

Strategic Agricultural Plan



District of
North Cowichan

May, 2001

**NORTH COWICHAN
STRATEGIC AGRICULTURAL PLAN
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The Project was managed by a Steering Committee
representing the local farming community,
The Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries
The Agricultural Land Commission and the District of North Cowichan

Members Included

*Auke Elzinga – Agricultural Community
Geoff Bruce – Agricultural Community
Ian Woike – Agricultural Community
Erin Kelly – Agricultural Community
Dave Gronlund – Agricultural Community
David Wiebe – Agricultural Community
Wayne Haddow – Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries
Barry Smith – Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries
Niels Holbek – Land Reserve Commission
Roger Cheetham – Land Reserve Commission
Ruth Hartmann – Community Futures Development Corporation
Chris Hall, Chair – Planner, District of North Cowichan
George Seymour - Councillor, District of North Cowichan*

Preparation was Undertaken by

*George Penfold of Westland Resources Group
Paul Guiton of Groundworks Strategic Marketing Solutions*

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to the preparation of this Plan**

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DISTRICT OF NORTH COWICHAN STRATEGIC AGRICULTURAL PLAN TABLE OF CONTENTS

OVERVIEW/EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	i
INTRODUCTION	1
STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS	
A) Current Strengths of Agriculture in the Cowichan Valley	4
B) Current Weaknesses of Agriculture in the Cowichan Valley	5
C) Opportunities for Agriculture in the Cowichan Valley	6
D) Constraints to Agriculture in the Cowichan Valley	6
A VISION FOR AGRICULTURE	8
STRATEGIC GOALS	
GOAL 1: Improve the Planning Framework for Agriculture	9
i. Context	9
Table 1: Current Zoning of ALR Land by Parcel Size	10
ii. Objectives and Actions	12
GOAL 2: Support and Enhance Small Farm Sector	13
i. Context	13
Table 2: Gross Farm Sales	13
ii. Objectives and Actions	14
GOAL 3: Expand Local Market Opportunities	14
i. Context	14
ii. Objectives and Actions	16
GOAL 4: Improve Communications with the Community	18
i. Context	18
ii. Objectives and Actions	18
GOAL 5: Improve Land and Water Stewardship, Conservation and Management	19
i. Context	19
ii. Objectives and Actions	20
GOAL 6: Reduce Cost and Regulatory Barriers	21
i. Context	21
ii. Objectives and Actions	22
IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY	23
MONITORING SCHEDULE	
GOAL 1: Improve the Planning Framework for Agriculture	24
GOAL 2: Support and Enhance Small Farm Sector	26
GOAL 3: Expand Local Marketing Opportunities	27
GOAL 4: Improve Communications with the Community	30
GOAL 5: Improve Land and Water Stewardship, Conservation and Management	32
GOAL 6: Reduce Cost and Regulatory Barriers	33
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: North Cowichan Agricultural Strategy: Regulatory Issues (Paul Guiton, Groundworks)	35
Appendix B: Strategic Agricultural Plan – Steering Committee	44
Appendix C: Agricultural Background	45
Appendix D: Non ALR Lands with Agricultural Potential in North Cowichan (Gary Rolston, P.Ag)	47
Appendix E: North Cowichan OCP/Zoning Bylaw Review	49
Appendix F: North Cowichan Agricultural Plan – Exclusion/Inclusions in the ALR	51



OVERVIEW/EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Farming has been a mainstay of the community and economy in North Cowichan from its settlement in the 1850's. Agriculture continues to make a vital contribution to the employment and economic base, with direct employment (1996) of over 400 directly and generating annual farms sales of approximately \$13 Million. Of the Municipality's 20,400 hectares, over 6,250 hectares are in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) and 4,793 ha. are farmed.



However, farmers have encountered growing threats to their economic and social stability characterized by a declining land base, development pressures, burdensome regulations, environmental constraints and competitive disadvantages with their Mainland counterparts.

