



**Opportunities to Increase Farming Production
Capacity in the Comox Valley:
A Research Project**

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**Submitted by:
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Opportunities to Increase Farming Production Capacity in the Comox Valley: A Research Project is a land access research project of the Comox Valley Food Roundtable (CVFRT) developed in collaboration with:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Comox Valley Land Access Research Project is an initiative of the Comox Valley Food Round Table (CVFRT), funded by the Real Estate Foundation.

The goal of this research project was to discover more about local food production and the potential for increasing the amount of food produced in the Comox Valley. Through in-person interviews, online surveys and a focus group session, the researchers engaged with landowners and new farmers in the Comox Valley to determine the key challenges and opportunities for increasing food production.

The average age of farmers in the region is increasing, and many landowners are looking to sell their land or pass it down to family. Fewer and fewer family members are interested in taking over the family farm; therefore, new relationships are being developed between individuals who are not related. Landowners and potential farmers both face multiple barriers and challenges with land sharing arrangements. Landowners identified issues such as: inability to find people to farm the land; shared goals, values, respect and philosophy; lack of housing on site, liability concerns, lack of adequate water/irrigation, fencing, risk management, privacy concerns and others.

Though many younger people are eager to start a farm business, they face many challenges as well, including: lack of capital and start-up finances; high cost of farmland; a lack of affordable arable land; inability to locate farm land; inability to commit to farming as a career path; lack of farming knowledge; lack of equipment or infrastructure; and a lack of tenure or lease agreement for the property. Additional concerns were raised during a Focus Group Session held on February 13, 2014. These included:

- Local zoning and agricultural production
- Possibilities for multiple ownership of the land
- Cooperative structures
- Multiple farm dwellings on one farm site
- ALR restrictions and regulations

Despite these considerable barriers, a number of opportunities were also identified by interviewees, survey respondents, and focus group participants. Many felt that the Comox Valley held tremendous agricultural potential in terms of access to water, food prices increasing due to drought in other food producing regions, and a growing local market opportunity with a knowledgeable and engaged customer base. It was also clear that there are a number of tools available to assist landowners and new farmers with creating land sharing agreements and accessing financial support. Farmers were also very keen to work together and collaborate on:

- Pooling resources to get better quality and prices on inputs
- Developing a buying club to share the cost of purchasing inputs
- Creating opportunities for work bees to share the workload on farms
- Developing a web-based tool share database, which could also be used to share inputs and do group purchasing

It was evident through engaging in this research that arable land is available for farming in the Comox Valley. The majority of this land is privately owned, but landowners are amenable to land

sharing arrangements where appropriate. Additionally, the City of Courtenay recently conducted an inventory of available public land for urban agriculture opportunities. This research is in preliminary stages, but identifies some potential for utilization of public land to increase agricultural production.

Recommendations were put forth under three categories as follows:

1. Education:

- WCB, liability, insurance 101 for landowners
- Farm succession planning
- Business planning and financial management for small farms
- Marketing
- "Farming 101 series": basic info on seed-starting, value-added processing, animal husbandry
- Choosing the best crops to grow on your land
- Collective marketing models (from informal arrangements to co-operatives)
- Forming effective lease agreements
- Alternative land ownership models
- Involvement from educational institutions such as North Island College

2. Support for Farmer Collaboration

- Offer Land-Linking events to match beginning farmers with landowners willing to lease
- Form a Tool Lending Library with tools appropriate for small - medium-scale farming
- Develop an Agricultural Asset Map for the Comox Valley (in process)
- Create, or centralize listing of resource directories available to farmers
- Create a resource library with farm-related books and info
- Create opportunities for farmers to gather and network informally

3. Increasing New Farmer Participation in Existing Agricultural Organizations

- Introduce 2 young farmer representative positions at the board of directors level for local farm-related organizations. These youth representatives will be responsible for:
 - Voicing new farmer perspectives and ideas
 - Ensuring that the direction of the organization serves new and younger farmers
- Explore the possibility of expanding the FI tool library to include machinery and hand tools that are useful to small and medium-scale farmers and producers.

The Comox Valley has enormous potential to produce a greater quantity of food for local and regional markets. While young people who wish to become vocational farmers face many challenges, opportunities exist to lift some of these barriers. We can create a community that encourages, attracts and retains new farmers by forming strategic partnerships between government, non-profit organizations, local institutions and businesses to provide farmers with resources, education and mentoring.

