

2.2 Focus Group Consultations

During the course of the project, there were three completed focus group consultations. These sessions were conducted to gain input on specific topics of interest to the project manager. These focus groups and their objectives were as follows:

- **Agriculture Advisory Committee (Peace River Regional District):** the objective of this session was to gather input from the various producer group representatives on specific issues (general, or area specific) facing the agricultural sector, and recommendations on addressing those issues.
- **Agricultural Land Commission:** the objective of this session was to gain insight and advice for development of the Rural Plan within the context of land-use issues in the Peace region, and policy/regulatory developments concerning the Agriculture Land Reserve Act.
- **Upper Halfway River Community Association:** the objective of this session was to gather input on community land-use and development issues and needs; the meeting was undertaken because this remote area of the Regional District had not been adequately represented at other community workshops.
- **Provincial Inter-agency Focus Group:** the objective of this session was to gather input from various provincial government agencies who were considered to have particular expertise or information to share on land-use, resource management and/or community development issues of interest and concern to rural communities; two attempts were made by the project manager to organize this session, however due to lack of sufficient confirmation of attendance, this focus group did not proceed as planned; instead, an information package was prepared for the invited representatives to respond at a later date; the package included background information, questionnaire, and public issues summary.



Focus-group meeting with Halfway Community Assoc. members

2.2 (a) PRRD Agriculture Advisory Committee

Date: April 29, 2003

Location: Meeting Room, Peace River Regional District Office

The meeting began with a presentation by Bruce Simard on the objectives of the Rural Plan, and its emphasis on the needs of the agricultural sector. Reg Whiten then provided an overview of the Rural Dialogue process, and the agenda for the AAC focus group. As well, interest was expressed in obtaining the AAC's input on the Agricultural Land Commission.

Discussion Questions

What comments, priority issues and recommendations should the PRRD make to Agriculture Land Commission?

AAC Members Responses:

- Industrial use (oil and gas) water resources e.g. aquifers, coal bed, and Pine River protection
- Inconsistent boundaries for the ALR
- Conflicting land uses e.g. organic vs. industrial (O/G)
- Control over adjacent uses
- Rural residential settlement (loss of farmland)
- Need for regional planning to consider watershed impacts
- Pre-tenure land sales review (conventional vs. CBM) – by local and regional government – drilling depth disclosure?
- Lack of coordination of land use regulations and planning processes (LRMP / CRMP)

Following the above discussion on the ALC, the Committee was divided into three groups and asked to identify issues and needs relevant to the agricultural industry. These can be summarized according to the following categories:

Agricultural Sector Viability & Rural Development

- Access to facilities needed
- Processing options need to be investigated i.e. Bison processing, bio-diesel
- Need more focus on innovation in agriculture – need research and development support and agricultural products
- Losing farmland – ¼ section non-farmers
- Challenge of cheap food policy – re: Federal Trade Policy – allowing imports
- No/low return on investment
- Farmers getting older – no young farmers coming
- Potential split assessments/classification – residential/farm/etc.
- Every producer will eventually need to complete environmental farm plans
- Current over-regulation related to chemical and pesticides
- Need for balance between environmental stewardship and protection of farm economic viability and affordability
- Need for policies that protect the ability & flexibility of farmers to farm (right-to-farm)

Land Use Planning

- Planning needs to consider agricultural community
- Potentially too many subdivisions within 1½ hour commuting distance of urban centres
- Every type of use allowed with small rural communities – compatible or not
- Manage/Consider impacts of rural residential development near farming operations – minimize potential conflict
- Subdivision – at least 1 or 2, 10 acre parcels per ¼ section
- Is there enough land for rural communities to grow? i.e. housing for seniors; young families
- Potential and current BC Assessments – Classification for assessment purposes – tax differences from EFP
- Plans for development for coal bed methane; must consider impacts from surface disturbance, noise, produced water
- Current ALR boundaries – inconsistent and confusing, to be reviewed by ALC
- Current lack of government coordination of all/many land use regulations and plan (EF Plans, LRMP, Crown Range Management Plans, and need more coordination and consultation about regulations)
- Conflicting land use a problem i.e. Organic farm surrounded by Industry use
- There is inadequate or no control over adjacent land uses
- Hunting and wildlife a concern – control over access and concern with animal populations i.e. crop damage and loss
- Need for animal wildlife management

Agricultural Development/Regulatory Approvals

- Access concerns – hunting and recreational use (ATV, Snowmobiles) , including vandalism, with machinery being shot up, trucks doing donuts on fields etc.
- Need better enforcement – more people (conservation officers, police)
- Fines that portions of go back to the farmer that suffered the damage (compensation)
- Recognize the value of hunting to control wildlife populations (but need hunter education)

