

# first reading

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Farming, which many urban dwellers have long-percieved to be a relatively quiet occupation, is very much in the news and all of our minds of late. We regularly hear and read about debt problems, drought and grasshoppers, low commodity prices, mental breakdown, stabilization programs, pesticide and herbicide contamination, and a variety of other issues. Farming, we are coming to realize, is not a simple occupation - it never was, but many of us never knew it.

However, those of us who were previously ignorant about the facts of life as they apply to agriculture now only seem to really be aware that it's not an easy way to make a living, and that there are some significant problems facing agriculture in both Alberta and across Canada.

The problems faced by this country's farmers and farm families are numerous. They are also serious enough for all of us to be very concerned about the future place of agriculture in this country. Yet the problems are, for the most part, ones that we have only really begun to grapple with, and for those of us immersed in urban life the problems are new, complex and often misunderstood.

This edition of FIRST READING attempts to shine a bit of a light on some of the issues and problems facing agriculture and its practitioners in this country. Why is farmland so expensive, and why is some of the best of it disappearing? Why do some farmers do well, while others struggle to keep family and farm together? What is the role of farm women in the farmlife of today and tommorow? These are some of the questions to which this FIRST READING addresses itself.

Just a reminder, that the Edmonton Social Planning Council is sponsoring a conference on community development from April 27-29, 1987. A detailed brochure on "Nurturing Community" is included with this issue of FIRST READING. The next edition of this publication will concentrate on the subject of community development.

# Agriculture

Terry and Alice Vande Kraats are in a lot of ways not a typical Alberta farm family. They're young, Terry is from a non-farm background and they're not going broke.

The Vande Kraats and their four children live near Millet, an hour's drive south of Edmonton. They operate a 40 cow dairy farm, a modest size by industry standards, and grow 400 acres of mostly hay and greenfeed.

Due to Terry's non-farm background no one would lend them money to begin farming. This despite the fact that farm credit was supposedly easy to come by 10 years ago when they began. Commercial lenders considered them too poor a risk. Fortunately, however, the Vande Kraats found a retiring farmer willing to finance them at a fixed interest rate for 20 years.

At first, according to Alice, some people were skeptical about the family's chances of making it. Nevertheless, with lots of hard work and good neighbourly advice, the farm provides them with a good living.

Terry described their financial prospects as "pretty stable" because the milk price is based on a cost of production formula. He is concerned, however, that sky-rocketing dairy quota values are making it increasingly difficult for young people to begin farming.

Peter and Ruth Poettcker have grain farmed in the Pincher Creek area of southern Alberta since 1948. The Poettckers have wanted to retire for several years already, but found it difficult. "I was going to sell the farm to my son-in-law," Peter Poettcker says, "but the economics are against it. He just couldn't see how he was going to make it pay."

The economics Poettcker talks about are a combination of weather and markets. In 1984 and 1985 their yields were cut drastically by drought and grasshoppers. 1986 saw a recovery in yields, but a dramatic collapse in the price they received for their grain. Because of the price collapse, Poettcker doubts he broke even last year, even though he is virtually debt-free. "I just can't see how young farmers

with high land payments can possibly make it," he says.

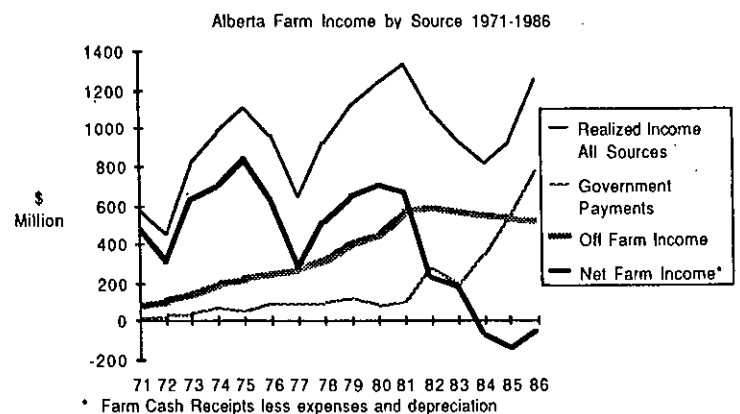
The Poettckers are presently in the process of selling their farm. While they would have preferred to sell it as a unit, this was not financially feasible. Consequently, the land is being divided and sold to several adjoining farmers wanting to expand. Another family farm will soon be disappearing from the Alberta landscape.

