

The Agricultural Industry

► What factors limit agriculture in British Columbia?

The agricultural industry in British Columbia has been in decline since improved transportation and storage made it cheaper to import foods than to produce them locally. In recent years, however, factors such as increased transportation costs have highlighted the benefits of local agricultural production.

The Business of Farming

Although only 1.1 percent of British Columbia's land area is considered prime **arable** and about 15 percent is potentially arable, agriculture has continued here since the Hudson's Bay Company encouraged farming on Vancouver Island. The province's geography and climate have allowed for a broad range of agricultural activities. The hot, dry climate of the Okanagan is ideal for orchards and vineyards. The range lands of the central interior are used for cattle ranching, and the Peace River valley for grain farming. The fertile Fraser Valley is suited to the **intensive farming** of vegetables, poultry, and dairy cattle.

Farming was traditionally a small-scale family business in British Columbia, but by the 1990s, agriculture became much more of a big business. The hot-house industry has become a major producer of tomatoes and cucumbers for the expanding urban markets of the lower mainland and southern Vancouver Island. Recently the emphasis on organic foods and local produce has revitalized many family farms in the province.

Land-Use Issues

Areas in British Columbia that are ideally suited to agriculture are also ideal for settlement, and they often become centres of high population and growth. This trend often leads to conflict over how land should be used, as industrial and residential development place pressure on rural areas. In British Columbia, people realized that the province's already limited agricultural land was shrinking. The situation was most serious in the Lower Fraser Valley, the Okanagan Valley, and on southeastern Vancouver Island.

In 1973, rising public concern over the loss of farmland led the provincial government to take action. It passed a law establishing an **Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR)**, designed to protect fertile land from development. The Agricultural Land Commission, a Crown agency, was placed in charge.

Did You Know...

Emu, ostrich, and rhea are raised in British Columbia, providing products such as meat, leather, oil, feathers, and eggshells.

arable capable of being used for agriculture

intensive farming achieving a high yield from a small growing area

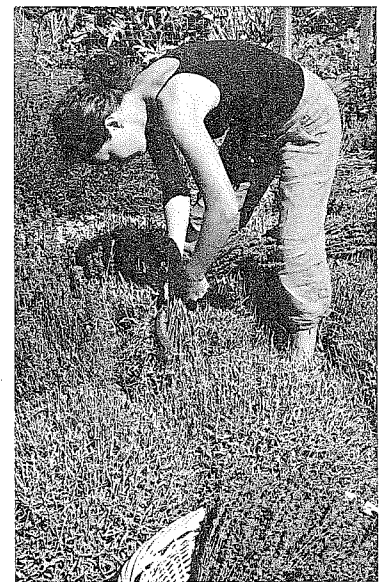


FIGURE 9-22 Harvesting lavender on a farm on Vancouver Island. Lavender has many uses—in teas, as an essential oil, and in cooking. It is also used in honey production. Why might a product with such diversity be a good choice for small farms?

Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR)
an act that provides for protection of farmland

Both private and public lands may fall within the ALR, and they may be forested, farmed, or unused. The ALR also protects land that has the *potential* for use as farmland. This means that land-use decisions in the future will be affected as new methods of irrigation, pest management, and fertilization are developed.

Under the act, farmlands can be converted to other uses, such as golf courses, and still remain in the ALR. In this case, it must be shown that the land can eventually be used again for farming. Some people oppose this measure, seeing it as a weakening of the act.

Today, the Georgia Basin and the Okanagan Valley are among the fastest-growing regions in Canada. The Georgia Basin makes up only 3 percent of British Columbia's land area, but more than two-thirds of its population lives there. Mountain slopes, water, and border lines restrict expansion in these areas. This places increasing pressure on land that is being used for agriculture, and harder decisions will have to be made in the future.