Recognizing that the survival of agriculture depends on developing a more competitive base, and stronger consumer support, farmers in North Cowichan, through the Cowichan Agricultural Society (CAS), in 1998, assisted in launching an initiative to establish the Island Farmers Alliance (IFA), to protect and advance their interests. The plan was prepared through a series of public workshops. Interested parties from throughout the Valley participated in setting the goals and action steps under the guidance of the Steering Committee consultants.

With the launching of the District of North Cowichan's Official Community Plan review, the Municipality decided to include, as a priority, the development of a Strategic Agricultural Plan, recognizing not only the importance of agriculture to the economy but also the vital role of the farming community in its social structure.

The Strategic Agricultural Plan identifies issues that threaten or present obstacles to the future stability of the agricultural industry in the Municipality and the region and opportunities that can help strengthen the agricultural community and economy. It proposes goals, objectives and actions to address these issues and opportunities, and provides direction and co-ordination for actions of the District of North Cowichan, the Agricultural Society and producer and other groups that have activities related to agriculture. The Strategy promotes an entrepreneurial spirit for agriculture, and development of the small farm sector based on local marketing. It has a Vision Statement, 6 main Goals and approximately 60 proposed action steps to achieve them.

The Vision:

The agricultural sector in the Cowichan Valley will be healthy economically, socially and environmentally. It will consist of a medium scale farm component that markets through traditional commodity systems, and a small-scale farm component that markets both basic production and value added products to local and regional markets. The industry will be noted for its diversity and its support for, and from the community.



GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

To Improve the Planning Framework for Agriculture

Good land is essential as a basis for production. For agriculture to be successful in the region, it will be necessary to continue to protect the agricultural land base from subdivision and non-farm development, provide more opportunities for small farms and increase agricultural input on planning decisions.

To Support and Enhance Small Farm Sector

The small farm sector has been largely ignored by most of the programs and agencies that support agriculture. Training, education, research, identification of market opportunities and of local farm and business development opportunities are all needed for the small farm sector to grow. Also, more opportunities to generate income from non-farm activities in the form of home businesses will be needed.

To Expand the Marketing Opportunities

Revitalizing farm sector will mean enhancing regional and provincial marketing opportunities for medium/large scale farms, and enhancing local marketing opportunities for small farms. To support small farms, value added processing of agricultural products, and diversification of economic opportunities through agri-tourism will also be necessary. There may also be opportunities to expand green house production using waste heat from the pulp mill at Crofton, or by using other waste as an energy source.

To Improve Communications With the Community

For the other goals to be achieved, the community and local governments and organizations must support the agricultural industry. This will mean increasing political and public awareness of the local agricultural industry and the issues it faces. This can be accomplished through a strong Education in the Classroom Program with School District 79, farm tours and events, and informing rural landowners about farming operations.

To Improve Land and Water Stewardship, Conservation and Management

In addition to good land base, agriculture needs access to water for irrigation. The Strategy proposes to improve access to water and water management. Water is a limited resource and must be used wisely. That means improving information related to soil and water management and farm management skills and practices related to water use and water quality.

To Reduce Costs and Regulatory Barriers

Like any other small business, agriculture is subject to many regulations and requirements that add to the cost of business. Some of these are necessary and appropriate. Others may be unnecessary burdens on the industry. The goal is to reduce or remove burdens.



STRATEGIC AGRICULTURAL PLAN

Implementing this Strategy is complicated because the goals are broad, and affect many community and government organizations. The Strategy recommends that the Plan be adopted as part of the Official Community Plan, and that a Committee be established to advocate for implementation of the strategy, coordinate implementation actions, and review progress on the Strategy and report on a regular basis. While the plan was prepared through the auspices of North Cowichan, the goals and objectives are valley wide. Consequently, many of the action steps involve organizations and agencies beyond the municipality. These include:

- BC Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries
- The Land Reserve Commission
- Cowichan Valley Regional District
- The Agricultural Society
- Island Farmers Association
- The Cowichan Valley Smallholders Society
- The Regional Economic Development Commission
- Cowichan Tourism
- S.D. 79
- Community Futures Development Corporation

It is expected that the cooperation of all these agencies will be necessary to see the plan appropriately implemented.