## Hard Times

Many farmers in Alberta are experiencing hard times now. Farm bankruptcies have quadrupled since 1981, but even they do not tell the whole story. Most farmers in trouble sell out long before being forced into bankruptcy. Recent estimates from the Farm Credit Corporation suggest that one in four Canadian farmers is experiencing severe financial stress and is therefore at risk.

Net farm income (that's the income farmers have left after paying their expenses) has been in a steady decline since 1982. As Figure 1 shows, Alberta farmers have been operating at an overall loss since 1984. Many are only being kept afloat by government subsidies and off-farm income.

Figure 1



(Source: "Background Paper on the Alberta Agricultural Development Corporation," October 1986, p.12.)

Yet, as the examples of the Vande Kraats and Poettckers shows, it's a mistake to generalize about the farm financial situation. What is striking about the farm crisis is how unevenly it applies to different types of farms. Currently, beginning farmers, those with high debt loads, and grain and oilseed farmers are being hard hit.

On the other hand, many cattle and hog farmers had one of their best years ever in 1986. The supply managed sectors (dairy and poultry) continue to be profitable overall. In fact, low grain prices helped the livestock sector to recover in 1986.

### Roots of the Problem

Paradoxically perhaps, agriculture's current problems are rooted in the "good times" of the 1970s, which were characterized by an unusually high demand for food products worldwide, especially for cereal grains. This in turn caused prices for agricultural land across Canada to rise at over twice the inflation rate throughout the decade. These events encouraged an excessive level of farm borrowing based more on anticipated increases in farm values than on ability to repay from operating income. The dramatic rise in real interest rates in the 1980s have left many farmers with falling equity levels and insufficient cash flow to service debts.

Another part of the explanation for the hard times Alberta farmers are facing can be found in the chaotic situation of agricultural trade world-wide. Alberta farmers depend heavily on external markets for their incomes. About 75 percent of Alberta farm products are exported out of the province, some to other parts of Canada, but most to destinations outside the country.

The fact that the international trading system in agricultural products is in such a mess should concern all of us a great deal. The sorry state of the world grain markets is a good illustration.

Several years of excellent crops in most major producing areas have led to a short term surplus relative to commercial demand for that grain. This has been compounded by a nasty grain war, the major instigators of which have been the United States and the countries of the European Economic Community (EEC).

To provide a little background, until the 1970s the EEC countries were the largest importers of grain in the world. However, the EEC has been gradually expanding its grain producing capability by converting land formerly in pasture or rangeland into land growing grains. Intensive management practices, featuring high levels of inputs, have caused yields to rise dramatically to the point where today the EEC is the world's second largest wheat exporter after the United States, but ahead of Canada.

European farmers can afford these high input costs because of the EEC's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The CAP guarantees both a market and a profit for European grain farmers. Grain is sold internally in the EEC at extremely high prices, with the surplus dumped in the international market. The EEC pays farmers for any losses on world markets, payments which this year are expected to exceed \$20 billion U.S. dollars.

The U.S.A. has been arguing for years that the CAP constitutes unfair competition. While other exporters have held their own, the U.S. has watched the Europeans take over more and more of their traditional markets.

World grain prices are set in the U.S. market. In times of surplus the U.S. sets the floor price. Their strategy is to drop the floor price to a level where the Europeans can no longer afford to make up the difference to their farmers. Canada and other grain exporting countries have been caught in the crossfire. Wealthier countries such as Canada have been forced to provide subsidies to their grain farmers to at least partially offset the damage caused by the trade war.

