

Treating our land as a family member

by Ralph C. Martin

“The Gillis's lived on the mountain
For about a hundred years
Where we picked berries, they cleared land
Spent their blood and sweat and tears”

The Rankin Family

There was a time when our ancestors intimately knew and respected the land they lived on. This land provided. People who didn't live on Gillis Mountain or similar homesteads were closely related to those who did. Land was a member of everyone's family.

Today, many Canadians hardly know a specific knoll, valley, meadow, field, farm or even a garden. Only a few relate to land and know the low spots where drainage is slow and reeds grow, or where the oak tree will resolutely cling to some leaves through January storms. For the most part, land is depersonalized as an asset and/or a resource.

A report, [Preservation of Agricultural Land in Nova Scotia](#), was presented by a Nova Scotia Agricultural Land Review Committee to the Ministers of Agriculture and Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations in 2010. It's worth having a look at:

www.gov.ns.ca/agri/elibrary/nsalrc/

The land review committee noted, “active farmland in 2006 was about a third of the area in use in 1901, even though Nova Scotia's current population is double 1901 levels.” They go on to say that, at a minimum, there is a land deficit of 53,000 hectares (about 130,000 acres) to provide a healthy diet to all Nova Scotians from provincial production, based on the Canada Food Guide. Furthermore, farmland fertility is declining.

The pattern of using Canadian farmland to produce export commodities (often with little or no processing) is increasing. To grease the wheels of export we've agreed to import food and are becoming reliant on it. For a blip in anthropological time, mostly since World War II, buying from elsewhere has been our collective experience. This

unusual way of feeding ourselves may eventually become less feasible, given long-term issues of resource management, climate change, and economic realignments.

It seems obvious that all farmland in production today must be preserved for agricultural use in the future. However, there are contradictory forces. Some farmland is even being abandoned because profits of farmers are low. They compete with cheap food from other countries, which may give more support to their farmers, have less stringent food safety requirements or have poorly paid labour.

Urban Canadians tend to be too quick to assign blame to farmers who want the right to sell their farmland to developers. The old adage of 'cash poor and asset rich' represents farmers who sacrifice most of their lives for our benefit, and justifiably seek a modest, comfortable retirement.

Family farmers struggle in many areas to make a decent living while cheap food, increasing input costs, variable weather, and labourers with urban aspirations challenge farmers' capacity to manage.

Canadian farmland really is the partner that can sustain our descendants. Nevertheless, it may not be able to if we abuse it. We all have a stake in the farmland where we live. So what are our options?

The NS land review committee has excellent recommendations, including one that 'the cost of preserving agricultural land should not be borne only by the farm community.' They also recommend that the province preserve and protect agricultural land, as soon as possible. It is urgent because delay will result in more loss of land for all of us.

Much farmland not surrendered to overlay by aggregates, cement and pavement is also declining. Soil erosion and soil degradation still exceed soil renewal rates. Wendell Berry suggests we need a higher ratio of eyes to acres, to observe and understand what is required to maintain soil quality. Maintaining soil integrity and productive capacity under variable weather and weather extremes is becoming more important. Sometimes large scale operations with associated management by rapid coverage of fields, will limit options for cover crops, green manures and use of perennials. Furthermore, crop and livestock (with manure) farming are diverging.

Perhaps we need some agricultural practices that involve more people. This might require additional homes in farm communities on land not suitable for cropping. Rural community vitality and resilience could be improved. We could avoid putting all our eggs in the large scale, high volume commodity basket. Soil health, food health and community health may respond well to diverse approaches on watersheds. Profitability can be improved with higher value products.

I tell my students that land is asked to provide the 4 Fs: food, feed, fuel and fibre. The demands on land are significant and climbing and we have many reasons to retain productive capacity on as much farmland as possible.

Our pioneer ancestors accepted formidable challenges to sustain their lives. They set us up not only to survive, but to thrive. Now it's our turn. We have the information to see where we are in the arc of land use history. A bit of sacrifice and more knowledge of ourselves and our land, will, in the end, lead to more resilient and richer lives.

Like our ancestors, we and our descendants, can know Canadian farmland as a family member. This includes an extended family of producers, consumers and even other creatures. In the long run, supporting our family members pays off.

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