



FARMS and the FUTURE of FOOD in BC

By Marc Lee

Asked where their food comes from, many British Columbians might answer “the supermarket”. That people have become detached from the sources of their food is not so surprising, given that farmers now compose about 1% of the working population. But this is regrettable, since the topic of food encompasses a range of issues—including food security, food safety, nutrition and hunger—that are of vital importance, if only because everyone must eat.

There are several dimensions to the battle over the future of food. Corporate domination of the major links in the food supply chain is threatening the viability of family farms. Local food decision-making is being trumped in the name of expanding trade. And food production based on pesticides and genetic engineering is gaining prominence. Behind the scenes, however, a growing number of BC producers and consumers have been building a sustainable alternative to this corporate-driven model of agriculture.

Family Farms in BC

In many parts of Canada, the family farm is under threat from large-scale corporate farms, and the abandonment of programs designed to ensure stable and decent farm incomes. In BC, this threat looms large, although BC’s rugged geography and fragmented land base make the province less conducive to corporate farms. More than 90% of the province’s 22,000 farms are still

family-run, and the number of family farms has even grown over the 1990s.

Farms, however, are the only part of the BC food system that does not have a high degree of corporate control. Major farm inputs—such as fuel, fertilizer and seeds—are tightly controlled by a handful of companies, leading to rising costs for farmers. Many of BC’s grower-owned cooperatives that used to handle packaging and processing for member farms are now private companies that aim to serve shareholders, not farmers. And at the consumer end, four major supermarket chains dominate the BC market.

The result is that farmers’ incomes are getting squeezed. As Darrin Qualman of the National Farmers Union notes: “The market is failing to return a fair and adequate share of the consumer dollar to farmers. . . [This] is a direct result of dramatic market power imbalances between agri-food industry transnational corporations and the family farms that must do business with these firms.” So while corporate profits have been rising, an increasing number of farms in BC rely on off-farm

Table 1: The Facts on Farming in BC

	Farm Cash Receipts (\$ millions)		Growth, 1990-99
	1990	1999	
Crops			
Fruits and Vegetables	210	437	108.1%
Floral and Nursery	195	307	57.4%
Grains and Other Crops	71	134	88.7%
Livestock			
Dairy Products	250	340	36.0%
Poultry and Eggs	214	307	43.5%
Other Livestock and Products	294	379	28.9%
Other	64	41	-35.9%
Total Cash Receipts	1,299	1,945	49.7%

Source: Statistics Canada

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income to survive. This jeopardizes not only the longer-term viability of family farms, but also local control over the food sector.

The Global Context

At the global level, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its cohorts are entrenching a high volume, export-oriented model of agriculture worldwide. This emphasizes very large corporate-run plantations with extensive use of machinery, irrigation, fertilizers and pesticides.

This model is far from environmentally friendly, due to energy intensive transportation requirements, and the negative impact of pesticides and fertilizers on agricultural land and groundwater (not to mention workers and consumers). Increasingly, genetically-modified crops are being introduced for pesticide resistance, longer shelf life and in-store appearance, bringing with them a number of risks around food security, food safety and nutrition.

In response to concerns among consumers about genetic engineering, the industry (and the federal government) have launched a public relations campaign. But at this point, such reassurances amount to a leap of faith. With billions in potential profits on the line, industry motives are far from neutral. Like thalidomide, DDT and asbestos—all considered safe when introduced—the longer-term consequences of these experiments can

only be understood decades down the road. By then it may be too late.

Small-scale farmers are a casualty of the corporate food model, as they are the first to get hit by the invisible hand of the market when conditions turn bad. Swings in commodity prices have always been an issue for farmers, but with increasingly global markets and climate change, these swings have been exacerbated. This suggests a need to revitalize programs and strategies that support farmers and local agriculture, rather than rely exclusively on the market.

Ultimately, there is a conflict between export-oriented agriculture and maintaining structures to support domestic production. The US remains eager to use new WTO negotiations on Agriculture and Services to undermine provincial marketing boards for eggs, poultry and dairy. These mechanisms that have enabled farmers to earn stable incomes will remain under attack as long as exports are given priority at the international level.

Seeds of Change

As this process has unfolded, consumers have responded by demanding safer and more nutritious food. The market for organic produce is now the fastest growing segment of the food industry, with the Canadian market expected to grow some 15% per year in the medium-term.

Organic production in BC has grown to more than 500 farms. BC is far ahead

of other provinces in the amount of land being devoted to organics, with organic production representing 8.7% of the vegetable area and 3.2% of the fruit area of the province. As Table 2 shows, some crops have a relatively large organic component.

However, even in the organic sector, BC currently supplies only 10% of the organic produce sold in the province. With a growing domestic market and a base of organic producers in BC, there is a great

Table 2: Fruit and Vegetable Planted Area, Selected Crops, 2000

	Organic	Total	Percent Organic
	(acres)		
Broccoli	124	1,440	8.6%
Carrots	75	785	9.6%
Leeks	8	40	20.0%
Lettuce	46	760	6.1%
Shallots	33	90	36.7%
Spinich	27	135	20.0%
Radish	19	120	15.8%
Squash and Zucchini	43	345	12.5%
Tomatoes	19	185	10.3%
Apples	719	15,750	4.6%
Peaches	66	1,195	5.5%
Pears	60	825	7.3%

Source: Fruit and Vegetable Area Survey, Statistics Canada

potential for replacing imports from California with domestic sources.

A key to expanding organic market share is for organic producers and marketing boards to work cooperatively to bring greater coherency to the overall sector. This remains a challenge as there are lingering disagreements over how to accommodate organics in a way that meets the needs of both organic and conventional producers.