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INTRODUCTION

The Comox Valley Food Roundtable (CVFRT) is a coalition of over 20 groups that work on food security issues in the Comox Valley. The CVFRT was awarded a grant by the Real Estate Foundation to research issues around land access. This research project involved connecting with landowners to understand what barriers exist to intensifying production on their land and exploring the barriers to farming for those who do not own land themselves.

The CVFRT discovered that as the average age of farmers in the region is increasing, there are not enough young people getting into farming. Some of the barriers that arose during discussions include: a lack of affordable land for farming; inability to locate farm land; inability to commit to farming as a career path; lack of farming knowledge; lack of equipment or infrastructure; and a lack of tenure or lease agreement for the property. The CVFRT also found that there is a lot of underutilized land within and outside of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) on both public and private lands.

The intent of this research project was to determine which barriers are perceived and which challenges are realities for new farmers. Some opportunities to overcome the challenges have also been explored. The target interviewees included people who were ready to farm (vocational farmers) and those with land available that is not currently being farmed. Retired farmers, professionals who have purchased farm land, and those who are currently leasing land were also interviewed for their perspective.

The objectives of the research project were:

- To determine the barriers to increasing and intensifying production in the Comox Valley;
- To determine the barriers to accessing farmland in the Comox Valley; and
- To conduct a Focus Group Session with key stakeholders to explore key issues to accessing land and increasing production in depth.



Pigs at Halstead Farm - Merville

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The Comox Valley is home to over 500 farms that produce a wide assortment of food products including: vegetable and fruit crops, livestock, poultry, animal products, greenhouse products, mushrooms, honey, and maple syrup products.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2011 only 25 farmers in the Comox Valley were 35 years old or younger. The average age of the Comox Valley's 670 farmers was 55.7 years. Projecting that statistic forward to 2014, Comox Valley farmers are now at an average age of 59.

Comox Valley farms sell their products through a variety of channels including the year-round Comox Valley Farmers' Market, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Programs, distributors like Sunshine Organics, restaurants and local grocery outlets.

The total area of farmed land in the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) is 14,290 ha, which increased 10% from 2006-2011; however, much of the arable land in the Comox Valley is not being used to produce crops for human consumption (Statistics Canada, 2011). According to the CVRD (2011) the area of crops in the CVRD in 2011 was 4,279 ha, or about 18.5% of the area in the ALR, with only 248 ha producing fruit and vegetables. The area of hay and pasture was 3.137 ha or 73% of the total area in crops. The total area of land in the CVRD that is within the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) is 23,054 ha (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Some additional characteristics of the agricultural profile and the change in production from 1996-2011, include:

- The number of chickens has decreased from 30,798 to 22,126 birds
- Cattle and calves have decreased from 8,248 to 6,877
- The number of pigs have decreased from 976 to 844
- Sheep and lambs have decreased from 2,094 to 1,645
- The number of bee colonies has increased from 378 to 851.
- There were 12 certified organic farms in the Comox Valley Regional District in 2011.
- The average net revenue of farms in the Comox Valley is under \$10,000/year.



METHODOLOGY

The work plan for this research project was divided up into four key phases:

1. Interviews of Landowners to Identify Barriers
2. Interviews of Potential Farmers to Identify Barriers for Entry
3. Focus Group Session with Landowners and Potential Farmers
4. Interview Analysis and Final Report



Interviews were conducted with a total of 34 landowners and 24 new farmers. Landowners included retired farmers, those who are currently farming and looking to expand or decrease production and those who currently aren't farming. Face-to-face interviews were conducted whenever possible, in addition to phone interviews when necessary. An online survey using Fluidsurveys was also generated in order to capture responses from those who may be difficult to contact.

New farmers who were interviewed included those that were currently farming and leasing land, as well as those considering farming as a vocation. Some interviewees were looking to enter leasing agreements, while others were looking to purchase land for production. There were challenges finding farmers who were willing to commit to agriculture as a definite career path, given the current tenuous state of agricultural profitability. It was also difficult to locate landowners who were willing to offer up their land for lease or rent and ready to make that next step. Some were interested, but others had not even considered it an option.

Another key phase of the project was to conduct a Focus Group Session with key participants in the project. The format of the focus group was informal taking an interactive discussion approach. Preliminary research findings were presented to provide some context for the discussion. A total of 12 participants attended the session, chosen from the list of interviewees.