In addition, some of the actions are provincial in scope, and will have to be implemented through support of the Vancouver Island Agri-Food Action Plan and Trust Strategy, and other provincial level initiatives.





North Cowichan Agricultural Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture in North Cowichan is subject to many of the same pressures as agriculture elsewhere in B.C. and across Canada. These pressures include low commodity prices, high input costs, land loss to urban and rural residential development, and global competition in the market encouraged by international trade agreements. While these realities are a matter of local, national and provincial political concern, responsibility for solutions to these challenges rests primarily at the provincial and national level. (See Appendix A)

Many issues and concerns of farmers can, however, be addressed through local planning and decision-making as well as by provincial initiatives. These include:

- Land loss and conflict with urban development,
- Access to water for irrigation,
- Adequate surface water drainage and field tile outlet,
- Development and strengthening of agricultural organizations,
- Local marketing, and new initiatives such as combining agriculture and tourism,
- Producer and community education,
- Advocacy for local interests with local, provincial and federal governments on the general “pressures” described above.

At a local level, the community, government and both local and regional farm organizations can address these concerns. The focus of this Strategic Plan for Agriculture in North Cowichan is on those matters that can be addressed locally.

A Strategic Plan represents a commitment for change. It makes choices between a range of possible issues and opportunities, actions that can be taken, and organizations that can take action. For an agricultural strategic plan to be successful, choices have to be agreed upon, the implications have to be understood, and the responsibility for implementation shared between local and regional governments, farm organizations, growers, marketing agencies, retailers, distributors and processors and consumers. The ingredients of an industry leading initiative are present in the District of North Cowichan and the Cowichan Valley. These include: a good resource base, a dynamic agricultural community including several farm and producer organizations, a farmers market, an agricultural awareness initiative, a community land trust and an industry base that includes some leading edge initiatives such as combining grape and wine production with tourism. Also, the commitment by the District of North Cowichan to undertake the development of a strategic agricultural plan provides both a foundation for and a momentum toward future change.





STRATEGIC AGRICULTURAL PLAN

The purpose of this North Cowichan Agricultural Strategy is to focus and co-ordinate decisions and actions of the participating and non-participatory organization(s). The Strategy sets direction for the municipality, the Agricultural Society, key producers and other community groups that can influence the future of agriculture in the District.

This Strategy places most emphasis on taking advantage of opportunities and competitive advantages that exist in the area and on addressing local situations that result in reduced competitiveness relative to other comparable areas. This means that the Strategy does not focus on issues such as tariffs or trade practices that are not under local control and that are difficult to influence through local actions. Although these issues are important to the future of the industry, there are other organizations such as the Island Farmers Alliance and commodity groups that are better positioned to influence senior government decisions and actions. This Strategy therefore focuses on co-operative actions to address general issues, such as land use planning, services and infrastructure, producer training, public education, value added processing and local marketing. All these aspects are under local control or can be addressed or directly influenced by local actions.

Specifically, this Strategy:

- Documents the current status of the agriculture industry, and its resource base in North Cowichan;
- Identifies the constraints and opportunities facing agriculture;
- Identifies potential solutions to the challenges facing agriculture;
- Presents innovative ideas for developing a strong agricultural industry;
- Recommends priorities, actions, and participants to successfully achieve solutions;
- Promotes agriculture
- Establishes a monitoring process that:
 - Measures ongoing progress towards plan implementation; and
 - Maintains an activity inventory of the agricultural sector in the community.
 - Incorporates the farm community and the general public in the planning process.

The Strategy was developed between July 2000 and May 2001 through a process of review of past studies and other related information; consultation with the community through open houses, public meetings and focus group activities; and direct consultation with producers, processors, and agency representatives and circulation of a Draft Strategy to involved organizations and Agencies. A Steering Committee consisting of members of the community, local government and farming associations guided the project (see Appendix A for a complete list of participants). The Steering Committee worked with a consulting team of George Penfold, Westland Resource Group, and Paul Guiton of GroundWorks Strategic Marketing Solutions.

