

Richmond Review Article – May 1, 2014 – Price Shock at the Supermarket  
By Stephen C. Mullins

"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."

What I tried to 'pick out' was the answer to the question "Why are the humble potatoes I buy in my local supermarket so expensive?" The question came up on my last trip to the supermarket. I was only buying a few items, including three large potatoes, which, when rung up at the cash, cost about a dollar each. I thought "That can't be right!" But it was correct.

For most of my life, potatoes had always been really cheap, so I had maintained that assumption until now, a delusion helped by the fact I usually buy potatoes by the bag and not individually, so I didn't really notice the actual per unit cost of them.

I was perplexed, because isn't the modern international food system supposed to bring prices down?

Of course, I had to find an answer. And that's when I found out the Universe was attached to this one simple question. I followed the chain of international food production and distribution to see what could be affecting imported potato prices and found the answer became very complex, very quickly. Ultimately my search led right back almost literally to my own doorstep, and I ended up with a renewed appreciation for the BC Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), which is now under a controversial review.

So what affects the price of potatoes?

Poor weather is an obvious factor. In the past few years, floods, extended cold snaps, and huge droughts in important food production centers like California created shortages that drove up prices. Crop blights and insect infestations were also an issue, as were problems that made transportation of food more difficult or expensive, like increased fuel prices, tariffs, labor disruptions at ports, and deteriorating roads.

But that's not all. Rising consumer demand for fresh produce in huge growing markets (like those in China and India) drove up the price of staples, a problem worsened by the fact that large tracts of food land worldwide are being turned over to biofuel production. Prices also rose because the global food market is vulnerable to financial manipulation by large stakeholders in order to increase profits, an example of which was the recent price fixing scandal of potatoes in the USA (where a cartel of producers are alleged to have throttled back potato production to artificially raise prices).

It's clear we have built a long international food production chain that is getting longer and more intertwined all the time. Which brings us to the review of the ALR and to my original question, which I now realize was the wrong question. Given the complexity creeping into our world's food distribution, economic and environmental systems, more

and more the real question isn't "Why are the potatoes in my supermarket so expensive?" but "Will potatoes be available at all?"

It's a fact that we can grow potatoes and many other crops here in BC, but will we? Or will we continue to reduce our capacity to grow food locally and regionally while we increase our reliance on imports that are proving more uncertain and less of a bargain each passing year?

From all accounts, the ALR review is too focused on the 'here and now.' It ignores the long-term realities of food security, such that land that is capable of producing food, fibre and energy will become immensely valuable in the not too distant future. High quality soils take hundreds of years to develop and that is what we are paving over or replacing with residential or industrial developments across the province.

In many BC communities, people can buy locally grown food that was harvested that same day. We cannot lose that. The strongest food security chain is a short one, and in BC, the ALR is the strongest link we have.

Steve Mullins is the communications manager for Richmond Food Security Society. We work to ensure that all people in the community have access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods that strengthen our environment and society. To contribute, check out [www.richmondfoodsecurity.org](http://www.richmondfoodsecurity.org) and find out how you can get involved.