Water Resource Management/Environment

- Must consider protection of water sources
- That new subdivisions consider proper sewage management
- Lack of groundwater information; need for registration of water wells?
- Coal bed methane extraction – impacts from water use and disposal
- Potential implications of diversion of natural water courses – highway, rural, and land owners
- Control, monitoring, downstream flooding
- Current planned water course run off etc – Management of erosion – watershed level
- Aquifer protection – underground protection of shared water resources;
- Groundwater information - need for identification of major aquifers
- Need volume use control and limited/licensing for commercial extraction that where it might impact on farm water supplies
- Keep Canada's autonomy in everything, not just commodities (i.e. US water exports?)
- Establish need for policy over water protection /control of resource; including potable water; water for hydro; water control for irrigation
- Concern with drilling through underground water and contamination possibility
How to handle injection of salt or other water in farming areas?
- Support for Environment Farm Plans – need policy

- Support of licensing of water wells – benefit to owner from increased protection - aquifers on private lands

Transportation

- Policies needed so that new subdivisions make use of existing roads as much as possible
- Road design needs to accommodate wide farm equipment
- Provincial Government needs to allocate sufficient money to maintain and improve roads
- Current roads must be improved, constructed and maintained to service rural areas
- Current ditches – right-of-ways need regular weed control, erosion protection, & brushing
- Potential coordination of road networking systems (improved planning)

Education, Technical Assistance & Research

- Lack of agricultural education or awareness by urbanites; need for information/education on where the public's food comes from; tied to support for farms in general because they are unaware of how important farming is limited by access & distance to markets
- As government funding for research drops off – How can we support continued research in the agricultural industry?
- Don't want to rely on commercial research that the farmer still pays for i.e. Monsanto etc; how do Canadian grain producers compete with subsidized crops in US and Europe?

2.2 (b) Agricultural Land Commission

Location: PRRD Boardroom, Peace River Regional District Office

Date: Apr. 29, 2003

Attendance: ALC Commissioners: John Kendrew, Frank Reade; ALC Planner: Marion Jamieson; PRRD: Bruce Simard, Debbie Kunz, Carla Eaton; B.C. Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries & Food: Jim Forbes; InterraPlan Inc.- Reg Whiten,

This focus group session was aimed at exchanging information on the Rural Plan process, and to solicit advice from the ALC Board representatives on what they would like to see emphasized in the plan. The following is a series of comments and suggestions for helping to guide development of the Rural Plan:

- the planning exercise will be a big help to ALC; it is important to consider both small-scale and large or mainstream farm operations; role of OGC will be to gather additional input – agricultural strategy will include Agriculture GIS overview with focus on rural areas, not fringe areas;
- PRRD will consider population pressure, productivity (plotting areas of use) to create community profile and mapping inventory of farm infrastructure, support services/transportation, processing, agricultural outlets e.g. AgriCore, fertilizer plant (semi industrial);
- policies should be developed how best to locate sites, and considering issues of public safety, distances, emissions, environmental concerns; the Plan should recognize potential of new agricultural enterprise, and how to respond to short term agricultural issues (e.g. infestation of pests); there is a need for delineation of identifiable use under certain conditions (e.g. temporary, Crown, industrial permits)
- edge planning (conceptualize): is it relevant for planning around small rural communities? consider rural commuting and out-migration e.g. use of buffers, paved road access;
- lot size buffering (1/4 sect); should be trying to minimize number of subdivisions;
- communal approach for rural communities; recognize subdivision, must consider support services/infrastructure/schools (change in school funding formula, may be new opportunity to support rural schools with per head funding)
- the ALC desires “ rural settlements”, not “ rural sprawl”
- defining delegation is a key objective
- changes to Rural Plan (adopted to ALR) on agricultural land have to be checked for consistency
- dealing with requests outside plan will depend upon thoroughness of the Plan (the “tighter the plan, the easier it is for the ALC to delegate decisions, and don’t have return to ALC for approval”).

In its rural plan, the ALC representatives asked that the PRRD consider some of the following criteria and issues:

- appropriate lot size for type of agricultural viability (e.g., cow/calf sections)
- supportive principles in the ALR
- agricultural zoning designations (fewer is better)
- permitted uses (at OCP level -- rural bylaw)
- second dwelling for farm help depending on farm operation e.g. Upper Halfway 'communal farm'
- definition of agriculture and "farm practices definition"; what is meant by value-added production;
- use of Blue and Green zone as template for rural area-fringe areas; OCP's are more integrated
- background info on non-farm uses: demographics, economic profile, dealing with new uses that might be considered for accommodation; future service needs/demand and supply based on cost analysis (ALR vs. non-farm)
- water quality & supply issues i.e. relationship to the Drinking Water Protection Act for regulation of source protection, monitoring and supply development (e.g. through PFRA); whether landowners will have to hold water licenses for their own use, tank loaders, or treatment system; and associated - liability issues;
- water allocation issues; how the plan will fit within broader watershed planning, and how will relationship be defined with Northern Heath Authority (safety of water, quantity)