Key to the support for, and success of, the North Cowichan Agricultural Strategy will be the willingness of the District of North Cowichan, the Regional District, local agricultural organizations, other community and government organizations, the farm community and the



STRATEGIC AGRICULTURAL PLAN

community at large to be involved. They will have to commit their time, energy and resources to implementing the strategies that are outlined in this document.



STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

A general description on the current agricultural industry is attached as Appendix C. A more complete description is available in the publication "District of North Cowichan Agriculture Overview" published by the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries. These statistics are based on the 1996 census and give a picture of what agriculture was like at that time. In total, there were 242 census farms, farming 4,793 ha, and generating \$13.09 million in gross sales. Average farm size was 19.8 ha., and 34% were under 4 ha. in size. This "data" does not give a clear picture of the pressures on the industry, how farmers are responding to those pressures, and or where the industry is headed. As part of the process of gathering background information, we reviewed the results of the Agricultural Societies' March 2000 forum, contacted key individuals in the community who represent various sectors or activities related to agriculture, and toured the area with the District Agrolgist. In addition, a recent survey of producers in South Cowichan, published by the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries was used to examine regional trends. From those sources and from feedback at the initial public meeting in November 2000, we developed the following "picture" of agriculture in the North Cowichan and the Cowichan Valley. This picture is based on the views expressed by the community at the events and opportunities described above.

A list of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Constraints related to agriculture in North Cowichan was created based on background information and input from the public workshops and focus groups. The following section summarises the major themes identified from this process:

a) Current Strengths of Agriculture in the Cowichan Valley

Product quality and diversity

- North Cowichan farmers offer superior quality products, especially compared to imports from outside Canada.
- There is a wide range of different products. The industry is not dependent on a single commodity and the associated price fluctuations. Also, local producers can supply a variety of local product needs.

Economic Contribution and Potential

- Agriculture and food production currently makes a substantial contribution to the local economy, both in terms of employment¹ and farm sales.
- A well-developed agriculture sector can offer employment to those displaced (temporarily or permanently) from other resource industries.
- New "rural-lifestyle" farmers are bringing in new capital.

Co-operation and Community Resources

- Local agriculture has already demonstrated a strong sense of co-operation and of community through the Cowichan Agriculture Society.

¹ Agriculture represents 3.4% of workforce in Cowichan Valley, 1996, compared to 4.5% in logging and forestry.



- The Cowichan Valley Smallholders Society operates a successful Farmers' Market, which provides an excellent outlet for local farm products.

Consumer loyalty

- Vancouver Island consumers have stated a willingness to support local producers and buy local products.

Processing

- The area is already seeing the start of a vibrant small scale processing industry (meat, cheese and wine.)

Location

- The District is conveniently located to supply major Vancouver Island markets (Victoria and Nanaimo), and to draw "agri-tourists" from those centres.
- The local agricultural industry is located close to other agricultural areas, so that initiatives and infrastructure can be shared where appropriate.

b) Current Weaknesses of Agriculture in the Cowichan Valley

Lack of community awareness of agriculture

- Local government is not as well informed about the contribution of the agriculture industry and its issues as it could be.
- The general public is not familiar with the contribution of the agriculture industry and its issues.
- Agriculture is not included in economic development planning.

Lack of infrastructure

- There is a shortage of processing resources in the area.
- There are limited local training programs for farmers and prospective employees.

Lack of access to water

- There is a water deficit for production during the summer months. Farmers do not have assured access to water, even though their land is in the ALR.

High input costs

- Most inputs come from the Mainland, incurring additional freight and ferry charges.
- Cost of land in the District is relatively high for those wishing to expand or enter farming.

Production of low value commodities

- Large areas of land are used for hay production as opposed to higher value crops.