### Generalizing Not Helpful

One of the obstacles to finding effective solutions to the farm crisis is our tendency to want to treat all farmers the same. The current tendency to generalize about farmers' problems arises from two erroneous viewpoints often promoted by politicians, the mass media and farmers themselves.

The first viewpoint, promoted by groups such as the farm survivalists, but finding increasing support in mainline farm organizations, invokes the "sinking ship" analogy.

Canadian agriculture is likened to the Titanic. Just because some farmers are on the top deck doesn't mean they won't go down.

Bridgid Pyke, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, claimed in a recent United Church Observer article that, "...all farmers are in trouble, whether they are willing to admit it or not." Some spokesmen even hold out the threat of domestic food shortages should the farm economy collapse.

The second viewpoint, still held by many economists and some politicians, maintains that farm failures result from bad management by individual farmers. These people reason that agriculture will emerge stronger and leaner after this period, with the bad managers being squeezed out.

Advocates of both viewpoints tend to favour universal assistance programs: the first because they assume all farmers are in trouble; the second because they wish to reward the "good" managers along with the "bad."

The false picture created by these viewpoints is revealed by the experiences of farmers like the Poettckers and the Vande Kraats. It is also shown by the fact that existing approaches to the farm financial "crisis" are not working.

As John Vander Meulen, president of the Christian Farmers Federation of Alberta, pointed out in a recent meeting with rural Alberta politicians, "despite a massive \$800 million cash injection into the rural economy, the rash of farm failures continues unabated."

Most benefits from universal aid programs, Vander Meulen explained, go to farmers who don't need help. Not only is this a waste of taxpayers' money, it also tends to artificially inflate the rural economy. Prices rise for such inputs as supply management quotas and breeding stock, thereby making things even more difficult for farmers who are struggling.

#### Targeting Needed

Federal and provincial governments are now being pressed to shift from universal aid programs toward ones targeted to farmers in difficulty. This is a particular need when dealing with the dilemmas of farm indebtedness and low grain prices.

Also needed is a national approach to

the debt problem. An approach which shares the cost involved among farmers, lending institutions and the two levels of government. It has been proposed that struggling farmers be allowed to set aside up to 40 percent of their mortgaged debt for three years, or until they get back on their feet financially. In exchange for giving up interest payments on the principal which is set aside, banks and private lenders would be given a government guarantee on the remaining loan.

This program would not save all farmers, but it would give some a second chance and encourage better financial stewardship. In exchange for financial help, a farmer would be required to take courses to improve his or her management skills.

While everyone is not as pessimistic as many people about long-term prospects for prairie grain farmers, there is no question that the current record low prices for grains and oilseeds spell potential disaster for thousands of Alberta farmers, especially the beginning and developing ones.

Assistance is already being provided through the Western Grain Stabilization Program and the Special Canadian Grains Program. However, if current prices do not improve by this fall, additional assistance, beyond that already announced, will be necessary.

Two solutions are needed in the longer term. First, greater diversification of the prairie farm economy to reduce dependence on volatile world grain markets. Second, fair trade rules and more secure market access for Canadian agricultural exports with our trading partners.

The financial problems faced today by many Canadian farmers should not be underestimated. Most of these problems are not the result of a lack of skills, hard work or dedication on the part of farmers. Rather, they are largely caused by factors beyond the farmers' control.

At the same time, not all Canadian farmers have suffered crop failures or price collapses, nor do all carry excessive levels of debt. Care must, therefore, be exercised to ensure that government assistance does not worsen the problem.

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John Kolkman is the research and policy co-ordinator of the Christian Farmers Federation of Alberta.

At a recent speech to a farm women's conference, I recounted a story of a recent Christmas when my two year old niece received a Fisher Price farm which included animals, buildings and people. I sat down with my niece to introduce her to the people. I picked up the woman and said, "this is the farmer." I picked up the man and said, "this this is the farmer's husband." The women in the audience laughed.

