

Islands Trust turns 50

Updated policy statement raises questions

KATE AYERS and PETER MITHAM

SALT SPRING ISLAND – When the Islands Trust governing council met on Salt Spring Island on June 18-20, it took a moment to acknowledge its 50th anniversary as a special-purpose government stewarding more than 450 islands and the waters of what’s now known as the Salish Sea.

Created on June 5, 1974, the Islands Trust was one of a number of progressive initiatives the Dave Barrett government implemented with a view to protecting British Columbia at a time of heightened awareness of its precious natural resources and the wide variety of benefits they provide.

Originally designed to protect the Gulf Islands in the same way the Agricultural Land Reserve protects farmland, many farmers say the Islands Trust has delivered diminishing returns.

“Deep down, their idea of protecting farmland is just to protect it where absolutely nothing gets done on it,” says John Money, whose family farmed on Saturna Island and who served on the Islands Trust council for 21 years until 2010. “I’m all for protecting farmland, but let’s realize what you’re protecting it for.”

The original vision of protecting what made the Gulf Islands unique worked for several years but Money says the trust seems to have lost its way, paying less attention to sustaining complete communities on the islands.

“The Islands Trust has too many people trying to protect this perceived dream of living in utopia, but the fact is, everywhere should try and remain self-sustaining, so if you’re going to have a community, you need a mix of people and you need an economy,” he says, “You’ve got to meet a balance.”

The trust operates under the oversight of the BC Ministry of Municipal Affairs, and its wide-ranging responsibilities mean that agriculture is one of many interests it’s trying to balance. While the Agricultural Land Commission Act regulates 264 acres of farmland within the entire Islands Trust area (about 14% of the land base),

agriculture itself is subject to the Islands Trust’s policy statement, now under revision as part of the Islands 2050 initiative launched in 2019.

The update is the first since 1994, and the draft statement addresses concerns that have come to the forefront since then, including reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, climate change and affordable housing.

A draft proposed in 2021 was shelved due to resident opposition. Many farm groups,

Policy improvements ▶



Gulf Islands Food Co-op president and grower Roz Kempe says a new draft of the Islands Trust policy statement is more accommodating of agriculture’s diversity. | SUBMITTED

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► Policy improvements avoid prescriptive definitions

including the Pender Island Farmers Institute, criticized a lack of transparency and consultation regarding the wording and policies around agriculture.

“We had some pushback around some of the regulations and thinking that was going on, and that communities and people are not necessarily ready for some more restrictive legislation,” says Islands Trust council chair Peter Luckham.

The first iteration of the statement was too prescriptive, says Gulf Islands Food Co-op president and grower Roz Kempe.

“If they were saying it should be sustainable, regenerative agriculture, that's good, but then who are they to say what that is? How would they define that?” she says. “They're getting a bit too far down into an area they shouldn't be.”

On May 30, the trust council considered a second draft of the policy statement outlining five policies for local farmland: identify and protect agricultural lands for current and future use consistent with the Agricultural Land Commission Act; minimize any adverse impacts of land uses from adjacent properties on agricultural lands; ensure roads and utility corridors are appropriately situated to minimize agricultural land fragmentation; strive to preserve, protect and encourage sustainable farming and sustainability of farming; and strive to address land uses and activities that support the economic viability of farms without comprising the land's integrity.

The new draft does not define “agriculture” or “regenerative,” and provides a generic definition for sustainable – “capable of being maintained indefinitely.”

Kempe is pleased that the new draft addresses housing and water, two issues that directly impact island producers.

“Housing is a massive issue,” Kempe says.

Islands agriculture at a glance

The Islands Trust is home to 246 acres of protected farmland, but the total area farmed is much larger at approximately 6,000 acres. Census of Agriculture data from 2021 reports 171 farms on Salt Spring and the southern Gulf Islands.

Gulf Islands farms primarily produce fruit and vegetables, poultry, eggs and sheep. The majority of farms are less than 70 acres in size, and generate revenues of less than \$10,000 a year. Total revenues approach \$5 million.

—Peter Mitham

Agricultural Land Commission rules govern what happens within the ALR, and Islands Trust council members regularly correspond with the ALC to address issues related to farmland and food production.

