

TOFINO-UCLUELET WESTERLY NEWS

Young Agrarians aim to grow next generation of Vancouver Island farmers

Scott Stanfield

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1 / 3 Pendleton Farm owner Sarah Wilson. Photo supplied

The farming population in Canada has been decreasing as fewer young people are entering the sector, according to the Young Agrarians.

The organization offers farmer-to-farmer programming to grow the next generation of farmers, and supports farmers to access education, training, land, business mentorship and resources.

"The context for farming is dire," Young Agrarians executive director Sara Dent said in a presentation to the Comox Valley Regional District board last month. "We continue to see that farmers are aging, and there are less and less young farmers, 35 and younger in the country."

Over the last decade in B.C., she said the number of farms has dropped from 19,000 to 15,000.

"We are working on supporting the next generation to come into agriculture," Dent said, noting land and production costs create entry barriers for young people. "Everyone is aware of how expensive the land is."

Young Agrarians delivers a Land Matching Program (BCLMP) that addresses the high cost of land. There is no cost to participate, and it provides services to farmers and landholders of all ages. The BCLMP was adapted by a program in Quebec, which has 44 land matchers. B.C. has six.

"We're helping to de-risk the access to land component," Dent said.

On Vancouver Island, Young Agrarians has made 71 land matches on 198 acres.

Thanu Eagalle, 32, owns Wild Bee Florals in Dove Creek. She says the program helps people determine if they want to pursue a career in farming.

"We really appreciate our landlords and being able to grow on their property," she said. "Without access to this leased property, we wouldn't be able to farm."

She and her partner, Aaron Brown, are determining which revenue streams will be their focus and how to build the business in a way that they can transport it and adapt easily, if need be.

Pendleton Farm owner Sarah Wilson said the Young Agrarians helped her set up a lease after she had found a property in Merville.

"They walked us through every step of the agreement, got us to consider aspects that would never have occurred to me, or the landowners," said Wilson, who is in her fourth year at the property. "It involved a lot of back-and-forth, and in the end it left both the landowners and myself much more comfortable with what we were getting into."

She built a solid base thanks to input from YA, and hopes to continue to farm at the property for the foreseeable future.

The BCLMP is funded by the provincial government, local governments and other funders. The Young Agrarians requested an assessment of financial capacity for the CVRD to help expand the program's reach on Vancouver Island through a North Island Land Matcher role.

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