Their laughter indicates one of the ironies of the lives of farm women. Despite being active members of complex family business operations, most do not see themselves as farmers. Like many urban women, much of their work is invisible and spread over many work roles. The gap between their stake in the farm operation and the recognition of that stake is one of the major social and economic issues facing farm women.

Much of farm women's work takes place in what has been called the informal economy, the non-monetized sector which includes household and community volunteer activities. Research on Alberta farmers shows that women work an average of 9.8 hours per day in this part of the economy. Most of this time, an average of nine hours per day, is spent doing household work. Farm women also work in the formal economy, the monetized sector, which includes employment and farm work averaging 3.4 hours per day, with farm work comprising 1.7 hours of this time.

## Contributions

Farm women's contributions to the farm operation are many. Their household work includes the production and preservation of much of the food consumed by the family, the feeding and accommodation of farm labourers during peak periods, the deferring of household expenses to build the farm business, and the socialization of children who will be the next generation of farmers. Many of their community volunteer hours are spent in farm-related organizations whose mission is to improve the quality of life of farm families. Like

farm men, the major portion of their farm labour is in field work, with many women also doing the bookkeeping for the farm business. Women and men work similar hours at off-farm jobs, but women's wages average only half those of men, so their input of time gives them less income to contribute to the farm operation.

It is clear farm women contribute to the farming operation within both the informal and formal sectors. Their informal contributions are the traditional ones that, since homesteading, have been seen as the purview of women. In the formal sector, their employment hours are similar to those of men; their farm work hours are fewer but spent performing similar tasks.

## Commitments

As well as their commitments of time, farm women have high levels of emotional commitment to their various jobs. Most see their farm work as important and satisfying although many see barriers to more active involvement due to gaps in their skills and knowledge, lack of time and lack of physical strength. Although women see their household work as important, they are less satisfied with household work than farm work, and most find their off-farm jobs to be particularly satisfying. Few would give up their jobs even if there were no economic necessity to keep them.

Thus, farm women have working and emotional stakes in both the formal and informal economies. However, it has been argued that the separation of these two spheres makes women's work invisible. Farm operations are usually seen as part of the formal economy, as agribusinesses. In this context, work includes farm work and off-farm work used to support the farm operation. Thus women's household work is not seen as productive, even though efficient household management and the provision of services to the farm operation are of direct benefit to the business. Also, wives benefit less from their farm labour than do husbands who, as farmers, are their wife's employers. The laughter from the women at the conference indi-

cates their recognition of this situation and, despite the ironic jokes of a feminist speaker, they know that the men are the farmers and the women help them. If the informal economy makes productive work invisible, and work within the formal economy is unrecognized (by low wages), then what are the advantages to women of all of their work inputs to the farming operation?

A strong work ethic and an equally strong commitment to farming as a way of life are reasons why farm women continue to carry heavy and diffuse work loads.

Sure I work hard. If there is no hired man, my role in the farm increases dramatically. If the children are involved scholastically or in extra-curricular things, they're unable to help in the farm duties. Then I do field work, chores, etc. Even though it's unpredictable and busy, there is no place I'd rather live, though it's really true that you have to be out there or you really wouldn't.

Yet farm women's mental health is in part dependent upon external recognition of their contributions. It seems clear that their farm work does not gain them status as farmers. This is in contrast to farm men who gain their identities through their work in the formal economy, especially their farm work. For the men, farm work provides the best of the formal economy, seen to be a sector where in general people are "more dependent, more helpless, more alienated, more remote and less able to participate." Men have a public identity which is farmer, but have a work setting in which they have some freedom and control, some insulation from public opinion, and can call on family members as loyal, unpaid workers. Women not only do not see themselves as farmers, but even at home their farm work may not be recognized. As one farm man said of his wife, "No, she doesn't do farm work. She just picks rocks, runs errands and does the books." Recognition from husbands of women's farm work contributions is an important buffer against stress for farm women.

