

Legislative Assembly of British Columbia
Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

LUSH Valley Food Action Society [LUSH] is a staffed registered non-profit and has been working in the field of food security for 9 years. LUSH is recognized by VIHA as the HUB of North Vancouver Island in food security. We have 100 volunteers and will distribute about 10,000 lbs of rescued fruit and nuts to the disadvantage population of the Comox Valley this year. We are funded by VIHA, Comox Valley Regional District, various grants and community donations.ⁱ

The Comox Valley Affordable Housing Society reported about four health determinants – the interconnectivity of no or too expensive housing, low income, food security and health are clearly evident.

“We cannot solve future health problems solely by providing health care services. Broad determinants of health such as shelter, education, food and income also have a profound effect.”ⁱⁱ

All of North Vancouver Island is experiencing epidemic proportions of diabetes in Indigenous communities resulting from a lack of access to healthy culturally adapted Indigenous foods.

It is of no great surprise that the Comox Valley - with more than 3000 people on the verge of homelessness and 250+ homeless people, high rents, less than 1% vacancy rate and a local economy based mostly on a service industry and agriculture, that food security issues are of great concern.ⁱⁱⁱ The average household income in the Comox Valley is \$59,000 compared to that of BC of \$70,000 and Canada at \$72,000. We earn per household 18% less than the provincial average and 22% less than the average Canadian household. *2007 Financial Post Canadian Demographics*

An individual must make \$17 an hour to rent a two bedroom house – with most jobs paying in the \$10 range you can immediately see a correlation between the lack of money to spend on food and trying not to become homeless. Hard decisions have to be made and usually the rent is paid and Kraft dinner served.

Although Buy Local is an excellent program it is almost redundant in the Comox Valley as most of the food produced here is sold at the farm gate or at the Farmers’ Market and is too costly for a large portion of the population.

The results of poor nutrition in the Comox Valley were highlighted by a UBC report “The Early Child Development Mapping Project” by Joanne Schroeder completed in March 2007:^{iv}

Five areas were assessed in 2004 and then reassessed in 2007 – Physical Health and Well Being, Social Competence, Emotional Maturity, Language and Cognitive Development, and Communication Skills and General Knowledge. The Comox Valley ratings fell in all areas from the previous assessment and were the worst in all of BC. This was mainly due to the lack of affordable housing and access to childcare and nutritious food. When the cost of food rises the price of protein becomes very expensive - protein is necessary for brain growth and development – which is necessary for day to day competency. The results are higher rates of depression, inability to handle stress, and poor performance at school; all of which will contribute to future erratic employment, if employed at all and possibly criminality and addictions. The brain damage can be reversed by access to nutritious foods – if not reversed, the cumulative effects are passed down to their children, and their children’s children ...

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“B.C. farmers produce only 48 per cent of the meat, dairy, fruit and vegetables that we consume, according to a report prepared by the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture. The report, titled B.C.'s Food Self-Reliance, says that the area of farmland with access to irrigation in B.C. would have to increase by nearly 50 per cent by 2025 to provide a healthy diet for all British Columbians.

“Maintaining our current level of food self-reliance in 2025 would require a 30-per-cent increase in agricultural production”. *Vancouver Sun 2007*

In the past, the Comox Valley produced 80% plus of the food consumed in the Comox Valley– now it is less than 10%. The reasons are many:

1. Inability to compete with cheaper foods produced elsewhere and shipped in
2. Our aging farmer population – on the island it is 65 years old – leaving some acreage unfarmed
3. The cost of procuring land – land costs have sky rocketed – a new farmer would have to invest almost \$1 million to begin a farming operation
4. The lack of experienced farm workers
5. In the north, the lack of fertile land able to produce food; greenhouse farming could address this

With skyrocketing fuel prices and carbon taxes, climate changes, the cost of labour – food prices will escalate dramatically in the very near future. Recent highly publicized food scares also underline the need for BC to grow more of its own food.

But it isn't too late to remedy the situation with your help:

1. Introduce non- interest bearing loans through a body similar to BC Housing – to finance new farmers to purchase existing farms and machinery – the grants would be for food producing only - not wine or liquor.

The Loan Body would consist of retired experienced successful farmers who would not only make loan decisions but also mentor new farmers. This body would have representation in local areas as each agricultural area has unique farming method needs.

A change would need to be made to the ALR policy of only one permanent home on the farm plus a trailer or skid shack – remembering that the farm is the farmer's pension fund – the cost of purchasing the farm would be less if the farmer could remain on the farm and benefit from the food produced as well as be a mentor to the new farmer.

2. For existing and new greenhouse farmers – institute no interest loans to convert from coal/wood burning for heating to green heating i.e. geothermal, wind, and solar.

We are in danger of losing an inland fish farming endeavor because of high interest charges and the insistence of Community Futures that this farmer heat with coal for the shoulder months for heating. Costs have risen significantly and with the carbon tax and the banning of coal burning this farmer and other greenhouse farmers are at jeopardy of closing.

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3. A recent marijuana bust in northern BC - land and multiple greenhouses were confiscated and probably the technology to operate them. All of this can be donated to non-profits, communities and reserves to start their own greenhouses and produce local fresh foods.^v

Give LUSH twenty (20) of the confiscated greenhouses and the associated technology and in partnership with VIHA, North Island College and the local Agrologists we can in four years go a long way in making North Island food secure, address health issues and at the same time create the employment so desperately needed in most North Island communities.

4. Institute a moratorium on fertile land being taken out of production for anything, including subdivisions, shopping malls and parking lots.
5. Institute a review of recent ‘Health & Agriculture Ministries’ rules and regulations taking into account our need to keep the farmers we have and not ‘rule’ them out of existence and address the food safety issues. This review should include smaller farmers who will have ideas on how to solve this issue.
6. Designate strategic ‘ecological corridors’ near rivers and streams that are linked with fish habitats to save our fish spawning areas – no logging, no building – with *significant* fines for infringements. It is suggested that those fines be allocated to rejuvenation of streams and rivers that have been damaged.
7. Stop shore line communities from dumping/leaking sewage into coastal waters destroying clam, other shell fish and herring production. Support initiatives for sustainable agriculture practices that take into account the health of the neighbouring Indigenous land and food systems in the forests and waterways. This will take provincial and municipal investment in infrastructure.
8. Do not support the removal of lands from food production into bio-fuels – producing some bio-fuels is far less cost effective and produces a larger carbon impact than the production of gas, if you take onto account the loss of much needed food production.

Agriculture has been a poor second cousin receiving little attention over the past few years by all levels of government. You are now aware, as is the public, of the growing concern over access to safe, nutritious food and the results of not having that access. We have presented practical solutions to address some of the barriers to food security. Some cost money, some don't. The cost of not addressing the issues will be catastrophic for us all, not just the disadvantaged living in our communities.

ⁱ LUSH <http://www.lushcomoxvalley.org/index.html>

ⁱⁱ Housing and Support for people with Severe Addictions and or Mental Illness in BC
[http://www.carmha.ca/publications/resources/pub_hsami/Housing_SAMI_BC_FINAL_\(pre-desk\).pdf](http://www.carmha.ca/publications/resources/pub_hsami/Housing_SAMI_BC_FINAL_(pre-desk).pdf)

ⁱⁱⁱ Mayor's Task force on Homelessness - <http://www.city.courtenay.bc.ca/media/98969/homelessness.pdf>

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^{iv} Early Child Development Mapping Project

http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca/mapping/mapping_projbackground.htm

^v Drug Bust - <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2008/09/01/bc-likely-marijuana-bust.html>