Recommendations

- leave land retained in ALR for non-farm uses; its easier to deal as permitted use rather than non-exclusion
- consider how deregulated ALR might expand opportunities for more economic uses; e.g., agr. tourism
- don't want to see fragmentation; don't want 'donut effect' - can deal better with the boundaries
- prefer to consider how land can be traded (some areas left out); e.g., Lone Prairie
- provide exclusion for residential (negotiate criteria for non-farm use)
- preference to proposals that are well supported and justified; not always related to topography/soil type; may be location
- scoping using criteria/logical characteristics, including site selection; develop criteria/amend uses; can be done with a delegation agreement
- in responding to new opportunities, have forward thinking approach, but respond to short term with incentives/disincentives
- subdivisions and use of restrictive covenants; flexibility is needed
- amalgamate other titles (not more parcels – units have to be viable)
- parents/daughter needs separate title (not ¼ sec.) children want residential purchase of property; need succession plan, traditional mortgages are not always available; alternative may be Family Credit Farm Loan (parents hold mortgage); Ag. Committee should hold information workshops and provide educational resources on this topic
- work with neighboring properties to add new land
- environmental farms planning is being implemented, so there has to be consistency
- for non-farm uses, have to consider what's "too large"? e.g. on 1/4 sec., 2 oilfield contractors have expanded beyond home-based business (menu of permitted uses including limits on outside storage if there are no limits in OCPs, # of parking, # sq. ft., # employees, # storage); in blue area (default to local zoning); tax assessments for commercial activities.

2.2 (c) Upper Halfway Community Association

Date: Nov. 25, 2003

Location: Upper Halfway Community School

Attendance:

Community Association Directors: Margrit Weitzel, Denise Simpson, David Simpson, Eckbert Weitzel

Facilitator: Reg Whiten, InterraPlan Inc.

The meeting began with an overview of the Regional District's Rural Plan initiative (goals, objectives, process) and the public consultation phase. It was mentioned that because there was not a significant turnout at the Wonowon meeting in April, Chair Karen Goodings recommended that a follow-up meeting be conducted with representatives of the Upper Halfway community to better understand the issues and issues. On behalf of the PRRD, I expressed appreciation to the Upper Halfway Association community directors for taking time to participate in a discussion.

Comments & Questions

Plan Boundaries

A question was asked about the plan area (green zone) boundaries and whether or not the Federal Ranch, Graham River farms and Crying Girl private properties were also incorporated to the west of the Upper Halfway community. We reviewed the small-scale map, and I explained that it was my understanding that all rural areas within the Upper Halfway vicinity were to be considered in this plan.

Priority Issues

A discussion then followed which covered a range of topics on the economic, social, environmental, community issues and needs. The following is a summary of those points, in relative order of priority to community members.

Security of Range Tenures

It was emphasized that the livestock industry is the backbone of the Upper Halfway economy and that "most operations in the area would most operations in the area would not be economically viable cattle ranches if it wasn't for the extensive Crown grazing tenure". There may, in fact, be significant new opportunities for local expansion in the sector as the industry recovers from recent market problems.

It is essential that existing grazing tenures be secured, and it is not clear how the government's new "Working Forest" policy initiative which favours the forest industry might impact on use and management of these range tenures. Another related issue, is the limited nature of private land availability in the Upper Halfway area; the PRRD should be working with provincial Lands department to make more arable Crown land available for expansion of existing cattle operations.

Oil & Gas Development

Residents in the Upper Halfway recognize that oil & gas development is here to stay, but there are several concerns residents have that are related to air quality and human health, particularly given the geography of the valley and prevailing winds that blow through.

(a) H₂S Gas wells in some locations are up to 600 m. near residences, and causes foul odours and possible health problems – suggest that setbacks of at least 1000 m. from residences should be put in place, and subject to assessment of land conditions (topography, wind direction); also at least 80 m from water courses to avoid contamination.

(b) Coal Bed Methane is a significant concern, particularly as it relates to “groundwater sources which might be severely impacted by intensive drilling in the area”. At present, the Valley has very good springs that residences want to see protected.

(c) Pre-tenure Consultation is something that people would like to see as surface rights are sold when landowners don't have sufficient knowledge of possible impacts, or community issues; much more public consultation needs to be done, especially as it relates to new types of development.