The lack of recognition of their productive farm labour may account for women's positive attitudes toward their off-farm

employment. Although off-farm work brings fewer monetary rewards to women than men, it provides women with a public identity separate from that of their husbands and the farm operation.

### Closing the Gap

Women's contributions to farm business are beginning to be acknowledged at public, family and individual levels. At the public level, increasing numbers of women are becoming joint owners of farms with their husbands. Human rights legislation and landmark court cases in Alberta have resulted in women receiving larger property settlements in divorce cases.

The dark side of this public recognition is that young women coming into farming are often viewed with suspicion by their husbands' families. The worry is that if women can claim part of a farm business which they help to build, they may stake their claim and then leave with part of the business but without their partners. These young women have among the highest stress levels of all farmers. Yet their commitment to farming will, to a great extent determine the success of the next generation of farmers. Farm estate planners and farm families need to find the compromise between the assurance of stability for a farm operation and the acknowledgement of a legitimate place in farming for young farm women.

The commitment recognition gap can also be narrowed within farm families themselves. Farming has been called a greedy occupation. It is greedy in that it requires not only the work of the farm man, but incorporates the work of his wife as well. It is also greedy in that only one person receives public recognition for that work. This makes women more dependent upon a husband's recognition of their contributions to the business. Calls for higher levels of communication between spouses have become something of a cliché, but in farm families talking about work, work preferences and work contributions can be a matter of emotional survival.

At the personal level, women are increasing their skills in the farm business. Many are taking time to take courses on various aspects of the farm operation. Some are encouraging the development of

courses for women. This makes it easier to justify their attendance and encourages the excluded partner to stay at home to both keep things going and take care of the children.

The concept of the family farm is changing. Rather than the small subsistence unit of a farmer and his family, it is increasingly a large business operation. Yet most farms are still family operations. The difference is not only in the scale of

the business, but in the involvement of the partners. The concept of the silent partner, at least at one level, may soon be a thing of the past.

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## Community Development Conference

- Sponsor: Edmonton Social Planning Council
- Dates: April 27 - 29, 1987
- Title: Community Development By Any Other Name...  
A Conference on Nurturing Community
- Location: Edmonton, Alberta
- For Whom: Community Activists and Professionals
- Theme: In a society which encourages individualism and specialization, community involvement is increasingly elusive and uni-dimensional. Without community, the individual feels incompetent, lonely and dependent on fragile supports. By using community development processes, people can achieve collective, self-determined goals.
- Major Topics: Community Development Theory  
History of Community Development in Alberta  
Community Development Ethics  
Current State of Community  
Community Development Projects In Alberta  
Future Community Development Applications in Alberta
- Keynote Speaker: Dr. Hubert Campfens, Sir Wilfrid Laurier University
- Brochure: To request a detailed brochure and registration materials, please write to the Edmonton Social Planning Council, #418, 10010 - 105 Street, Edmonton T5J 1C4 or call (403) 423-2031.

What do we mean when we talk about the degradation of agricultural land? We can include many factors that are detrimental to the soil, such as erosion by wind and water, fertility reduction due to poor farming practices, acidification and salinity. We can add to this list the permanent removal of good food producing land from agricultural use by activities such as mining, urban expansion and industrialization. If we have the will to save the best farmland, the technology exists to solve the other problems.

## National Overview

Canada has practically no remaining undeveloped prime agricultural land. Stunning? It should be. To understand how much land we are really talking about let's put land and food production into perspective. The Canada Land Inventory (CLI) has grouped soil capability for agriculture into seven classes, with only classes 1 to 4 being considered capable of sustained use for cultivated field crops. Of Canada's 2.2 billion acres of land, only 178 million acres, or eight percent, fall into classes 1 through 4. The remainder consists of rock, water, permafrost, urban areas, roads, railways and industrial sites. Only five percent of Canada's area can support cereal crop production and only one percent is considered prime or #1 land. Canadian figures for the period 1966-76 show that 62% of the agricultural lands converted to other uses were CLI classes 1 to 3 - prime agricultural lands! In the Niagara fruitbelt alone fully 40% of the region's 37 000 acres has gone under concrete and asphalt in the last 20 years. Consequently, Canada is now a net importer of peaches and other soft fruits. 57% of all the #1 land in Canada is within 80 kilometers of major metropolitan areas.

