

## *Funding provided by:*



### **Comox Bay Farm Agriculture and Conservation Center (Comox Bay ACC)**

*Prepared by Brent Warner PAg, WLR Management  
and Gary Rolston, PAg, From the Ground Up.*

#### **Vision**

Ducks Unlimited, the agriculture community in the Comox Valley, and the City of Courtenay have partnered with educational and culinary institutions and individuals to develop this concept for the first ever facility of its kind anywhere.

This facility will combine local agriculture and conservation experiences and values. It will also allow for the sale of local agriculture products, some of which will be sold through a certified locally grown farmers' market. Local visitors and international tourists will be able to witness farming in conjunction with an opportunity to see one of the largest birding venues on the continent. With as many as 30% of the world's trumpeter swan population on site during the fall/winter season, this is truly a world class ecotourism destination.

This concept document is based on the premise that a suitable long-term lease can be negotiated that would secure financing and allow construction of the required buildings on the site at Comox Bay Farm. It is also assumed that all necessary approvals can be obtained from the relevant agencies. So far, this all appears to be achievable. It is recognized that the signatories, below, are agreeing in principle to this concept but are not committing their organizations to the final details, or financially, until further details are worked out in the next phase.

It is also important to note that the agricultural center is intended to enhance the character and contribute to, rather than compete with, the business community in the City of Courtenay.

#### **Range of Products**

The exact type and range of products that will be sold at this facility will be determined in a later phase. Because the land is in the agricultural land reserve, the products mix sold on site must, at very least, be consistent with the policies of the agricultural land commission. Beyond that, it is expected that a very significant portion (likely over 80%) will be from BC.

The percentage of non-BC product warrants comment. There are products, like coffee and the ingredients for some products, which will need to be sold on site to attract and retain customers. It is also recognized, that the center will include a small number of full-time complementary businesses who may need to include a portion of non-BC product in order to carry a sustainable mix of inventory. These businesses are key to maintaining security and continuity at the site. The extent to which these products are allowed to be sold and the mechanism needed to control it will be developed in a later phase.

The key point here is that the vast majority of products sold will be food and agriculture related, of B.C. origin, will include fish and shellfish, and will be consistent with the vision described in this document.

The ALC has approved a marketing concept for the farm based on the following list of products:

- Primary and value added agricultural products, from B.C., including vegetables, fruit, meat and livestock products, flowers, herbs, poultry, and
- Locally harvested fish and shellfish products, and value – added products
- Agro-forestry and handcrafted wood products produced in BC.
- Products sold within the Farmers’ Market section of the center will be consistent with the locally focused rules, regulations and policies of the Comox Valley (CV) Farmer’s Market Association.
- Education services to accommodate programs that are related to the activities and vision of the farm.
- Agri-tourism services that are related to the activities and vision of the farm, and
- Conservation related products to support the activities of Ducks Unlimited.

Note: the agro-forestry and wood products were approved for use for a former proposal on this property but may not be consistent with this concept. This will also be reviewed in a later phase.

### **User Groups and Partners**

The following organizations have been involved in the discussions leading to the creation of this concept:

- Ducks Unlimited,
- Comox Valley Farmers Market Association,
- Comox Valley Farmers Institute,
- North Island College, BC Shellfish Growers Association,
- North Island Chefs Association,
- City of Courtenay, and
- Comox Valley Economic Development Society.

### **Statement of Best Practices**

In a Canadian wide survey completed in 2008 /2009 of Farmers’ Markets in Canada, 81% of consumers stated, that they believe food safety practices at farmers’ markets were as good as, or better than, retail grocery stores. This trust placed in the farmers’ market industry represents an incredible opportunity and at the same

time, imposes a responsibility on Farmers' Market organizations to maintain that reputation. For that reason this facility will be designed with food safety and traceability as a major priority.

The site will provide a fully health certified and inspected demonstration kitchen which can also be used for basic food processing and education. This kitchen will be key to the use by both the educational and culinary communities, as well as enhance the experiences available to consumers on site for events and farmers' market days.

The Comox Valley Farmers' Markets Association already requires that all food vendors be "Food Safe" trained and certified. This facility will make this farmers' market one of the leading markets in North America in regards to the safe preparation and sale of locally grown and processed agricultural products.

