

Why are they planting all those potatoes?

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The keynote speaker was expansive. He spoke of small being nimble. Of farmers accelerating into the curves of change. Of the new mood of optimism evident in the farm sector. As proof, he referenced increased plantings of high-valued potato crops across the prairies. He spoke of...

errrrch. What? Wait a minute. What did he say? High-valued as compared with what? And just why are all those farmers planting all those potatoes? Is it really optimism that's driving their thinking?

I suggest the increase in Prairie potato plantings may be less a sign of unbridled excitement at the opportunity ahead and more a move by producers to reduce risk: going for the contract carrot offered by the trans-national firms which are dramatically increasing their processing capacity on the Prairies.

(Recent News Item, Western Producer: *"Lucky Lake, Saskatchewan will soon be home to Western Canada's largest potato packaging plant... \$7 million plant capable of processing 5,000 sacks of potatoes daily... As many as 50 new jobs are expected... Up to 2,000 acres of potatoes will feed the plant that will target domestic and American markets."*)

Meanwhile, Alberta is pumping spuds into the BC market quicker than you can say "centralized buying." Many in generic bags that make BC potatoes fully indistinguishable from out-of-province (or out of country) product.

It feels like everywhere I turn these days, I can't help but encounter another story about how centralized buying practices of large retail chains and/or shutdown of yet another area processor is cutting off access by B.C. farmers to their traditional, local markets.

What's wrong with this picture?

You have to remember, I grew up with the little sprout. You know the guy, the one that hung around the Jolly Green Giant? In the Valley of the...? Ho-ho-ho? Right. That one.

It was one of the first animated commercials I clearly remember as a child. Lush. Green. Healthy. Productive. Sure looked sustainable to me. Particularly with that big ol' green guy with the huge grin overseeing it and all.

I wonder how many consumers have a similarly comforting image of where their food (must be?) grown? I wonder what it takes to wake them up?

The Green Giant himself pulled up stakes some two years ago this spring. Just up and left. Closed down the once independent (that'd be before ol' Jimmy P. bought and sold it) Fraser Valley Foods right quick. Not 'cause it wasn't making money, you understand, but cause it was going the way of all Pillsbury vegetable operations north of the Mexican border. Shutting down. So tight they wouldn't even sell the corn line to the producers. 'Supposed to have quietly scrapped it instead... Putting out of work one in three processing acres in the Valley.

Then Foremost left. I wonder how many consumers realize that since Foremost closed their lower mainland dairy, the milk in their fridge just may have traveled across B.C.'s highest mountain ranges twice to get there — once in a tanker truck heading east for processing, once in cartons heading west for their lower mainland — SuperValu — stores)?

I wonder how many consumers realize that one result of the “free” trade agreement — no-holds-barred removal of barriers to trade between the provinces — will soon be the right to transfer milk quota out of province?

(And the incentive to do just that will soon exist, what with a 4 cent per litre drop in milk prices projected to occur when B.C. dairymen join the Western Pool in April coming on top of an almost similar increase in feed prices.)

Who will buy this quota? Likely farmers producing milk on contract, and not necessarily to their friendly neighbourhood co-op, either...

(Item taking up half the front page of the Financial Post in early February: *“Shakeup in dairy sector: Two big deals come back to back. Ault plans sale of Ontario unit to Agropur while an unnamed buyer, probably Italy’s Parmalat, pays \$290 million for Beatrice.”* Agropur is a Quebec agri-food cooperative. What interest does Italian dairy and food conglomerate Parmalat Finanziaria SPA have in Beatrice’s restructured biscuit and dairy company?)

I wonder how many consumers understand that in many B.C. communities, our ability to continue to produce food locally and sustainably is under considerable threat?

I wonder how many care to do something about it?

All you really need is six. Consumers, farmers, any six people who still care enough to effect change. Six Citizens, that is. The number needed to sign a letter to the Director, Bureau of Competition Policy, Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada, Ottawa stating they have concerns about the effect of central buying practices by large retailers and wholesale/retail concentration on the economic survival of independent farmers in this province. And that they would like him to look into it on their behalf.

And guess what? By statute, The Director is obliged to begin a preliminary inquiry if he receives such a request from Six Citizens.

Isn’t it tempting to see what he might have to say? If you want to be a signatory to such a letter, fax me at 604-947-2321. If we get six interested people, maybe we’ll just have to send one off and see...