

## **UBC farm concerns misplaced?**

*Gavin Wright, Erika Mundel. The Vancouver Sun. Vancouver, B.C.: Jul 24, 2008. pg. A.15*

*Copyright Southam Publications Inc. Jul 24, 2008*

Under Stephen Toope and Steven Owen's leadership, discussions regarding the future of the University of British Columbia Farm have moved forward in a very positive direction over the past few months. We applaud Steven Owen and Murray Isman's assertion in Tuesday's op-ed that there will be a farm at UBC. Their editorial characterized widespread community concerns about the UBC Farm as being "misplaced." The column contains a number of omissions, however, that provide a very strong basis for legitimate public concern over the farm's future.

Firstly, UBC's 70-year track record of re-locating, downsizing, or eliminating its farmlands give the community a solid foundation for concern about the current farm's future. The tenacious "Future Housing Reserve" label that still marks the farm area on campus planning maps does little to dispel these concerns.

Secondly, the independent report referred to in the editorial which recommended an "appropriate footprint" for the farm looked only at the needs of two faculties (The Faculty of Land and Food Systems and the Faculty of Forestry). It does not address the needs and future interests of the other 11 UBC faculties, schools and colleges that currently use the site. Of over 2,000 student users on the farm recorded in 2007, less than half came from students enrolled in the Faculty of Land and Food Systems.

Thirdly, the statement that the farm now uses "about five hectares" within a 24-hectare area on south campus is erroneous. This assessment excludes indoor and outdoor classroom spaces, roadways, greenhouses and forested land, all of which are of significant value to the expanding academic and community service learning projects on site. The 10 hectares of 90-year old forest surrounding the cultivated fields provides habitat diversity that helps to balance populations of pests and predators, and creates a windbreak which maintains an agriculturally favourable microclimate in the fields.

The stated size of about five hectares also suggests that the farm has a static footprint. In terms of cultivated field areas, numbers of academic users, and visitors to the site, the farm has maintained an average annual growth rate of 50 per cent for the last seven years, and with increasing attention being paid to food security and food systems, there are no indications that this trend is slowing.

Fourthly, the uncertainty expressed in the editorial about the location of the future farm site raises concerns. A farm cannot be easily re-located as though it were a building. The current site's suitability for agricultural purposes arises from decades of carefully improving the soil from its rocky origins. A partial or complete farm move would set this soil improvement work back more than a decade.

The UBC Farm is a unique asset to the city and region. It provides students, researchers and the broader community the opportunity to learn hands-on about how food is produced, and how this is a key part of mitigating climate change and creating healthy local communities and economies. The sustainability of the food supply in the face of continued global urban population growth, global climate change, and growing resource consumption is essential for the survival of the human species. Universities have a social responsibility to advance our understanding of how food production systems can flourish under these increasing pressures. By retaining a complex, integrated, appropriately-scaled on-campus academic farm system, UBC will retain a hugely important, irreplaceable tool to learn and make positive contributions towards these pressing issues. As components of this system are lost, we similarly lose the ability to study the complex interactions that can provide a key to our future.

Since it charted a new course eight years ago, the UBC Farm/ Centre for Sustainable Food Systems has endeavoured to help UBC achieve its sustainability goals. Friends of the Farm is encouraging UBC to look at ways to strategically densify existing developments rather than sprawling into prime agricultural land and green space. There are win-win options available for UBC. Friends of the UBC Farm sees the farm integrating into the fabric of a growing campus community, favouring densification of residential areas to achieve on-campus population targets, while retaining the entire farm system and ensuring that close connections with neighbours bring the benefits of the farm to academics and residents alike.

Gavin Wright and Erika Mundel are members of the volunteer student-driven Friends of the UBC Farm group, currently representing over 700 student, faculty and community members.

Credit: Gavin Wright and Erika Mundel; Special to the Sun