

Richmond Review Article – What an Army Sergeant Could Teach BC about Water

By Stephen C. Mullins

Recently I asked a number of family and friends if they could recall the thirstiest they'd ever been, a question inspired after I was parched and sunburned in 35 degree heat on a visit to Port Alberni. Turns out, everyone I talked to had sharp memories of times they thought they were literally going to die of thirst. Not pleasant, to be sure.

For myself, the incident that jumped most clearly to my mind wasn't the Port Alberni trip, but back when I was doing basic training in the Canadian Forces. My platoon had been marching for kilometers through the dry, dusty country roads of the Fraser Valley outside of Chilliwack, each of us lugging 40 kg backpacks through a July heatwave. Most of us, despite warnings from our sergeant, had emptied our canteens far too early in the day, ignoring our training in how to ration water. So when we finally got replenished from a supply truck later on, the water tasted like the nectar of the gods.

Yet despite the rigours of summer training, I also remember marvelling at the extent of the farms all through the Fraser Valley, flourishing with blueberries, peppers, cauliflower, corn and other fruits and veggies. Truly a breadbasket region, but one that faces dual threats: the slower disaster of water shortages in the summer, versus the rapid disaster of devastating floods in the spring.

Recently a major study commissioned by the Richmond Chamber of Commerce called for urgent action to prevent catastrophic flooding of the Fraser River that would cause tens of billions of dollars in damage to commercial, residential and farm development all down the valley. According to a separate study by the BC Government, climate change will make the risk of such destructive floods much more likely.

So water is on many people's minds this summer. Too much here and in recently flooded Saskatchewan and Manitoba, too little in the north where forest fires are raging out of control, or in drought-stricken California. For food security advocates, the prolonged and worsening California situation looms particularly large.

In BC, 70% of our imported fruits and vegetables come from California, including staples like lettuce, oranges, berries and broccoli. Not only is the drought causing prices to spike, but the quality is dropping as well. With salary increases either non-existent or lagging far behind the rate of inflation for low-income or middle-class families, these soaring food prices are a vexing problem.

My old sergeant would have had some choice words about how Californians have managed their water – essentially, they used it all up in the first part of their march. For most of the last century, California's climate has been unusually wet, so they largely ignored warnings that they would one day face mega-droughts that can last for decades. Now they have a big problem on their hands.

So how did California abuse its water supply? Green lawns everywhere in a desert-like climate? Check. Using and polluting huge amounts of ground water while fracking for oil and gas? Also check. Letting mega-corporations like Nestle drain precious local aquifers to sell the water out of state or to parched local residents? Big check.

But the biggest culprit is the farming industry. Farms use 80% of the water consumed in California. Much of this water goes to lucrative crops like almonds, which need tremendous amounts of water to grow. There is going to be a reckoning soon about what crops are sustainable or not in California's drier future.

However, let's not pretend BC's resource management is superior to California's. Here, we're wrestling over the fate of the Agricultural Land Reserve, we import far too much food that we can grow locally, and

we face complex challenges due to climate change. We even have Nestle here in BC, who were draining our aquifers without limit or fees until BC finally started regulating ground water just last year. We need to do better.

More than anything, all these problems emphasize that BC should be planning for food self-reliance on a larger regional scale. Too much of our planning is focused on piecemeal initiatives that will not stand up well to the stresses of a changing world. We're lucky - perhaps we have more time to avert a water crisis like that which is overtaking California. What we do here to protect our arable land, to regulate our water use, and to balance the needs of business and development with the fundamental need of food security can be a model for communities everywhere – let's make sure we get it right.

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 and find out how you can get involved.