Participants were asked to provide input on the following questions:

1. What are the main challenges for you?
2. What opportunities exist for agriculture and farmers/producers in the Comox Valley?
3. What tools/supports/programs, etc. do you think would be helpful for new farmers and landowners in the Comox Valley?
4. Landowners: What kind of proposal would you want to see from a potential farmer? Business plan? Commitment?
5. Farmers: What kind of commitment/offer would you be looking for from landowners?

Results from the interviews and the Focus Group Session were used to help identify the recommendations within this report. It is important to note that results are not statistically significant due to the fact that participants were selected by the interviewees for interviews and the small sample size.



Barbara and Bryne Odegard - Ironwood Farm, Fanny Bay

LANDOWNER PROFILE

A total of 34 landowners were interviewed for the project to determine the barriers to offering land for lease or rent to new farmers. Landowners were identified through the Comox Valley Growers Guide, by word of mouth through snowball sampling and through an online survey. Attempts were made to interview landowners who were ready to offer their land to new farmers. The landowners differed widely in their demographics and farming practices. Some were actively farming and at the beginning of their farming career, while others were retired and looking for someone to work their land.

Most of the landowners only had one or two people who were occupying the land with a couple of tenants, but the tenants generally were not involved in farming activities. Farm sizes ranged from 5 acres to 900 acres with a total of 1497.93 acres for all interviewees. The average farm size was 83.22 acres, but the median farm size was 14.82. A total of 72.2% of the farmers interviewed were on land within the ALR and 61.1% had farm class (Class 9).

A total of 69% of the farmers interviewed were interested in sharing their land with other farmers, while 13.8% said they were not interested because they did not have excess land or were concerned about infrastructure, philosophy and land use conflicts. Another 17.2% were not sure whether they wanted to share their land.

Table 1. Interest in Sharing Land Amongst Landowners Interviewed

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Yes		69.0%	20
No		13.8%	4
Not sure		17.2%	5
		Total Responses	29

FARM PRODUCTS

When asked what farm products the interviewees produced it was clear that the majority were growing a combination of products and raising livestock (Table 2).

Table 2. Farm Products Produced by Landowners Interviewed

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Livestock/meat		46.7%	7
Dairy (cattle/sheep/goat)		6.7%	1
Poultry/eggs		53.3%	8
Greenhouse vegetable/fruit production		6.7%	1
Field vegetable production		40.0%	6
Berries		53.3%	8
Tree fruit/nuts		20.0%	3
Staple crops (grains, pulses, edible seeds)		13.3%	2
Value-added		6.7%	1

Specialty crops		46.7%	7
Mushroom production		6.7%	1
Seeds		13.3%	2
Other, please specify...		66.7%	10
Total Responses			15

Products identified in the “other” category included: forage (hay), honey, beeswax, ducks, geese, bees, medicinal plants and organic fertilizer.

A total of 60% of the landowners stated that they created value-added products on their farms. Table 3 shows the variety of value-added products produced.

Table 3. Value-Added Products Created by Landowners.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Canned preserves or pickles		40.0%	4
Baked goods		30.0%	3
Wine, beer, or spirits		0.0%	0
Cheese, yogurt, or other dairy products		10.0%	1
Soap, bath, or beauty products		0.0%	0
Textiles		10.0%	1
Other, please specify...		60.0%	6
Total Responses			10

Items in the “other” category include: sheep skins, custom butchering, meat pies, soups, candles, beeswax for cosmetics, Echinacea tea, dried goods such as beans and mushrooms, medicinal oils and soy milk.

The majority of interviewees were selling their products at the farmers’ market, at their farm gate and to restaurants (Table 4). It was clear that most interviewees were accessing a diversity of markets to sell their products.

Table 4. Where Landowners Sell their Farm Products.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Comox Valley Farmers' Market		41.7%	5
Pier Street Market		0.0%	0
Other farmers market:		8.3%	1
Restaurants		41.7%	5
Retail		25.0%	3
CSA		8.3%	1
Farm stand or farm gate sales		41.7%	5
Other, please specify...		58.3%	7
Total Responses			12

Markets in the “other” category included local craft fairs, direct marketing, u-pick sales, through family and friends, word of mouth, Facebook and through local manufacturers.

When asked which products landowners found easiest to sell in the region, they responded with the following:

- Chicken (boneless, skinless chicken breasts)
- Eggs
- Apples
- Patty pan squash
- Beans and peas
- Honey
- Cranberries
- Strawberries
- Pickling cucumbers
- Garlic
- Blueberries
- Goldenseal






All interviewees stated they were farming using environmentally sound practices. A total of 73.3% indicated that they were farming using organic practices, but were not certified.

SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

Landowners were asked to explain whether they maintain an off-farm job and their motivation for working off the farm if they are. A total of 56.2% of interviewees indicated that they were working off of the farm. A few of these respondents were retired, so they were not working at all. Of those working off the farm, 90% said they were working off-farm for financial necessity, while 20% said it was for personal satisfaction. A total of 42.9% indicated that they had no desire to maintain a job alongside farming in the future, 42.9% indicated that they will continue working on the farm in the future, and 10% were unsure.

Some of the landowners indicated that they had a succession plan in place and were discussing their options. Of those who had a plan in place, 40% indicated they were hoping to pass their farm along to their children (Table 5).

Table 5. Succession Planning Options.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Passing it on to children		40.0%	4
Establishing a farm cooperative		20.0%	2
Selling it to another farmer		20.0%	2
Attempting to have the farm subdivided and/or rezoned		0.0%	0
Other, please specify...		40.0%	4
		Total Responses	10

Landowners were asked to explain their vision for the farm. There were a variety of responses with some wanting to remain involved in farming, while others hoping to sell and stop farming completely. The following are some thoughts from the interviewees:

- Want business partners and an integrated farm business
- Would like to increase agritourism potential on the farm (i.e. destination farm, café, farm tours, demos, farm stays, educational centre, wedding venue, etc.)
- May need to sell the property
- Residential and farm cooperative with a strata development
- Looking to bring more land into production and grow their farm business
- Would like to provide allotment gardens

Despite the variety in answers, all landowners wanted to see the land used for farming in the future.



Merville Organics - Merville

NEW FARMER PROFILE

A total of 24 new farmers were interviewed. Some of the farmers had been farming previously, while others had yet to start. Interestingly, 95% of the new farmers interviewed wanted to farm in the Comox Valley over the long term.

New farmers in the Comox Valley are highly motivated by the independence and autonomy offered by a career in farming. Many are also very passionate about feeding their community, and feel that farming is a form of activism.

The majority of the new farmers interviewed were aged 26-35. Sixty percent of respondents had no formal training in agriculture, but most had a combination of experiential learning, including working on farms as labourers, apprenticing on farms, taking short workshops, and growing up on acreages with food gardening for the household, or growing up on farms.

The reasons for people choosing to farm here in the Comox Valley were varied. While many indicated that they feel there is a strong community of farmers here, some interviewees indicated that they did not feel supported by an agricultural community. Respondents also spoke to the good quality of arable land in the Comox Valley, the favourable climate, and the allure of living in a location with beautiful natural areas to explore.

The majority of respondents said:





- It is important to them to live on or very near the land they are farming (92.3%)
- They want to farm with others (86.7%). Many of these respondents indicated they would like to create business arrangements with friends, business partners, or collectives/co-ops.
- They are using or planning to use environmentally sustainable practices of some kind
- They currently work off-farm and will finance their farms with this income
- Their off-farm work is a financial necessity
- Their main challenge is start-up capital

NEW FARMER BACKGROUND AND PRODUCTION PLANS

Of the new farmers interviewed, 60% did not have any formal training in agriculture. When asked what kind of training the new farmers possessed there was a variety of responses (Table 6).

Table 6. New Farmer Training and Experience in Agriculture.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Grew up on a farm		33.3%	5
College certificate		6.7%	1
University degree		13.3%	2
Some college or university courses		6.7%	1
Permaculture Design Course		13.3%	2
SOIL apprenticeship		20.0%	3






WWOOF volunteer (Willing Workers on Organic Farms)		33.3%	5
Informal on-farm learning/volunteering		26.7%	4
4H Programs		6.7%	1
Other, please specify...		60.0%	9
Total Responses			15

Training in the “other” category included:

- LUSH Valley & Job Shop program (EI) Apprenticeship
- Farming workshops
- Agriculture-related employment
- International exchange working on farms
- Gaia college
- Personal gardening
- Online courses

Some of the new farmers interviewed were currently farming or planning to start in the relatively short term. When asked what kind of business structure and partnerships they were planning to create, new farmers indicated that they were not interested in farming alone and wanted to farm with friends, family or business partners (Table 7).

Table 7. Farm Management Plans for New Farmers.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Solo		13.3%	2
With family members		13.3%	2
With a business partner		13.3%	2
With a life partner or spouse		46.7%	7
Other, please specify...		53.3%	8
Total Responses			15

Responses in the “other” category included:

- With a friend (2)
- With business partner(s) (2)
- With a collective (1)
- Internship (1)
- Not sure yet (2)

New farmers were also asked to indicate what they are currently growing/producing, or plan to produce. The majority of interviewees were planning diverse farm operations, indicating they were producing or intending to produce 4 or more items listed in Table 8, which provides the responses that were received.