Of the 150 or so nations on the globe, less than 10 countries do not have to import sizeable quantities of food. Canada is one of these favoured countries. However, only four nations on the earth can both feed themselves and export sizeable quantities of food. Once again Canada is one of those nations, along with Australia,

Argentina and the United States. But the writing is on the wall. We are losing agricultural land at a staggering rate. During the 1961-1976 period nearly 10 million acres of productive land were lost from agriculture in Eastern Canada and only 6.7 million acres were added in Western Canada's fringe areas. A 1979 publication of the Toronto Dominion Bank, titled "Will Canada be Able to Retain Food Self-Sufficiency?" concluded that the answer to the question was doubtful if recent and then current trends were to continue for but a very few decades.

We live in a world where yearly net population growth is 75 million people. This means that in our lifetime world population could triple from the present 4.5 billion to perhaps 12 billion. Yet, even today the world has staggering food supply problems. Already one billion humans, roughly one-quarter of mankind, are significantly or seriously malnourished. It is time to wake up and treat land as a resource and not a commodity - before Canada turns from being a breadbasket of the world to a net food importer.

## Provincial Outlook

Where does Alberta stand in all this? Of the 163 million acres in this province only about one-third has any potential to produce our commonly cultivated crops (eg. barley, wheat, canola and oats). Of the approximately 54 million acres with some cropping potential, much is severely limited. There is either too much or too little rain, the land is either too rocky or too hilly, or poor soil characteristics and climatic factors, such as the number of frost free days, inhibit the land's potential. Only a mere one percent of Alberta's land is considered to be prime or class #1 food producing land with no limitations to productivity. Sadly, it is this top 1%, "the cream of the cream," which is under the most pressure for diversion out of food production.

One-fifth of Canada's agricultural products come from Alberta - one of only three provinces that is self-sufficient on a net basis. We produce half of all the



barley in Canada, one-third of the oats and honey, one-quarter of the wheat and 40% of the canola. How important is this to Alberta? Consider this: 1985 farm cash receipts were \$3.8 billion and primary agriculture provided employment for approximately 81 000 people. If we are to maintain our place in world markets we must at least maintain our present productive capability, yet we continue to blunder on, destroying our best food producing land. During the period 1976-80, 390 000 acres were removed from agriculture and 387 000 acres were added. However, to put this in perspective, the quality of the additions to the agricultural land base does not match the losses. In the top three classes of land there was a net loss of 91 000 acres.

#### Case Study

In 1980, an attempt was made to halt the spread of industrialization in the Joffre-Prentiss area in the county of Lacombe. This area consists of fertile, black-soiled, undulating countryside with a rich history of excellent farmland, superb crops and prize winning cattle herds. The county of Lacombe showed the highest value of products sold per farm in the Red Deer Region, more than 28% above the provincial average. Both the federal and provincial governments had acknowledged the importance of the agricultural industry in this area by their establishment of the Agricultural Canada Research Station at Lacombe (in 1907) and the Lacombe Crop Research Facility in the late 1970s.

In the early 1970s land prices in this area were in the \$120 to \$150 per acre range, with some quarter-sections selling for as high as \$250 an acre, mostly to non-agricultural investors. It was during this period that Alberta Gas Ethylene purchased 2000 acres of land at \$500 an acre, for the construction of their petrochemical complex. In the meantime, economic pressure on the agricultural land base was increasing, with country-residential, light industry and non-agricultural investors purchasing agricultural land. Lending institutions began lending 100% of market value of the land - far above its productive value.

