government has one job above all else — to promote the wellbeing of all British Columbians. That starts with a sustainable economy and a sustainable agricultural sector that make communities across B.C. food secure.
- **Sustainability and Intergenerational Equity** — Because government should not be giving away our agricultural land for short-term profit at the expense of our children's food security. We too should be a generation that leaves a better world for our children, like our parents did for us.
- **Responsible Government** — Because after decades of broken promises and political self-interest, British Columbians have lost trust in their government. We have a duty to make wise investments on behalf of British Columbians that demonstrate, through action, that their government is working for them.

A B.C. Green Government will introduce policies that will support our agricultural sector so that all British Columbians can enjoy food security.

1. A Green government will invest \$30 million to enhance the long term viability of the agricultural sector so that it can provide an increasing proportion of the food consumed by people of B.C. for generations to come. This will include incentives to produce food on Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) land, the establishment of agricultural apprenticeship programs at the secondary and post-secondary levels, and greater advertising and awareness of B.C. produce and products through expansion of “Buy Local” initiatives.

- B.C. produces less than half of its own food needs. A 2006 study by the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands estimated that to produce a healthy diet for British Columbians by 2025, the farmland with access to irrigation will need to increase by 49% over 2005 levels. Further, to maintain the current level of self-reliance, farmers will need to increase production by 30% over 2001 levels.
- A 2016 Conference Board of Canada study found that Canada's agriculture industry is short more than 59,000 farm workers, expected to rise to 114,000 by 2025.
- This investment will promote the production of B.C.-grown food to be consumed by British Columbians.

- This investment would promote farming as a career option and provide apprenticeships and training, as well as a liveable wage.
- This investment would support sustainable farming practices.

Budget implications: \$30 million over four years.

2. A Green government would introduce new legislation to enhance the protection of agricultural land, and to increase the proportion of ALR land in use for agricultural purposes. The legislation will address property speculation, the use of ALR for non-agricultural uses and the construction of mega-mansions and country estates on ALR.

- The ALR was created in 1974 to preserve prime agricultural land for farming and future food production across the province. It comprises about 4.7 million hectares, or five percent of the province's land base, but is strewn across B.C.
- In May 2014, the B.C. Liberal government brought in the "Agricultural Land Commission Amendment Act". The most controversial change in the Act is the division of provincial ALR land into two zones. In Zone 1 (Vancouver island, the South Coast and the Okanagan), the Agricultural Land Commission will continue to be required to prioritize agricultural values. In Zone 2 (which contains 90% of provincial ALR land), agriculture will no longer be prioritized. Instead, "economic" activities, such as oil, gas and mining exploration will be equally prioritized, as well as cultural and social values, regional planning objectives and "any other prescribed considerations" that Cabinet might describe in regulations. It may be no coincidence that many of the lands in Zone 2 lie atop mineral and petroleum deposits.³
- This measure will protect the land in the agricultural land reserve from developers and non-farm use.
- This measure will keep the price of agricultural land affordable.
- This measure will increase the amount of ALR land in use for agricultural purposes.

Budget implications: not applicable.

³[http://wcel.org/resources/environmental-law-alert/bill-24-agricultural-land-commission-amendment-act-un
dermining](http://wcel.org/resources/environmental-law-alert/bill-24-agricultural-land-commission-amendment-act-undermining)

3. A B.C. Green government will provide \$40 million to fund research, and establish regional agricultural bureaus to provide expertise and support to local farmers to adapt to a changing climate.

- The common assumption that a warming climate will be a boon for agriculture production in northern climes is now recognized to be false — the full suite of projected changes indicates that risks to agricultural viability are substantial. The scope, scale and pace of climate change are expected to exceed anything previously experienced.
- The agriculture sector in B.C. is characterized by unique circumstances: a high level of product diversity, an unusually limited land base, the prevalence of small, family-owned farms and an aging producer population. In 2010, 65% of farms in the province were under 70 acres in size, and 29% were less than ten acres.
- This funding will, among other things, go towards:
 - Supporting long-term and strategic planning to deal proactively with climate change and plan for future food production and security;
 - Conducting research into the impacts of climate change regionally, and on specific crops, diseases and pests;
 - Developing technologies and practices that will improve climate resilience;
 - Implementing initiatives to protect water supplies for agriculture.
- This investment will help farmers adopt strategies, make investments and choose to grow crops that will enhance BC's food security.
- This investment will facilitate enhanced access to mentorship, information and expertise for farmers.
- This investment will improve income stability for farmers.

Budget implications: \$40 million over four years.

4. A B.C. Green government will collaborate with indigenous people, the not-for-profit sector and other land interests to enhance access to land for farming. Alternative land access models such as cooperatives and agricultural land trusts and land-sharing agreements will be explored.

- A 2015 study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives identified access to farmland as one of the main barriers to entry into farming.⁴
- Alternatives to traditional individual land ownership include incubator farms, cooperatives, farmland trusts, farming on public land, backyard farming and informal land-sharing structures.
- This measure would remove access to land as a barrier of entry to farming.
- This measure would increase the number of new entrants into farming as a career.

Budget implications: None at this time.

5. A Green government will work with farm operators to introduce measures to address labour shortages in agriculture.

- Seasonality is one factor that makes it unusually difficult for agricultural producers to attract and retain domestic workers. Many potential workers have negative perceptions of the sector, such as that it is too physical or that it requires long hours.⁵
- Other factors inhibiting employment in the sector is below-average pay and the fact that agricultural operations are located in urban areas, where populations are experiencing no growth and aging rapidly.
- Measures may include training programs for farming, improving access to land and ensuring the agricultural industry has access to temporary foreign workers when local labour is unavailable.
- This measure will reduce labour shortages in agriculture.

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https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/WorkingPaper_WeilerDennisWittman_GoodJobsConf.pdf

⁵ “Sowing the Seeds of Growth” Conference Board. December 2016



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- This measure will improve the attractiveness of farming as a career and increase the number of new farmers.
- This measure will result in a reduction in the average age of farmers.

Budget implications: to be revealed in a further portion of the BC Green Party platform focused on income security.