Table 8. Products New Farmers are, or Plan to, Produce.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Livestock/meat		40.0%	6
Dairy (cattle/sheep/goat)		13.3%	2
Poultry/eggs		73.3%	11
Greenhouse vegetable/fruit production		80.0%	12
Field vegetable production		86.7%	13
Berries		60.0%	9
Tree fruit/nuts		60.0%	9
Staple crops (grains, pulses, edible seeds)		46.7%	7
Value-added		46.7%	7
Specialty crops		46.7%	7
Nursery		40.0%	6
Mushroom production		40.0%	6
Seeds		66.7%	10
Other, please specify...		20.0%	3
Total Responses			15

When asked why the new farmers had chosen these types of production they indicated it was for a variety of reasons such as profitability (2), diversity of production (2), and a general desire to grow/raise those specific products. Other responses included:

- Integrates easily into my lifestyle (2)
- Already have knowledge and experience with it (1)
- Found a market for the product (1)
- Low capital input required (1)
- It works well on my land (1)

New farmers were asked to indicate what they find easiest to sell. There was some overlap in responses from the landowner, which demonstrates an understanding of the local market demands. Here are the responses from the new farmers:

- Salad greens
- Eggs
- Plant starts
- Carrots
- Pastured meat
- Colourful vegetables
- Kohlrabi
- Broccoli
- Bunch greens
- Beets
- Buffalo milk
- Peas






Most of the new farmers were planning to, or were already using, environmentally sound production practices. A total of 40% of those interviewed were considering pursuing organic certification.

NEW FARMER MOTIVATIONS

Interviewees were questioned to determine their motivations for farming in general and their reasons why they have chosen Comox Valley as a destination to pursue their farming intentions.

When asked why they were interested in farming, the majority responded that it was for lifestyle and sustainability reasons (Table 9).

Table 9. Reasons for Pursuing Farming.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Food security		56.2%	9
Sustainability		62.5%	10
Health		25.0%	4
Lifestyle		68.8%	11
Other, please specify...		62.5%	10
		Total Responses	16

Some of the responses in the “other” category included:

- I want to produce food for my community (5)
- Autonomy and independence (2)
- Activism (2)

When asked why the new farmers were choosing the Comox Valley to farm in they indicated that they already lived in the area (4) and that there was a strong agricultural community (4). Some of the other reasons were as follows:

- I have access to land here (3)
- I grew up here (2)
- There is good quality farmland here (2)
- Local food economy has potential (1)
- Climate (1)

SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

A total of 63.6% of the new farmers interviewed currently have an off-farm job. Of the folks who were working off-farm, 75% indicated that it was for financial reasons while 41.7% said it was for personal satisfaction. Of all the potential farmers, 46.2% stated that they plan to maintain a second job alongside farming in the future, 38.5% plan not to maintain a second job, and 15.4% are unsure.

When asked to explain how new farmers were planning to finance their farms as they got started, the majority indicated they would be using their income from off-farm work (Table 10).

Table 10. Plans for Financing Farming Activities.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Financing from a credit union or bank		28.6%	4
Government programs		21.4%	3
Farm Credit Canada		14.3%	2
Family		7.1%	1
Off-farm work		71.4%	10
Grants		28.6%	4
Crowd-sourcing funds and equipment		7.1%	1
Other, please specify...		42.9%	6
		Total Responses	14

Some of the responses in the “other” category included:

- CSA program (1)
- Personal savings (1)
- Investments (1)
- Not sure yet (1)
- Work trade (1)

A total of 71.4% of the new farmers interviewed indicated that they were not currently leasing land and 54.5% were unsure whether it would be a long-term prospect. Another 36.4% stated that it was definitely not a long-term prospect for them. Currently, 50% of the new farmers were actively looking for land to purchase, but 62.5% have not been able to find land within their price range. Most importantly, 92.3% of the new farmers interviewed indicated that living on land they were farming was important for them, which could limit leasing potential in the future.










Ripple Farm Chicks - Courtenay

CHALLENGES WITH ACCESSING LAND

A number of challenges for accessing land were raised by both the landowners and the new farmers interviewed.

Landowners were asked to indicate the top three things that were preventing them from offering up their land for lease or rent to new farmers. The majority indicated that they just didn't know where to look for people to lease to (Table 11), which indicates that a number of landowners are currently ready to lease their land, but they require support with finding new farmers in the area that are looking for land.