By 1980, agricultural land values in the area had risen from \$500 an acre to \$900.

In the spring of 1980, large tracts of land were being assembled in the area. It was soon discovered that Union Carbide was the buyer and that we would have yet another petrochemical plant in the area. Prices were once again on the rise, with 2240 acres being purchased in the \$1500 to \$2000 per acre range. These kinds of land prices made every farmer of 640 acres a potential millionaire. The biggest problem for farmers who sold was scrambling to avoid paying tax on their capital gains. The simplest way to do this was to re-invest the money in land in other areas, such as the Peace River country. The money paid by industry for one acre in central Alberta now bought two or three acres up north. The spin-off effect caused land prices to rise dramatically in many areas of the province and all of the prices were above the productive value of the land. Land had become a commodity on which to speculate.

Union Carbide was offered an alternative site, on much poorer land. Their acceptance would have done much to remove the negative impact on agriculture, as well as establish a precedent in land use. Their chosen site was 60% CLI classes 1 to 3 land. The alternate site was all CLI 5 and 6. The alternate site was also closer to water (the Red Deer River), close to two railways (instead of one) and much closer to two main highways. But agricultural economics and land use were not issues.

It became clear that the majority of society did not care about the fact that four to six percent of the population has to compete with the remaining 94-96% for its land base. Politics prevailed over common sense and the destruction of prime agricultural land continued.

By 1985, prices for land in the area had started to drop due to deflation and the withdrawal of participants from the land commodity market. However, with the arrival on the scene of Cominco Chemicals and Alberta Energy looking for a site to build an ammonia plant, it soon became public knowledge that speculation had again taken agricultural land from \$750 an acre to \$1500.

Clearly, industry and urban expansion are unfair competitors for land. Land costs to industry are less than one percent of

their total capital investment, while for agriculture these same land costs represent 80% to 90% of a farmer's investment. Often the value of land needed for an industrial site or urban expansion is negligible compared to other capital costs. Furthermore, once industry moves into an area, there is increased pressure for residential development in nearby hamlets and we see more and more country residential sub-divisions. Industry also outbids agriculture for labour. This causes many young farmers to move into the industrial work force, a factor that is detrimental to agriculture. A 1978 study indicated that only 15% of farmers were under 35 years of age. While this may not seem to be a problem, the 34% of our farmers over the age of 55 must soon be replaced by younger operators. Who can blame a young man for not wishing to take on several hundred thousand dollars of debt in order to earn a below average net income, when industry offers higher income for less work and worry?

It cannot be denied that urban growth is a natural process. Several of our largest cities were founded because of good farmland and the expansion of these cities will unavoidably use up more of the precious top one percent. But it is the senseless loss of good farmland, where reasonable alternatives exist, that must be questioned.

#### Some Solutions

What are some possible solutions to the degradation of agricultural land? It is clear where the problem lies. There is a lack of government direction prohibiting the use of good agricultural land for industrial and other purposes. In December 1983, the Environment Council of Alberta (ECA) held land use hearings in Red Deer. From these hearings came forth many recommendations. One in particular called for the establishment of an Agricultural Resources Conservation Board (ARCB). To date there has been no evidence that any of the 29 recommendations which came out of the ECA's Red Deer hearings have been adopted by the provincial government. Over the past number of years, numerous public hearings have been held where industry has been seeking approval for either the construction or expansion of a petrochemical plant or the installation of

pipelines. These hearings have all been before the Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB), which has neither the mandate nor the personnel qualified to rule on land issues. Agriculture has been severely short-changed at these hearings and the establishment of an ARCB would help correct this injustice.