### **Economic Impact of Farmers Markets**

In a study done in 2006 by Dr. David Connell, UNBC, the economic impact of farmers' markets in BC was determined to be \$65.3 million. The impact of the Comox Valley Farmers' Market, at that time, was in excess of \$1.5 million.

In 2008 the first study of the Canadian Farmers' Markets industry showed that the direct sales through these markets in 2008 was \$913 million and the economic impact of these markets in Canadian communities was almost \$3 billion .

Locally the impact of the Comox Valley Farmers' Market has increased dramatically since 2006 and conservative estimates put the economic impact in 2008 at close to \$3 million. Furthermore, the center at Comox Bay Farm will accommodate an enhanced year-round farmers' market providing farmers' market vendors with an opportunity to further expand their product lines and increase their sales.

### **Community Benefits**

This site has the potential to not only serve the needs of Ducks Unlimited and the farming community but to also become one of the premier tourism destinations on Vancouver Island. Agriculture is becoming a centerpiece for tourism around the globe and in many agriculturally focused BC communities.

This facility will be the centerpiece of the ecotourism, agritourism and culinary tourism industry in the region. The addition of these world class tourism product offerings will dramatically increase the area's year round visitor appeal.

With a fully certified teaching and culinary kitchen available at the site the potential for educating the community in regards to local foods is enormous. Both educational partners and the restaurant industry will as partners in this project, be able to develop programs for the local community.

As the center develops, more local residents and tourists will be drawn to the site. Therefore the impact of this facility will quickly become much larger than the current impact of the CV Farmers' market by itself.

The indoor portion of the ACC will run events year round and will create new employment opportunities both directly at the site, and indirectly via businesses developing or ramping up production to capture the new markets.

It is expected that the activities at the center will significantly increase awareness of the conservation value of Comox Bay Farm and the activities of Ducks Unlimited.

### **Benefit to Industry**

The agricultural and conservation center concept will provide a number of benefits to the local agricultural industry:

- A permanent location for the farmers market with a certified processing/teaching kitchen, water and power for vendors and indoor washroom facilities for customers
- A sales and marketing incubator for new farmers
- An easily identifiable landmark for the local industry
- A distribution center, and a marketplace for local products to serve the local retail and restaurant industries
- An information center will improve awareness of tourists and local residents about all aspects of local agriculture and improve access to local products for the same group
- A world class education center to improve awareness of local agriculture, its contribution to habitat for trumpeter swans, and to educate the public about waterfowl and trumpeter swans and why the agricultural habitat is so important
- A place to celebrate local agriculture, to host events related to local food production
- A networking Center that will allow agriculture to connect with other agencies, industries, in the Comox Valley
- The center could also include services that benefit the user groups, i.e. offices for the Farmers' Market and the Farmers' Institute.

## Compatibility with ALC and Other Regulations

The intent is that the center and any operations on the site will be consistent with all relevant regulations. These will not be identified at the concept stage but will be identified and dealt with in the planning phase. Specifically, the center will respect the policies of the Agricultural Land Commission. This has not been discussed at this point, but it is suggested that the City of Courtenay's Agricultural Advisory Committee could be used as a sounding board to ensure that the activities and development at the site are in the best interests of the local agriculture sector and consistent with the vision developed for this project.

## Facility Description

At this initial stage, we suggest that all parties concentrate on what the facility can be and how to make the best use of the site, while at the same time realizing that subsequent discussion and designs will actually lay out the facility. For the sake of discussion the following are some of the requirements, all of which have been previously approved by the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC)

- Permanent building(s) of up to 40,000 sq ft. which would include:
  - Indoor washrooms and culinary/processing center
  - Indoor viewing center/classroom/educational area on a second floor

We also suggest that the structures which support the Comox Valley Farmers' Market, during peak season, should include water and power, as well as wings or awnings that provide protection from the weather. The permanent building will accommodate vendors that sell year round and require more facilities including washrooms, coolers, freezers, and refrigerated displays or processing facilities.

Parking, access and egress to and from the site, and potential conflict with the adjacent farmland uses, were issues raised in the initial meetings. These can, and will, all be dealt with in the next phase of planning.

## References

- 2006 UNBC Farmers Market Study
- Comox Valley Agriculture Plan
- 2009 National Farmers' Market Impact Study

## Signatories

Ducks Unlimited, Farmers Market, Farmers Institute, North Island College, BC Shellfish Growers Association, North Island Chefs Association, City of Courtenay, Comox Valley Economic Development Society.