Table 11. Top Three Things Preventing Landowners for Offering their Land.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Don't know where to look for people		53.3%	8
Fencing		33.3%	5
Lack of available water		26.7%	4
Potential costs		0.0%	0
Lack of knowledge about lease agreements		13.3%	2
Privacy concerns		20.0%	3
Concerned about land use conflicts		20.0%	3
Other, please specify...		33.3%	5
Total Responses			15

Some of the other considerations voiced by landowners in the “other” category included:

- Shared goals and values, respect and philosophy (9)
- No housing on site (4)
- Liability issues (4)
- Lack of adequate water/irrigation (3)
- Fencing needs to be repaired (2)
- Managing risk for both sides – who invests in infrastructure? (2)
- Privacy concerns (2)
- Dogs on site (1)
- Making access to property easily (1)
- Traffic concerns and nuisance complaints from neighbours (1)
- Safety concerns – equipment operation (1)

These responses are evidence that support in developing clear lease agreements and open and honest discussion is needed when relationships are being formed. Additionally, it is clear that housing is a concern for many landowners and new farmers. Unfortunately, the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) restricts the number of dwellings on farmland to one single-family dwelling and, sometimes, a secondary suite. Individuals cannot address these regulations, but lobbying efforts to, and by, local governments to the Provincial government and the ALC may work towards new regulations that address all parties' needs and concerns.

New farmers were asked to indicate their three biggest challenges they face as new farmers. Most were experiencing difficulties with accessing capital and the cost of land (Table 12). Some also expressed their concerns with the profitability of agriculture over the long term.

Table 12. Top Three Challenges New Farmers are Facing.

Response	Chart	Percentage	Count
Lack of capital		71.4%	10
Need more access to credit or financing		14.3%	2
Inability to lease land		35.7%	5
Lack of arable or appropriate farm land		7.1%	1
Cost of land (for purchase)		64.3%	9
Inability to access capital (loans or grants)		7.1%	1
Difficulty negotiating agreements (i.e. leases)		21.4%	3
Agriculture is not profitable enough to meet income needs		28.6%	4
Other, please specify...		64.3%	9
Total Responses			14

Some of the "other" responses provided by the new farmers included:

- Work/life balance (3)
- Marketing (2)
- Finding the right people to work with (2)
- Learning curve (2)
- Trying to "do it all" (growing, learning, marketing, running a business) (1)
- Business skills (1)
- Access to mentoring (1)
- Land that is affordable is not arable (1)
- Need extension services/agricultural advice (1)
- Agreements about how to use family land hard to negotiate (1)
- Can't hire labour (1)

It was evident by the responses that farmers need greater access to start-up capital and information about where to find appropriate loan programs (see Resources for more information). Education in key areas is also needed in the areas of: business planning, marketing, and record keeping. Some programs are already in existence, while others could be developed locally.

Some additional concerns were raised during the Focus Group Session held on February 13, 2014. Participants at the session requested more information from the local government and others on issues such as:

- Local zoning and agricultural production
- Possibilities for multiple ownership of the land
- Cooperative structures
- Multiple farm dwellings on one farm site
- ALR restrictions and regulations

Participants also expressed concerns about the ability to access and own land. Some mentioned that it is not a financially sustainable option and the huge down payment required was limiting for most new farmers. Also, participants in the session further confirmed that they need support on establishing lease agreements and legal assistance with creating new partnerships. Some also indicated that they would like support in navigating WCB, liability, and tenancy insurance when it related to agriculture. It was apparent that there was a general lack of services and support for farmers in insurance, lending, and business development in the region or a lack of knowledge on where to access this information.



Ripple Farm - Merville

OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE IN THE COMOX VALLEY

Interviewees were asked to share their perceived benefits to offering land for leasing and leasing land. Landowners that were looking to lease land mentioned that the following were benefits:

- Financial benefits – leasing income
- Shared workload
- Shared knowledge
- Allowing people to use the land – seeing the land being used
- Land is getting taken care of – resale value/aesthetics
- Someone sharing the dream and the experience
- Unintended consequences of trying something new

The new farmers that were asked to share the benefits of leasing land provided the following answers:

- Financial reasons (4)
- Infrastructure is usually already in place (3)
- Soil has already been worked (2)
- Can access great land (2)
- Can be great to work with others and gain knowledge (1)

Despite the challenges identified in the previous section, interviewees still felt that there were key benefits and reasons to engage in a leasing or land sharing relationship. A number of other opportunities in existence in the Comox Valley area were also explored during the Focus Group Session.