Pig Farm Air & Water Quality

The Maccabee pig farm on 117 Rd. is considered to be a serious concern of residents who live in close proximity to that operation. Residents find there are excessive smells from this operation due to its location in the valley and prevailing winds that carry the odours to nearby residences.

There is also a question about the number of residences and family units permitted on agricultural lands. The principal concern has to do large numbers of people (approximately 100) on the Maccabee farm and whether the capacity of the sewage system is adequate because runoff into the River may be occurring and needs to be assessed. One Director mentioned that in Alberta there is a limit on the number of families based on the agricultural title.

In response, I referred to the 2001 Zoning Bylaw and pointed out that on “large agricultural holdings” that either a two single-family or one two-family dwellings are permitted but not both. In the North Peace Plan, I pointed out that there is also a land-use designation for “communal farm” with agricultural enterprise as a principal use with six or more dwellings permitted along with other associated community facilities. Regarding sewage systems, I mentioned that the Northern Health Authority has the authority to approve and regulate this and further questions on this matter could be taken up with area's Environmental Health Officer.

The view of the association is that “environmental concerns regarding pig manure and residential sewage systems from a community of the size of Maccabee should be assessed and addressed by the proper authorities. This is very important because the water supply at the Halfway Reserve comes from the Halfway River downstream from this farm.”

Traffic and Roads

Traffic speeds from O/G industry personnel are often excessive on the 117 Rd. including in front of the school/community centre; there is no enforcement, and periodic patrols are needed. The seal-coating preparation from Alaska Highway to the Reserve is not yet completed, and may be as far as its going to go but would like gyp seal to go as far as school; also some problems with former standards e.g. from turnoff of the Alaska Highway to km 26, ditches are too steep and concrete curbs needed when upgrading is done on the 117 Rd. Road improvements needed on sections of road that have been eroded including km 2 on the Simpson Rd., km 45 (Goathill), and km 49 next to George Gienie's ranch(all on Road 117).

Emergency Services

Ambulance services from the Upper Halfway takes 1 hr. 40 min, and is much improved service; there is some need for advance training in Level 2 & 3 First Aid/CPR for residents and there would likely be interest in joint training with the Halfway River First Nation.

The 911 numbering system is working O.K. but there was no consultation in changing of names e.g. Highland Subdivision is known as the Halfway/Graham Subdivision.

There is a need for emergency response plan in the community as there have been some near disasters in recent years: e.g. a H₂S well near Ludwig's farm 4 yrs ago caught fire and blew up; "the public's protection is a farce, and luckily people have not been killed"; after trying to get assistance from the BC government, the community contacted the National Energy Board and there was a rapid response for clean-up

Pipelines in the area are getting older and though supposed to be tested yearly, it's not known how long they'll hold up; another pipeline was exposed during the flooding of a few years ago and could have caused another disaster; more monitoring of pipelines needs to be done, especially under streams and rivers.

Another major issue in these plans has to do with the protection of livestock; emergency response plans have to consider the "full agriculture/livelihood operation of the residents" and not just evacuation; the safety catchment area has to be extended to account for livestock that can also be impacted during an emergency.

Heritage

There are several historical sites in the area which should be recognized; these include the Geek homestead (oldest cabin); the NWMP (North-West Mounted) Police trail which traverses the community centre (some good research, and trail identification needs to be done); the community also has numerous fossils like up in the Crying Girl Prairie area; local, traditional names of sites in the area should also be recorded and preserved (e.g. Graham River was known as South Fork; Cameron River was North Fork; Chowade River was Stoney Creek; and Colt Creek was Deadman Ck.

Community Services

Most people use dial-up Internet with NW Tel; this service is often interrupted and it would eventually be good to have High Speed Internet in the area. NorthWesTel is the company providing all telecommunication services in the area, including cell coverage which is

considered good. It was further noted that NorthWesTel customers cannot subscribe to other long distance service providers which is a disadvantage.

Natural gas service would benefit the community; Local telephone calling to FSJ would also be welcomed as it is currently in places like Buick Ck.

Resource Management

Some more streamlining of permit system for cutting rails, firewood would be an improvement for residents and cattlemen in the area.

With cutbacks to government, there is only 1 Game warden for the Ft.St.John; there is no protection and some over-hunting occurs in some areas; people are left to resolve problems on their own and the situation can be dangerous i.e. there is shooting in the Halfway/Graham campground occurring and no monitoring of this situation – more patrols are needed as the area is very close to the community centre.

Economic Diversification

Tourism does have potential, but with the amalgamation of the entire north into one tourism region based out of Prince George, there is not adequate service and promotion of the Upper Halfway area (focus is on Mtns, Lower Mainland zones); the Upper Halfway has potential to expand if had the right amount of support (e.g. NRAHTA – activities include cabin retreat; ranch vacation, horse trail rides