

Salt Spring Island Agricultural Alliance

106 Old Scott Road, Salt Spring Island, BC V8K 2L6

The Farm Assessment Review Recommendations from Salt Spring Island

The objective of the farm assessment review is to ensure that the farm property assessment process is fair, equitable, straight forward and accommodates the regional diversity of our agricultural community.

There is a need to recognize that farms can be all sizes, big and small, and are not always single commodity based, but rather can encompass a wide variety of products in one place. Increasingly, agriculture on Salt Spring Island focuses on small-scale, intensive, diverse production, and, for many, the use of organic production methods.

On Salt Spring, 44 % of ALR lands are not currently farmed. The SSI Area Farm Plan recognises that we need to address the protection and utilization of all of our farmland, whether currently being farmed or not. We want to encourage farmland owners to farm or make their farmland available for farming. We want to minimize non-farm activities on ALR lands, while encouraging farming as a primary land use activity. We also want to provide long-term, affordable access to farmland for beginning farmers. We wish to recognize farmers for the environmental benefits they can provide to society.

We need the farm tax assessment rules, regulations, and process to help us achieve these goals rather than to create barriers.

With this in mind we have the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1: Do not apply split classifications

BC Assessment's declassification of farm property for revenue purposes runs contrary to the expressed provincial interest, i.e. the "encourage agriculture" mandates of both the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands and the BC Agricultural Land Commission. Seeking revenue from farm property by split classing BC's small food businesses to other than farm (business) class runs contrary to BC's new local food goals as expressed in both the 2008 Provincial Agricultural Plan and the 2008 Area Farm Plan for our island community.

- The agricultural land commission regulations provide a long list of activities that are considered farm use. These include: farm retail sales (farm shop), winery or cidery, storage of materials/produce, processing of farm products (i.e. value-added processing), agri-tourism activities, timber harvesting and agro-forestry.

- Increasingly, farmers are being encouraged to diversify their operations to improve farm viability, and therefore any or all of the above activities should be considered farm activities (and thus part of the farm) for assessment purposes. The home and home site on an active farm needs to be included as a farming-related use of the land.
- There is a need to think holistically to improve sustainability of farm enterprises and to protect the environment. An integrated, well-managed farm unit includes natural areas as well as cultivated areas. Maintaining natural areas within farmland should be encouraged, rather than penalised. Natural areas provide the following benefits: buffers and biodiversity for the well-balanced functioning of the agro-ecosystem – this is especially important on organic farms which cannot resort to the use of chemicals to control pests and diseases; society benefits from protecting wildlife habitat, watersheds and water quality within the farm boundaries. Eliminating natural areas from the definition of farm use discourages active management of natural areas on farmland.
- To declassify as farmland for assessment purposes non-productive areas of arable land because they are not producing a commercial crop presents a severe penalty for organic and ecological farmers. Under an ecological or organic farm management plan, arable land may be left fallow, or used for grazing non-commercial livestock, or seeded to a non-commercial crop for one or more seasons as part of the nutrient management system within the crop rotation. Thus there may be several years when a particular area will not be producing revenue, yet that area is a vital part of the overall commercial farm enterprise.

Recommendation #2: More than income threshold defines a farm

Income thresholds used to define a farm are the subject of much discussion. We believe that income alone cannot be used to decide whether a farm is truly a farm. Instead, a matrix of qualifiers is needed. Farms could meet all or some of the criteria and qualify. The goal is to provide an incentive to keep farmland in production.

This matrix would include the following:

- A target income level from farming activities (to include income from farm value-added product as well as primary products).
- Using the land for food production to increase food security of the region.
- Leasing the land to another farmer for active farm uses.
- The farmer/owner being active in one or more farm organizations.
- Farm-related activities are undertaken on a non-profit basis (e.g. training of new farmers, farm research activities, preservation and teaching of the traditional skills, etc.).

- An environmental farm plan is in place, or there is a demonstrated commitment to protecting natural areas on the farm and preventing pollution (for example as outlined in Appendix 2 of the BC Biodiversity Program Guide, June 2008 "Biodiversity beneficial management practices").
- The farm family has experience and history in food production.
- The farm family has training and/or experience in agriculture or horticulture, or is actively undertaking such training.
- No activities are undertaken which would restrict future farming uses (e.g. selling of topsoil).
- Realistic start-up periods are provided for new and emerging farms.
- The land has previously been an active farm and could become an active farm again upon change of ownership (e.g. a farmer retires from farming, lives on the property for a few more years, then sells the farmland to another farmer). This implies nothing is done to the property that would prevent future farming.
- The land owners do not currently farm, but have a 5-year residential tenure registered to agricultural food producing land stewards.

A fair process for defining a farm in the first place would avoid many appeals, which take up huge amounts of time and energy. We need consistent interpretation of the rules. We need assessors who understand farming of all types as well as having an understanding of the importance of a holistic approach to farmland for on-going sustainability and viability of agriculture and agro-ecosystems.

Respectfully submitted by:
Salt Spring Island Agricultural Alliance

Members organizations of the SSI Agricultural Alliance are: Salt Spring Island Farmers' Institute, Island Natural Growers- the Gulf Islands Chapter of Canadian Organic Growers, Salt Springers for Safe Food, SSI Earth Festival Society, SSI Chamber of Commerce, SSI Food Security Initiative. The mandate of the SSI Agricultural Alliance is to facilitate the implementation of the SSI Area Farm Plan.