

Reflections at the millennium.

January 2001 Column, Country Life in BC

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

January. Snow squeaks under your boots and breath turns to frost as you labour up the hill behind the house — feeling the effect of the Christmas turkey and New Year's ham. At the top, a grand view of the farm. Particularly this time of day.

Ten minutes stolen from other tasks. To look out across the land. Take the measure of your stewardship. Reflect on what worked and what didn't. Assess what's been made better thru your tenure.

As an Agrologist and columnist, my fields are my words. As this is the first column of the new millennium, a walk up the hill for a moment's reflection seems a fitting New Year's dalliance.

For seven years - this is my 84th column - my monthly assemblage of words has appeared on this very page. In this very space. Giving voice to issues of concern to this Agrologist regarding the plight of cooperatives, the destruction of competitive markets and the theft of Canada's water. Canada's loss of sovereignty over domestic policy and the need to compensate farmers for benefits they put on the social and environmental table (like thinking governments around the world are doing).

The dispensing of political report cards and palatable economics lessons. Stories of small potatoes and hybrid poplars and downstream benefits under the Columbia Treaty. Words of advice for the ALR (now land commission); the International Joint Commission, the Canadian Import Trade Tribunal and the Treaty Negotiation process.

Concern over the mass exodus of processors from the Fraser Valley. Political empowerment. Chicken farms in the US south. Six Mile Ranch. About the importance of being frank and mastering the knack of making love in a canoe. The demise - in a motion sans emotion - of the BC Federation of Agriculture and with it the voice of BC farmers.

The TIME-O-RAMA-READER RIDE. Stories of blacklisting; the hype on hemp, Six Mile Ranch and Cuba. The provincial interest. Globalization and NAFTA. The erosion of policy support for farming. The wisdom of the Little Red Hen. Venture capital. Respect. The emperor's new clothes (Chretien on the water/trade issue). The ALR in Punchaw and Delta.

We've covered a lot of ground together in seven years. And here we sit, January 2001, at the entrance to the next millennium. The headlines of columns past remain lying about; unresolved:

- Not many Canadians understand farming anymore... what it is to hold stewardship domain over the land.
- Farmers have gone from being the darlings of caucus to political pariahs in one generation...
- This year, farmers will be under the wheel rather than behind it... Without major shifts in thinking, BC's farm sector as we know it will be gone in a decade... Farming isn't valued enough to give it the proper policy respect needed to survive... You can't stitch farmers' feet to the land and say "thou shalt farm" ...once we lose our farmers, there will be no recalling them. And no replacing them.
- Canada's farmers are increasingly vulnerable to the attention of new international bedfellows.... The challenge is to keep the reins of authority firmly in the hands of the farmers. Creeping multi-national domination of our food supply... should be of prime public policy concern. Like the cat, the merchant banker's high card is patience...

On Cuba:

- Meeting domestic policy needs remains a national priority for Cuba. There is something very exhilarating about being in a country where farmers are so obviously respected. As Cuba's farm sector evolves, there will be significant opportunities...

On Water:

- Under the NAFTA, water is a good no different than oil which means we have to allow US access to it. Canadians must pass federal legislation prohibiting the export of bulk water. Farmland must include rights of access to water.

In Stanley Kubric's 2001: A Space Odyssey, the apes fall back in fear and wonder as a stone monolith - tabula rasa? - rises in front of them. Well might they be afraid: on it are inscribed the secrets of the universe: Reason. That which separates humans from animals, so we are told.

But far from that primal flash of insight, Canadians have "evolved" to a culture of surplus. Instead of policies that recognize and respect the contributions made by sustainable farming — to food security, the environment, to our soils, ecosystems and communities — we flood domestic markets with product from factory farms and penalize our farmers for "overproduction".

When will we "get it" that agriculture - like health care, like education - must be given policy respect? Its not a difficult message.

At the University of Bologna, a Professor named Zamagni developed a model of "cooperative competition" that has made Italy a world leader in packaging materials. He did it by recognizing and reinforcing the inherent benefits of many small firms of working together cooperatively to enhance their competitive edge. A model worth exploring for BC agriculture...

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Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.
Canada-Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project
Phone: 604-947-2893
Fax: 604-947-2321
email: holm@pinc.com

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