But the Islands Trust has no published guidelines regarding what kinds of agritourism it deems acceptable and aligned with its own mandate to steward the Gulf Islands.

This includes units for vacation rentals, which the province has allowed so that farmers can diversify their revenue but which could also be addressing the shortage of Gulf Islands farm workers.

“It's very much a gray area for the Islands Trust, and whether to allow buildings to be constructed for agritourism,” Kempe says. “The short-term vacation rental is such a problem area. Is that providing housing for temporary farm workers?”

Luckham says farm worker housing is important, but the jurisdiction of the ALC.

“Farm worker housing is an important element, and the Agricultural Land Commission has been restricting in the kinds and types and shapes of housing on agricultural land, and rightfully so. They

don't want any kind of housing to impact the agriculture there,” says Luckham. “We certainly look towards a future of more equitability there associated with housing and farmworker housing, particularly seasonal types of housing.”

Support for infrastructure including farmers markets, roads, composting facilities, abattoirs and water are embodied in the policy statement, Luckham says, but once again points to the ALC as the ultimate regulator.

“There will definitely be some impacts. Ultimately, however, the Agricultural Land Commission has the authority to allow or disallow certain kinds of activities or exemptions,” he says.

Water is the one issue where the Islands Trust has greater authority, Kempe says. While it doesn't regulate groundwater, it has the power to regulate the forestry companies operating within its area.

By engaging with forest managers, the Islands Trust could significantly benefit local aquifers.

“A lot of people don't understand the physiological connection between forests and groundwater,” Kempe says. “I think if the Islands Trust could be successful in truly preserving and protecting [our forests], then agriculture would be better off.”

Following further council meetings this summer and a six-month public consultation period this fall, the new policy statement could be implemented as early as next year, setting the stage for the trust's next 50 years.

“We're committed to taking as much time as is necessary for everyone to understand what this means,” Luckham says. “We are interested in looking at how to alleviate hurdles ... to support those in our community that are struggling to farm. We will be working with those communities rather than against them.”



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Land Act, water issues aired at Cattlemen's AGM

Advocacy key to beef association's mandate

TOM WALKER

KAMLOOPS – Advocacy is an important role for many agriculture associations across the province and a strength of the BC Cattlemen's Association.

"We get respect in Victoria due to our honesty and frankness," BCCA general manager Kevin Boon said in his opening remarks at the association's 96th annual general meeting on Zoom, June 7.

"You don't always see the work that your directors do on the ground," Boon adds. "But meetings with provincial government leadership, including the premier and our president's trips to Ottawa, are extremely important parts of the work that we do. And that is all supported by our strong committee participation."

BC Beef Day in Victoria, an annual meet-and-greet event with the public and politicians on May 14, was well attended with over 550 burgers served.

"We did have an audience with the premier and Minister Alexis, and we were able to bring issues forward directly to the premier, something we don't always get the opportunity to do," says Boon.

"This kind of direct conversation with the government leadership is valuable."

Many of the issues that ranchers lobby for, such as water, drought, wildfires, and disaster response, are ongoing.

While changes to the Land Act proposed in January are now on hold, BCCA expects them to resurface in the near future.

The changes would give local Indigenous governing bodies joint decision-making powers and/or consent prior to a decision involving Crown land tenures. They were met with strong opposition from BCCA and many other tenure holders across the province.

"The proposed changes lacked clarity and scope," says Indigenous Affairs committee chair Larry Rast. "We got the government to back off and pause these proposed changes."

But ranchers fully expect the government to revive the initiative in the future.

"We are continuing to push back on this issue," Rast says.

Uncertainty around the changes rattled tenure holders but it also had an effect on community spirit, says John Anderson, chair of



BC Minister of Agriculture and Food Pam Alexis presented BC Cattlemen's Association president Brian Thomas with a declaration noting May 14 as BC Beef Day. The annual gathering outside the Parliament Buildings in Victoria puts the spotlight on BC's beef sector and its major contributions to BC food security. | FLICKR / BCMAF

BCCA's ad hoc Indigenous Relations committee.

"The way the Land Act changes were rolled out cast a long shadow over relationship building this past year," he says.

Ranchers and their Indigenous neighbours both play a long game, he says, while governments come and go.

"Government policy such as we saw with the Land Act can divide communities, which is difficult to reconcile,

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