



Cultivating Common Ground

A farm tour brings together growers, government and ag advisors to foster connection, open dialogue and champion the role of agriculture in growing communities.

BY MYRNA STARK LEADER

On a cool, early April day, local elected officials and municipal staff from several Okanagan communities—Penticton, Spallumcheen, Naramata and West Kelowna—are at Deep Brar's farm. The Summerland farmer shows them the impact of a local road improvement next to his peach block.

"I can talk about the disengagement with councils and staff, and how it directly affects me, because this road is beautiful. It's new. However, it was about three feet lower before that, and on that corner, it was about four and a half, five feet lower," Brar says to the group.

Although he doesn't have scientific proof, the raised road has created a frost pocket leaving his best trees cold-damaged, an economic loss to his business. It's also made his existing deer fencing useless.

The tour has been organized by the Cross-Commodity Leadership Support Project to open lines of communication to cultivate a closer relationship between growers,

elected and non-elected leaders, plus others who support agriculture like provincial agrologists. Project lead Kellie Garcia sees it as an important way to build community.

"There is value in bringing together people from different groups to make connections, strengthen relationships, learn from each other through productive and respectful discussion and hopefully come up with solutions or opportunities to collaborate," she says.

Brar is no stranger to community building. He's VP of the BC Fruit Growers' Association, a director on the Fruit and Vegetable Growers of Canada board, and a representative on the National Labour Committee.

After earning a biology degree and two years working at the Summerland Research and Development Centre of Agriculture and AgriFood Canada, Brar's dad offered him first dibs on his 20 acres if Brar wanted to farm. Since then, Brarstar Orchards has grown to 160 acres. Brar says his father modelled community.

"At one point, there were 26 of us living in that small house," he says,

while directing the group to look at the modest home. "Newcomers from India needed somewhere to get their footing in this new country. I'm super proud of what my dad did to offer them a landing place and those people have gone on to success."

Bridging the urban-rural divide

If local farms and food production are critical to food security, fostering greater respect and greater support for those growing it is required. These two elements are foundational to the definition of community. Far from only financial support, it's about creating a shared understanding and advocating to keep farming top of mind in decision making, particularly as the Okanagan sees more new residents.

As one of the fastest-growing cities in Canada, Kelowna is attracting younger people, folks from larger urban centres like Toronto and Vancouver as well as immigrants. Diversity adds vibrancy, new ideas, businesses and supports the economy, but newcomers don't necessarily arrive with local agricultural knowledge.



Mary McDermott of Township 7 Winery spoke about the uncertainty around a new neighbouring residential development.



VOICES FROM THE TOUR

Ideas to support agriculture:

- Share an overview of the local agriculture sector with new elected officials and staff
- Hold more informal meetings between growers and municipal/regional staff/councils
- Bridge the gap between day-to-day on-farm practices, policies and regulations; simplify or remove red tape
- Increase policy continuity across different levels of government
- Create a dedicated committee focused on agriculture and economic development across municipalities and regional areas
- Improve how concerns from farm associations are communicated to municipal councils and regional districts
- Educate realtors so they can better inform newcomers about local agriculture



Consider B.C.'s Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). It was established over 50 years ago in 1973, to protect and regulate what can and can't be done on farmland, not something the average newcomer likely knows.

Instead, farmers are more likely to face criticism about standard on-farm practices like spraying, burning or the use of helicopters.

"When we hear that we don't pay enough in taxes, we don't pay enough in water, we don't pay enough in whatever, it really affects us as a farmer," Brar says to the tour group.

"I feel like I'm being let down. If I had to pay a residential tax rate on all our acreage, goodbye farming. I will not farm. I will pull this all out and leave it empty and sell it to whoever wants it, because I can't. It's not complaining. It's a fact."

Decisionmakers' priorities, actions and policies are influenced by the public's priorities. With nine percent of Okanagan land within the ALR, farmers aren't the majority.

Growing uncertainty in what have previously been stable economic and geopolitical systems moves issues like affordability, housing, healthcare, education and community safety higher on the community's priority scale, pushing agriculture and viticulture lower. This, despite the growing awareness of the need for greater local food security.

On the Naramata Bench, a new housing development is planned on the slope above Mary McDermott's vineyard. Family-owned Township 7 Vineyards and Winery has been here over 20 years.

Understanding the challenges faced by tree fruit growers came from seeing an orchard first-hand.

Mary wonders aloud to the same tour group how water run-off from the development will affect her vines and winery. However, her immediate concerns are hoping her vines rebound from winter damage and wishing for a busier tourism season than the past two years.

She shares how community is being built through business-to-business support.

"B.C. is a small [wine] industry," she says to the group. "We bought new vines from Washington State, and the company was on it, and got the vines here March 18, [to avoid any potential U.S. tariff] and they're storing them for us at no charge until we need them."

A growing alliance

Over the past few years, farmer-based organizations have also been coming together, forming closer bonds following some hard Okanagan growing seasons and shifts in supports—like the end to the BC Tree Fruits Cooperative.

These challenges have sparked a renewed focus on collaboration, with groups like the BC Cherry Association, BC Wine Grape Council, BC Grapegrowers' Association, and BC Fruit Growers' Association coming together through the Cross-Commodity Leadership Support Project.

In a similar spirit of unity, Summer 2024 saw the formation of the BC Wine Grape Industry Task Force, bringing together the five industry groups (BC Wine Grape Council, Wine Growers BC, BC Grape Growers' Association, BC Wine Authority, Wine Island Growers Association) plus winery owners, growers and key industry stakeholders.



Penticton Mayor Julius Bloomfield speaks to bus tour participants while Summerland Mayor Doug Holmes looks on [left]. Deep Brar, owner of Brarstar Orchards outlines some of the many challenges of farming in the Okanagan and B.C. in general.

The two-year initiative aims to unite the groups to create a collaborative strategy to shape the future of the industry.

B.C.'s Minister of Agriculture and Food Lana Popham says farmers know that working together makes everyone stronger.

"Helping each other is second nature to farmers," says Popham. "We see it every year during harvest season, in times of emergency, and as we work with them to develop programs to support farm businesses and our province's food security. We need their ideas and experience to provide programs that work."

Penticton's mayor, Julius Bloomfield, appreciated the tour, but

found the round table discussion among tour participants at the end of the day most valuable.

"We talked about the inconsistency of regulations for farm workers at different levels of government," he says. "Having that better understanding helps local politicians better advocate on behalf of farmers, locally and more important to the provincial government who often has the dollars."

West Kelowna city councillor Tasha Da Silva also had takeaways from the event, like the need to support the local economy by making agritourism easier, to support diversification and create resilience in vine and farm businesses.

"We also have a road that we are planning in a neighbourhood where there is agriculture, so it was a reminder to me of the need to speak with our local farmers when we are creating new infrastructure and working to maintain that balance between urban and rural needs, which takes open dialogue and collaboration."

Regional agrologist Lindsay Hainstock with the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture and Food summed up the power and promise of community.

"If we can find common ground, or where we can collaborate, we are more likely to find solutions that work for the whole community." ■

