

SWCS-BC's Position on the ALR

The Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS) is an international organization with a mandate to foster the science and art of soil, water and related natural resource management to achieve sustainability. As such, the British Columbia Chapter of SWCS promotes an ethic recognizing the interdependence of people and the environment while advocating conservation.

A very small portion (5%) of the B.C. land base is suitable for agriculture and only 1% is considered prime agricultural land (Land Capability Classes 1, 2, and 3). The regions associated with agriculture are the Okanagan Valley, Lower Mainland, and Vancouver Island, all of which are highly populated areas. For instance, 79% percent of B.C. residents live in or adjacent to agricultural areas that are responsible for 78% of B.C.'s farm revenues¹. The agricultural sector supplies more than half of the province's food requirements and employment for over 280,000 British Columbians either in farming or agricultural-related jobs¹. The agricultural sector is a key contributor to the economy of B.C. and provides approximately \$16 billion annually in economic activity¹.

The Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) of B.C. has been successful in limiting urban encroachment onto rural areas since the inception of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) in 1973, in part by maintaining decision-making regarding land exclusions at the provincial level. Although the amount of land in the ALR has remained relatively unchanged since the 1970s, exclusions and inclusions have resulted in more ALR land now being located in northern, remote areas further from markets and possessing lower capability soils².

SWCS-BC is concerned with the challenges the ALR is currently facing due to a number of applications that are being put forth by municipalities and private landowners to exclude segments of the ALR for industrial and residential development. In particular, SWCS-BC is troubled by the recent decentralization of the ALC into six regionally based three-member panels. This may lead to a loss of provincial perspective in decision-making and cause inconsistencies in the approval rates of exclusion applications. Ideally, the social, economic, and environmental interests of the province as a whole should be given more leverage than local desires for increased urban and industrial expansion.

SWCS-BC is specifically concerned with the following 2 issues associated with exclusions made to the ALR:

- Any industrial or residential development of prime agricultural land will lead to the permanent non-reversible removal of provincially and nationally scarce high-quality soil from agricultural production with significant economic and environmental consequences.
- The Lower Fraser Valley is currently home to the most intensive agricultural operations in Canada³. Links have been made between high density farming and disease outbreaks such as the avian flu virus^{4,5} and environmental deterioration such as contamination of surface and ground water^{6,7}. Further removal of land from agricultural production will lead to additional intensification of agricultural practices on remaining land and increase the risk of environmental and health problems.

SWCS-BC is calling on provincial and municipal governments to be held accountable for the protection of provincially scarce land resources. If all levels of government work together, several actions can be taken to stop the flow of land being excluded from the ALR. These include:

- Prohibit any exclusion of prime agricultural soils (Classes 1, 2, and 3). These areas are provincially and nationally rare (less than %1 of land in B.C.) and their loss is non-reversible.
- Communities should be required to demonstrate that alternative development options such as industrial intensification or high-density housing have been exhausted before ALR exclusion applications are considered. Furthermore, every step of the exclusion application process must be transparent and open for public input.
- Provincial interests in retaining a healthy agricultural sector must be placed above local urban and industrial development proposals. This may require the current structure of the ALC to be reviewed.

SWCS-BC looks forward to hearing from all parties and offers our assistance and expertise in the development of policies for the protection of the ALR if desired. Please contact us for any further information.

Sincerely,

Soil and Water Conservation Society – BC Chapter
c/o Ione Smith
4438 5th Ave. W.
Vancouver, B.C., V6R 1S5
Tel. 604-734-2149

References:

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