Currently, organic foods rely on a number of alternative distribution networks to reach consumers. These include:

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Hunger, Poverty and Food Security: Rethinking Social Policy?

By Graham Riches

At the start of the 21st Century, issues of hunger, poverty and food security are central to the debate about progressive social policy in Canada. The facts speak for themselves: the telling human and social consequences of the Prairie farm crisis; the battles over depleted fish stocks on the East and West coasts; and, the human tragedy of more than 750,000 Canadians a month having to depend on handouts from charitable food banks.

Yet, despite their international legal obligations, the federal and provincial governments have abandoned commitments to the human right to food. Of course, this is not a new story. Charitable food banking is now 20 years old and has become an accepted part of the country's tattered safety net. Amidst strong economic growth, rising prosperity for many, and a \$12 billion federal surplus, public begging is once again an established part of the Canadian way of life. By this account, Canada is neither a compassionate nor a socially just society.

What has really been missing from social policy analysis is the recognition that food issues provide important ways of rethinking approaches to local and global poverty and inequality, and to advancing human rights and social welfare. From this perspective, the concept of food security has much to offer. *The World Food Summit* (Rome, 1996) defined food security as existing "when all peoples at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious foods to meet their dietary needs and food preference for an active and healthy life."

Importantly, food security provides a way of re-framing debates about poverty, inequality and social exclusion, locally and globally. Food matters because it is basic to diet and nutrition and essential to physical health and life itself. Not only is food an economic commodity, it is also a profoundly significant social, cultural and spiritual good. Food connects us all. As such, it has the potential to bring together different sectors concerned about poverty, environmental degradation, sustainable agriculture, fisheries policy, social justice, food safety, and genetically-modified foods. Food is also a political commodity. The question of who controls the food system (increasingly the transnational

corporate food barons) raises critical issues of democratic freedoms, distributive justice, and human rights, with far-reaching implications for the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities.

Most profoundly, food matters because it is undoubtedly the most significant challenge of the 21st century: how are we going to feed the world? According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, the *World Food Summit's* commitment to halve the number of the world's 790 million hungry people by 2015 is already behind target. And there are 8 million people suffering from food poverty in the most industrially advanced nations of the world, including Canada. What this suggests is a global crisis with deep roots. It also suggests that any approach to acting upon issues of hunger and food poverty in Canada must take account of the global food system and its ability to feed us all.

Food security perspectives invite us to rethink current approaches to social policy analysis and advocacy in a number of ways. First, by recognizing the links, locally and globally, between the capacities of societies to feed themselves (the development of sustainable food systems), their rights to democratic control over food production and distribution, and the significance of equitable income redistribution and adequate social security entitlements that ensure access to food.

Second, by rejecting the commodification of welfare rights and entitlements. In terms of income support and social assistance policy, this would entail: guaranteeing that those unable to work, or unable to find work, would not be denied welfare benefits nor have them reduced; and, it would mean guaranteeing adequate welfare benefits in terms of meeting the full costs of food, clothing and shelter and customary living expenses. It would mean rejecting the welfare reform and workfare policies of the last 15 years which have increasingly stipulated that people's rights to benefits are solely determined by their attachment to the labour market. It would require that federal and provincial governments ensure domestic compliance with their obligations to guarantee the human right to food as set out in the UN *International*

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Recent Indicators

	Unemployment rate (%)				Average weekly earnings (\$)			
	Sep-00	Aug-00	Jul-00	Sep-99	Sep-00	Aug-00	Jul-00	Sep-99
BC	7.7	7.9	7.1	7.9	648.06	642.75	635.92	625.24
Canada	6.8	7.1	6.8	7.4	624.19	619.49	613.47	601.28

Note: Unemployment figures are seasonally adjusted.
Source: Statistics Canada

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farmers' markets; organic home delivery services; specialty retailers; and Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) initiatives (where urban dwellers purchase shares in crops grown on organic farms). Some 30 CSA and home delivery services are available in BC.

In conventional retail spaces, on the other hand, organics remain rare. And outside of the Lower Mainland and major centres, even the alternative distribution channels can be difficult to access. As a result, organics still only make up 2-3% of the total market.

BC has a large potential to be a world leader in developing an alternative approach—a safe, healthy and relatively self-sufficient food system. While BC currently produces about 60% of its food requirements, it is estimated that this

figure could rise to 85%. One bedrock element of an alternative approach must be preservation of the 4.7 million hectares that constitute the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), which amounts to about 5% of BC's total land area. If prime agricultural land gets converted into suburban sprawl, our dependency on food imports in the future will be all the greater.

At the same time, governments must commit to a policy framework that makes these protective measures for agriculture permanent—BC needs a system that ensures the viability of small family-run farms, encourages organic farming practices, and produces the high quality foods that consumers want. BC producers and consumers alike have a joint interest in bringing sustainable agriculture into the mainstream.

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Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

Third, it means questioning the increasing reliance of the state and community on surplus food redistribution schemes (e.g. food banks, community kitchens, school meal programs) as solutions to food poverty; and it means promoting national and community-based food policies that guarantee the protection and availability of healthy, nutritious and organically-produced foods, and adequate and effective income support and redistribution policies.

Lastly, there is a critical role to be played by civil society in monitoring Canada's compliance with its international commitments to ensure the human right to food and *Canada's Action Plan for Food Security* (1998). There needs to be strong support for the development of community-based food policy councils across the country and coalition-building between domestic and international non-governmental organizations directed at public education and policy advocacy concerning hunger, poverty

and food security. It is essential that social policy analysis and advocacy become informed by food security debates and perspectives. If not, it is likely that hunger and poverty will continue to be neglected by the social policy community, governments and the public at large.

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