Participants in the Focus Group Session mentioned that they felt there is tremendous agricultural potential in the Comox Valley in terms of access to water, food prices increasing due to drought in other food producing regions, and a growing local market opportunity with a knowledgeable and engaged customer base. It was also clear that there are a number of tools available to assist landowners and new farmers with creating land sharing agreements and accessing financial support.

There is also a desire to support one another and work cooperatively. Some of the suggestions for collaboration included:

- Pooling resources to get better quality and prices on inputs
- Developing a buying club to share the cost of purchasing inputs
- Creating opportunities for work bees to share the workload on farms
- Developing a web-based tool share database, which could also be used to share inputs and do group purchasing

It was also evident that there are a few organizations and individuals in the Comox Valley that are actively supporting agriculture and assisting farmers. Some of the resources available that were mentioned during the Focus Group Session were:

- Comox Valley Farmers' Institute – tool share
- [LUSH Valley Food Action Society](#) - commercial kitchen for creating value-added products
- [Comox Valley Growers and Seed Savers](#) - a winnower for cleaning seed
- Brent Garstin from Garstin Farm – Whiz Bang chicken plucker
- Heather McAnsh – Asset Mapping Project



PUBLIC LAND SURVEY

The City of Courtenay has been working on a Community Gardens Mapping project to identify sites within the City that may be suitable for the establishment of community gardens or other urban agriculture projects. Sites within park areas have been analyzed based on site suitability, agricultural capability, and zoning density.



Source: Community Garden Mapping: Recommended Sites DRAFT (City of Courtenay)

This project is a work in progress and has not been vetted through the City departments. This a first cut of sites that may be suitable from a physical standpoint, but the community receptivity to these locations has not been researched. Currently, the City is reviewing some community garden guidelines that could be considered for public lands.

This research is evidence that land for food production is available within the Comox Valley region and that the City of Courtenay is making a concerted effort to identify and facilitate the use of this land for agricultural purposes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improvements can be made in three key areas to encourage more food production in the Comox Valley:

1. Education
2. Support for farmer collaboration
3. Increasing new farmer participation in existing agricultural organizations

1. EDUCATION

Sixty percent of new farmers in the Comox Valley have no formal training in agriculture. While some have completed farm apprenticeships and taken short workshops, most of the interviewees expressed a need for more information, mentoring and resources. Landowners are also in need of education, especially related to forming lease agreements and inviting new people to farm on their land. Education in the following areas would be helpful:

For landowners:

- WCB, liability, insurance 101 for landowners
- Farm succession planning

For new farmers:

- Business planning and financial management for small farms
- Marketing
- "Farming 101 series": basic info on seed-starting, value-added processing, animal husbandry
- Choosing the best crops to grow on your land
- Collective marketing models (from informal arrangements to co-operatives)

For both landowners and new farmers:

- Forming effective lease agreements
- Alternative land ownership models

Some of these workshops could be offered as a series, in partnership with the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) or the City of Courtenay. The Lettuce Grow workshop series in Campbell River is an excellent model we could learn from - with few resources, the series offers workshops, presentations and films related to food production. There are a number of academic institutions and community organizations who would likely be interested in partnering to offer workshops.

Another recommendation arising from this report is an increase of academic involvement in farming education. North Island College (NIC) has been approached in the recent past with requests to offer agricultural education. Hopefully, this dialogue will continue, as it represents a

wonderful opportunity for increasing food production in the Comox Valley. NIC could also offer some of these courses through the Elder College (i.e. farm succession planning).

Of course, another recommendation that emerged from this research is the call for more agricultural extension services in our community. Focus group participants spoke at length about the waning government agricultural services in BC and the fact that BC has one of the lowest agricultural budgets in Canada.

2. SUPPORT FOR FARMER COLLABORATION

With a small amount of financial and organizational support, new and existing farmers in the Comox Valley could effectively pool resources, knowledge and skills to create a more favorable environment for beginning farmers. Because new farmers lack access to sufficient start-up capital, collaborative programs and services could help farmers access tools, marketing support, and land. Centralizing farm-related information about retailers, services and free resources in our community would also help new farmers to get started faster.

