



Comox Valley Society ushers in "ag"gressive marketing campaign

by PETER VAN DONGEN

COMOX VALLEY – What started out as a local agricultural plan has sparked a multi-faceted economic development strategy to promote more agri-food activity in the Comox Valley.

John Watson is the executive director of the Comox Valley Economic Development Society (CVEDS), a non-profit organization funded by the communities of Courtenay, Comox, Cumberland and the Regional District of Comox-Strathcona. He says the decision to build the region's economic strategy around agri-food came down to identifying their competitive advantage.

Abundance of land for ag

In 2001 and 2002, the Regional District took the lead in developing an official agricultural plan for the valley. As part of the planning process, an agricultural land use inventory confirmed what many people suspected: the Comox Valley has an abundance of underutilized agricultural land. In fact, only a third of the region's 99,000 acres of agriculturally viable land is in active production.

"For so long, people were saying that we have all the land

and nobody is using it, and nobody was listening to that," Watson told *Country Life in B.C.* "So we decided to listen."

Ag as development priority

Information from the agricultural plan then fed into an extensive strategic planning process conducted by CVEDS. By August 2005, the agri-food sector had been unanimously selected as the region's number one economic development priority.

"What we've done is we've established a five-year plan to expand the agriculture sector and the economic impact of the sector here in the Comox Valley," says Watson.

The concept involves a two-pronged approach: first, increase agricultural production in the region by promoting the availability of land and the region's favourable growing conditions. And second, attract higher value agri-food processing activities such as slaughterhouses, berry processing facilities and wineries.

"At this stage in the game, we're trying to build an image around the Comox Valley as a destination for agriculture," Watson notes. "And we're trying to build that image both locally here in British Columbia, but also in our Western Canadian markets."

Marketing campaign

To that end, Comox Valley has embarked on an aggressive and multi-faceted marketing campaign to promote its agri-food potential.

Initial elements included the development of a promotional agri-food brochure and website [www.agrifoodcomoxvalley.com].

In addition, Watson and other members of CVEDS and the local agri-food sector have attended major farm shows in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The goal: to entice farming families to relocate from those regions to the Comox Valley. So far, the results have been encouraging.

"There's an awful lot of interest from producers," Watson reports. "The discussion always rotates around land prices, operation costs, growing season, climate, soil conditions, and the difference in farming between the two regions."

Reaching even further abroad, Comox Valley partnered with several other B.C. communities, including Chilliwack, Mission, the Cowichan Valley,

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Lara Greasley of CVEDS and Jill Hatfield, Regional Agrologist with BCMAL, attended FarmFair International in Edmonton as part of ongoing efforts to attract more agri-food investment to the Comox Valley.

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