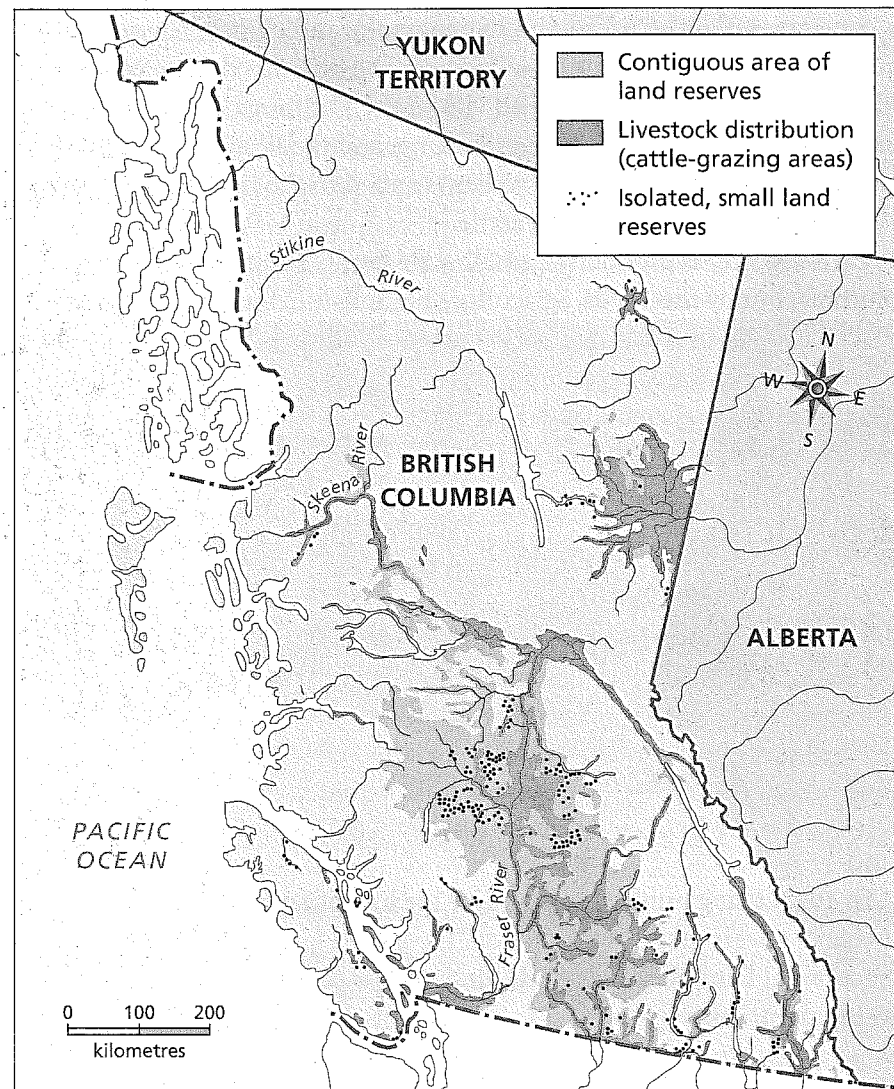


FIGURE 9-23 The Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) covers more than 4.7 million hectares. Some ALR blocks cover thousands of hectares, while others are small areas. How might the ALR affect the growth of urban areas in the future?

Municipal Governments and Land-Use Decisions

Municipal governments are very concerned with land use issues. As their communities grow, elected officials must monitor and regulate land used for homes, businesses, or farming.

While the Agricultural Land Commission is responsible for the administration of the ALR, municipal governments must make decisions regarding agricultural land use and growth within their communities. Changes in policies are often led by the mayor, an elected official who serves a term of three years.

Working with the Commission, municipal governments process all applications affecting agricultural lands. These applications may include requests to take away soil, or to use the land for non-farming activities, such as recreation. Applications must be made first through the municipal government, which will review the application. If the application goes against local **bylaws**, this must first be considered. Land development and zoning in municipalities is controlled by bylaws. They can be adopted or changed by the municipality's council through a procedure of readings, discussions, and votes. If it is a land-use bylaw, there must also be a public hearing.

bylaw a law made by a municipal government, rather than by the legislature

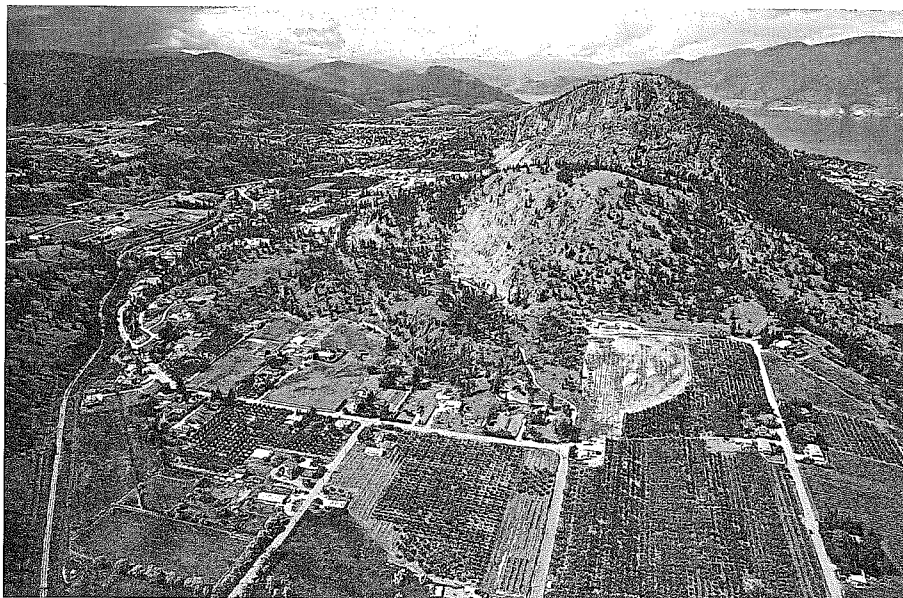


FIGURE 9-24 Farmland in the Okanagan Valley faces increasing pressure from population growth and development. What evidence can you find in this image that shows the geographical restrictions on farmland in this area? Is this typical of British Columbia?

ACTIVITIES

1. What changes in agriculture have occurred in British Columbia in the past 50 years? What changes can you see occurring in the next 50 years? Explain.
2. Farmers' markets have grown in British Columbia in response to the demand for more local and organic produce. How do these markets benefit the farmer and the local community?

Judgements

3. British Columbia's Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) supports farmers in the sustainable use of land and water. Should the government make programs like EFP compulsory for those involved in agriculture? Explain.
4. Find out the status of the ALR in your region. Have any lands been removed? If so, for what purpose?