The following recommendations emerged from surveys and the focus group:

- Offer Land-Linking events to match beginning farmers with landowners willing to lease
- Form a Tool Lending Library with tools appropriate for small - medium-scale farming
- Develop an Agricultural Asset Map for the Comox Valley (in process)
- Create, or centralize listing of resource directories available to farmers
- Create a resource library with farm-related books and info
- Create opportunities for farmers to gather and network informally

3. INCREASE NEW FARMER PARTICIPATION IN EXISTING AGRICULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS

In interviews, and in the focus group session, new farmers expressed interest in becoming more involved with the Comox Valley Farmers' Institute because it is a long-standing, farmer-driven organization that serves a large number of farmers in the Comox Valley. Many new farmers also expressed reservations about becoming involved because they felt the organization did not focus on issues relevant to new and/or small-scale farmers. Some of the hesitation from new farmers may be related to a cultural/generational gap - the Farmers' Institute may not yet know how to reach a younger generation of farmers.

From the information gathered, we have developed two recommendations regarding increasing new farmer involvement at the Farmers' Institute:

- Introduce 2 young farmer representative positions at the board of directors level for local farm-related organizations. These youth representatives will be responsible for:
 - Voicing new farmer perspectives and ideas
 - Ensuring that the direction of the organization serves new and younger farmers
- Explore the possibility of expanding the FI tool library to include machinery and hand tools that are useful to small and medium-scale farmers and producers.

CONCLUSION

The Comox Valley has a long history of agriculture, a wealth of arable land, and many local farms. We have an opportunity to use these assets to encourage new farmers and create favourable conditions for increased food production for local markets. The future of food production in the Comox Valley depends on taking pro-active measures to attract, retain and support new growers and producers.

This research project focused on a small sample size of new farmers, or people who wish to pursue farming as a career and landowners in various stages of life. In this small sample, a good number of landowners expressed interest in learning more about land-sharing agreements. At the same time, most new farmers interviewed indicated a stronger interest in buying land than leasing land, but, at this time, good agricultural land is priced too high to be a financially viable investment for most new farmers.

The recommendations made in this report will require individuals, non-profit organizations, institutions and government to work together to prioritize local food production. Connecting new farmers and landowners is one part of the way forward, but mentoring, education and resources will increase the number of successful, sustainable land access agreements. This is one of the keys to realizing the goal of increased local food production.



RESOURCES

LEASING LAND

The Land Conservancy: A Guide to Farmland Access Agreements:

<http://blog.conservancy.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/A-guide-to-farmland-access-agreements.pdf>

Young Agrarians: Land Access Guide, Lease & License templates:

<http://youngagrarians.org/young-agrarians-bc-land-access-guide-lease-license-templates>

FUNDING & LOANS

Canadian Youth Business Foundation Programs:

<http://www.cybf.ca/programs>

Vancity Small Growers Loan:

<https://www.vancity.com/BusinessBanking/Financing/Loans/SmallBusinessAndStartup/SmallGrowersFund>

Vancity & FarmFolk/CityFolk: Local Food Micro-Loan Fund:

<http://www.farmfolkcityfolk.ca/projects/microloan>

BC Ministry of Agriculture: Growing Forward 2

<http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/apf/GF2/GF2.html>

FARM START-UP INFORMATION

BCMAL: New Farm Start-Up: A Guide to Starting and Growing a Small or Medium Sized Farm Business in British Columbia

http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/resmgmt/publist/800Series/810202-1_New_Farm_Start-Up_Guide.pdf

ALTERNATIVE LAND OWNERSHIP AND FARMLAND CONSERVATION

The Land Conservancy: A Review of Farmland Trusts: Communities Supporting Farmland, Farming and Farmers:

http://blog.conservancy.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/FLT_dec2010.pdf

National Young Farmers Coalition (USA) Farmland Conservation 2.0: How Land Trusts Can Protect America's Working Farms

<http://www.youngfarmers.org/reports/conservation2.0.pdf>

EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS & RESOURCES OUTSIDE OF BC

University of Vermont Extension: Land Access & Tenure Toolshed:

<http://www.uvm.edu/newfarmer/?Page=land/index.html&SM=land/sub-menu.html>

FarmStart (Ontario)

<http://www.farmstart.ca>

New England Small Farm Institute:

http://www.smallfarm.org/main/for_new_farmers/resources_by_topic/land

FarmStart: Accessing Land for Farming in Ontario

<http://www.farmstart.ca/wp-content/uploads/Accessing-Land-for-Farming-in-ON-Guidebook-REV4.pdf>

REFERENCES

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Statistics Canada. 2011. *Census of Agriculture, Farm Data and Farm Operator Data*.

