

# Bill would ease rules for taking some land out of B.C.'s Agricultural Land Reserve

B.C. government is splitting farmland into two zones; In the zone including the North, Interior and Kootenay, the Agricultural Land Commission will be allowed to consider non-farm uses for land

BY ROB SHAW, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 27, 2014



Cattle are fed on a farm north of Fort St. John. Under changes proposed for the Agricultural Land Reserve, farmers in the North, Kootenay and Interior regions will have more flexibility to use non-arable parts of their farm for other businesses.

**Photograph by:** Ward Perrin, VANCOUVER SUN

VICTORIA — The B.C. government will relax rules for farmland in the Interior and North under changes to the Agricultural Land Commission introduced in the legislature Thursday.

"The agency was created 40 years ago," said Bill Bennett, the minister in charge of the core review that spent months reviewing the Agricultural Land Reserve. "These are probably the most significant changes that have ever been made to it."

Bennett said he will split the agricultural land reserve into two administrative regions, including one that encompasses the Interior, Kootenay and North regions.

In the northern region, to be called **Zone 2**, ALC commissioners will be allowed to consider non-agricultural purposes, be they economic, cultural or social, when deciding whether something can be developed on protected farmland, said Bennett.

That region holds almost 90 per cent of ALR land, but due to weather, short seasons and water sources, produces just 15 per cent of farm revenues in the province.

"There is some land in the agricultural land reserve that is useless to agriculture ... it's land that got trapped in the reserve 40 years ago when the reserve was created and the boundaries were drawn quite roughly in rural regions," said Bennett.

There will still be a mandate to protect and preserve viable farmland in the Kootenay and North, but the changes will allow more flexibility for farmers to use the land for other businesses, he said. Those could include food processing facilities, Bennett said.

Existing guidelines to preserve agricultural land will continue to apply for Zone 1 — Vancouver Island, South Coast and Okanagan — which produces 85 per cent of agricultural revenue and where land is in greater demand and under development pressures.

The government's proposed changes to the ALR have been controversial since a leaked document last November appeared to show cabinet considering dismantling the commission and allowing the B.C. Oil and Gas Commission to take over land-use decisions.

The Liberal government sharply denied the move, saying it was only an option that was not pursued.

But the NDP, which created the ALR during the Dave Barrett government of the mid 1970s, capitalized on the uncertainty to launch a series of rallies throughout B.C. to "save" farmland.

Bennett said the changes will retain the independence of the commission to make decisions about farmland usage outside of government.

NDP agriculture critic Nicholas Simons said the government is needlessly changing what had been strong public policy on farmland.

"This is not about helping farmers this is about trying to make two zones out of what was one provincial resource," he said. "The agricultural land was set aside for the people of the province, not just for that day 40 years ago, but for our generation, future generations. Once you start messing with that you open it up to speculation."

The danger is that land speculators will buy up farmland in the ALC thinking the government has a "transitory policy" that will change and open up development in the future, he said.

The proposed law would also make it easier for B.C. farmers — who are on average 55.7 years old — to stay on their land by allowing home-based businesses or other economic opportunities outside farming, said Bennett.

Bennett highlighted the case of a couple in their early 70s in rural B.C. who started a market garden and wanted to retire after 30 years and subdivide a small piece of rocky, non-arable land for their daughter to live on.

"The land was in the ALR and the answer was no," said Bennett. "That's, to me, wrong."

That's hugely important to farmers, said Faye Street, general manager of the Kootenay Livestock Association.

Street said her two sons are accomplished ranchers but think it would be crazy to take over the family ranch with existing restrictions. The changes would let them use rocky land that can't be farmed for other businesses that could help bring in money.

"I don't care if my children want to build a prison on that land, or a motel on that land, as long as their application shows me they are going to enhance the agricultural portion of that land with that application," she said. "We have to make some economic changes in order to establish the ability for our young people to keep producing food."

Street credited Bennett, Agriculture Minister Pat Pimm and Lands Minister Steve Thomson for tackling the controversial changes and "having the three B's in the male anatomy to get this done, starting at the brain, the backbone and work your way down."

Rhonda Driediger, chair of the B.C. Agriculture Council, said the changes will reduce restrictions and allow farmers to be more progressive.

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