

# Farmers rally to save local food

by JACK KNOX *Times Colonist* 18 April 2009 [jknox@tc.canwest.com](mailto:jknox@tc.canwest.com)

With a choir of rockspitting pigs — who knew they like to chew rocks? — grunting in the background, Tom Henry put down the feed bag long enough to deliver a brief, bleak assessment of the state of farming on Vancouver Island:

BRUCE STOTESBURY, *TIMES COLONIST*

“There are two powerful forces at work, and they’re opposing,” he said. On one side is the rising popularity of locally grown food. On the other is the alarming collapse of local agriculture. “It’s a race.”

Which is why farmers will rally at the legislature today, hoping to push food and farming onto the political agenda.

Tom Henry and Violaine Mitchell are typical in many ways. The Metchosin farmers work hard, work smart and still lose their shirts. They grow 3,000 bales of hay, have 100 lambs on the ground this spring and sell 2,000 pounds of holly at Christmas, mostly to Thrifty Foods. In a barn are 27 20-kilo pails of harvest wheat that Henry has just readied for Victoria’s Wildfire Bakery. Up-Island are the fields that produce 25 tonnes of milling wheat, mostly red fife. The 160 pigs they grow each year are Berkshires, a heritage breed known for their rich, fatty meat. These are niche products — all that is left for small B.C. producers in a world of cheap Chinese carrots and industrial-scale commodity farms.

Last year, they grossed \$68,000 from a farm that cost \$83,000 to run. OK, a big tractor bill skewed the numbers. “If it doesn’t break down this year, maybe we’ll make some money,” Henry says. Problem is, something always breaks down on a farm. So, like most small producers, they rely on off-farm income: She’s publisher and he’s editor of *Small Farm Canada* magazine. She also works with a Bill Gates-funded non-profit agency doing Third World immunization work.

At least the latter job taught her about vaccinations, which helped as she gave an injured piglet a shot of antibiotics yesterday. It’s the sort of thing Vancouver Island farmers learn to do on their own; a veterinarian’s visit can cost more than an animal is worth — that is, if you can find a vet who knows how to treat livestock.

That’s just one example of what Henry calls the “systemic collapse” of

local agriculture. The knowledge base is dying, the network of services — everything from professional castrators to fence builders to neighbours with whom to share equipment — unravelling. Sheep are sheared by a flower merchant who does it on the side. Just one feed company remains.

There’s no livestock auction, and only a limited number of livestock movers. New licensing rules mean pigs must be hauled to Courtenay or Chilliwack for slaughter. Lambs can at least be killed locally, but even that slaughterhouse is being run by a guy in his 70s who wants out.

Those licensing regulations are typical of the disconnect between government and farmers. Implemented a couple of years ago, the one-size-fits-all meat-inspection rules might make sense when applied to industrial-scale agriculture, but are like a death sentence to small producers. In consequence, the 50-chicken flocks typical of rural areas have disappeared. So has the guy who used to sell you a side of beef or farm-fresh eggs. This is what happens when decisions are made by a generation of well-meaning but unknowing politicians and bureaucrats who have grown up without mud on their gumboots: red tape grows, good soil disappears from the Agricultural Land Reserve, legitimate farmers lose property-tax status, and predators are allowed to devour crops. (“We lost two acres of red fife to geese,” said a rueful Mitchell.)

Even before those stringent meat-inspection rules arrived in 2007, Vancouver Island livestock numbers were in decline: The number of farms with beef cattle fell from 460 to 353 between 2001 and 2006. Sheep farms fell from 125 to



Farmers Tom Henry and Violaine Mitchell bottle-feed abandoned lambs. “There are real consequences to the loss of [local] farming,” says Henry.

117, dairy farms from 96 to 74. The poultry industry has been shrinking since Langford’s Lilydale processing plant closed in 1999. The total area farmed on Vancouver Island dropped to 54,000 hectares from 60,000 between 2001 and 2006.

Some make a profit, particularly very small-scale market gardeners. “You can take two acres and a \$3,000 Honda rototiller and make \$10,000 to \$20,000 off it,” Henry said. Problem is, that’s all you can make. Market gardeners are typically young women who quit after five or six years, knowing they’ll never earn enough to live. “It’s called the \$10,000 ghetto.”

And that’s the good news. That, despite all our professed devotion to good, fresh, locally produced, healthy food, is the reality of local agriculture.

Henry says he doesn’t like to complain, which is why he refers to this morning’s gathering at the legislature as a rally, not a protest. But jeez, the people in power have to think about how their actions affect the food we eat and the people who grow it. “We want to be in the discourse more often,” Henry says. “We want agriculture to be taken more seriously.”

“There are real consequences to the loss of farming. Please pay attention.”