What can the individual land owner do? I should like to introduce you to the words "restrictive covenants." Restrictive covenants are not new, except to the agricultural industry. In 1928 the Hudson's Bay Company registered covenants against their properties in Edmonton to restrict the development on any one lot to a single family dwelling. A 1980 court challenge to remove the covenants failed. In the Joffre-Prentiss area, Cominco has placed restrictive covenants on the property around its ammonia plant and loading-out facility. Why? To prevent further intrusion onto the agricultural land close to their operation. Several farmers in the area have now placed restrictive covenants against their properties. The covenant is a legal document registered against the title to a piece of property. In the case of agriculture, it limits the land to the production of food alone. This quite simply removes the speculative value from the land and allows it to trade near its productive value. To remove a covenant, someone who is not the beneficiary of that covenant would have to go to court and try to prove that whatever alternate use was planned for that parcel of land was both more important than the production of food and in the public interest.

Education of the public is a key to solving the loss of prime agricultural land. At a recent presentation on farming in Saudi Arabia, one colour slide told the story. Saudi Arabia has adopted a national policy which simply states that they will become a nation self-sufficient in food. To this end, all their housing is located on rocky, non-productive land, while the sides of their hills are terraced and producing food. No land that will grow food is used for any other purpose. When will Canada wake up!

Agricultural land has become precious. Peggy Thompson, a senior research officer for the ECA, said, "...the potential exists to seriously undermine the land base for

the future if problems affecting agriculture are ignored now...." We have the responsibility to act now.

I close with a quote from a highly respected soil scientist, Dr. Fred Bentley:

...unless legislation by provincial governments to protect agricultural land (perhaps legislation rather similar to that now applying in British Columbia and Quebec) is enacted and administered effectively - and soon - I foresee two inevitable results. Firstly, Canada will not be able to retain approximate food self-sufficiency (value of

agricultural exports less value of imports) for say the next half-century without either a considerable (doubling) of the proportion of disposable income spent on food or a drastic decline in the quality and variety of Canadian diets. Secondly, future generations will rightly condemn our generation for reprehensible, selfish, profligate misuse of Canada's most fundamentally important resource.

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Bob Pocock is the Secretary/Treasurer of the Preserve Agricultural Land Foundation.

## Annual Meeting

THE EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Invites You to Attend the

FORTY-SEVENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

To Be Held

Monday, April 27, 1987

at

7:00 p.m.

3rd Floor, Grant MacEwan Community College  
Downtown Campus  
10030 - 107 Street  
Edmonton

Guest Speaker: Joanne Sulman, Social Work Supervisor  
Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto

"Reviewing Social Assistance in Ontario"

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# Council News



## New Publication

"Your Guide to Services," a publication of the Edmonton Youth Services Co-op, is a referral handbook to youth services in Edmonton. The booklet contains information about 94 distinct services representing a broad spectrum of concerns, such as social services, education, health, housing and employment. Helpers to street involved youth will find the guide particularly useful. Available from the Edmonton Social Planning Council.  
 Free \$2 postage & handling

Date: Wednesday, May 20, 1987  
 Time: 12:10 - 1:10 p.m.  
 Topic: "The Heritage Savings Trust Fund: Was There a Better Way?"  
 Speaker: Dr. Jay Smith, Professor of Political Science, University of Alberta  
 Location: 4th Floor Boardroom  
 10010 - 105 Street  
 Edmonton

## Brown Bag Forums

Date: Wednesday, April 15, 1987  
 Time: 12:10 to 1:10 p.m.  
 Topic: "The Capital Punishment Debate: Fact or Emotion"  
 Speaker: Dr. Jim Hackler, Department of Sociology, University of Alberta  
 Location: 4th Floor Boardroom  
 10010 - 105 Street  
 Edmonton

Date: Tuesday, May 26, 1987  
 Time: 12:10 to 1:10 p.m.  
 Topic: "Food Banks: Collapsing the Social Safety Net?"  
 Speaker: Graham Riches, Associate Professor of Social Work, University of Regina  
 Location: 4th Floor Boardroom  
 10010 - 105 Street  
 Edmonton

Everyone is Welcome!  
 Admission is Free! Bring a Lunch!  
 Bring a Friend!