

Farmland Access in British Columbia

Project Summary Report

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Introduction

The [Farmland Access Research Program](#) is a community-based participatory research project that aims to advance solutions for sustainable community-based land management for food security in British Columbia. We are investigating the potential of alternative models of land tenure and access to support the preservation of an actively farmed land base, the establishment of new farmers, the transition of outgoing farmers, and the strengthening of regional food systems. The research employs a food sovereignty framework. A fundamental principle of food sovereignty is community-based control over local food systems and the productive resources including land. The research aims to identify land access models and policy mechanisms that enable community-based management of the land for regional food security.

The research program is hosted by the [Centre for Sustainable Food Systems at UBC Farm](#) in partnership with the [Community Farms Program](#) of [FarmFolk CityFolk](#). We are funded by the [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada](#) and the [Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia](#).



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Accessing land for agriculture and traditional food gathering and hunting activities is fundamental to the advancement of sustainable regional food systems in British Columbia. This requires both the protection of existing farm and foodlands and land access models that enable sustainable livelihoods and support regional food security. Without programs and policies to support a new generation of farmers and mechanisms to support land access, critical foodlands may be lost to competing uses including urban development and resource extraction. The [Agricultural Land Reserve](#), a provincial zoning policy, has been instrumental in protecting agricultural lands in BC. The ALR policy does not, however, adequately address the challenge of land access on ALR zoned lands for food production. With the passage of [Bill 24](#) in May 2014 to amend the permitted uses and governance of ALR lands, the protection may be weakened.

The agricultural sector in British Columbia faces interrelated challenges of farmer attrition, farmland loss, rising cost of farmland, and non-farm uses of farmland.

1. **Farmer Attrition:** Less than 6% of farmers in British Columbia are under the age of 35, and more than 50% of farmers are over the age of 55. See Figure 1¹.

2. **Farmland Loss:** Over 140,000 hectares of land have been removed from BC's Agricultural Land Reserve since 1973, much of this was prime farmland with access to urban markets.

3. **Lack of Accessible Farmland:**

- The cost of farmland in BC has risen sharply² and is increasingly prohibitive to new and beginning farmers. Non-farm uses of farmland and land speculation drive up the cost of farmland.
- In 2010 the ALC reported 4,759,829 ha of land in the ALR³, but only 55% of this is actively farmed⁴ (as measured by census Canada, this may not include land that is being used for non-agricultural forms of food provisioning).
- High land costs have resulted in an increase in farmland that is rented and decreased ownership of farmland by farmers in BC. See Figure 2 below⁵.

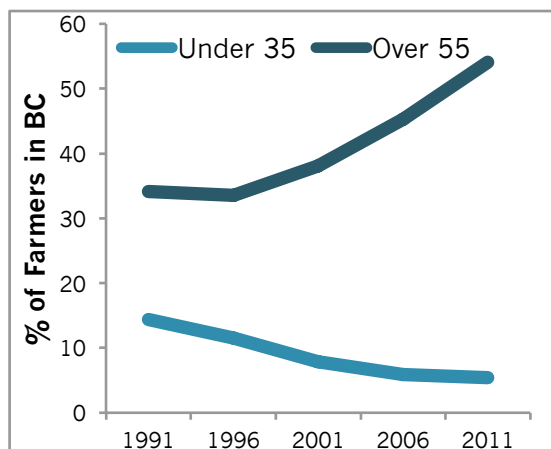


Figure 1: Trend towards declining young farmers and rising proportion of farmers over 55 years of age in BC.

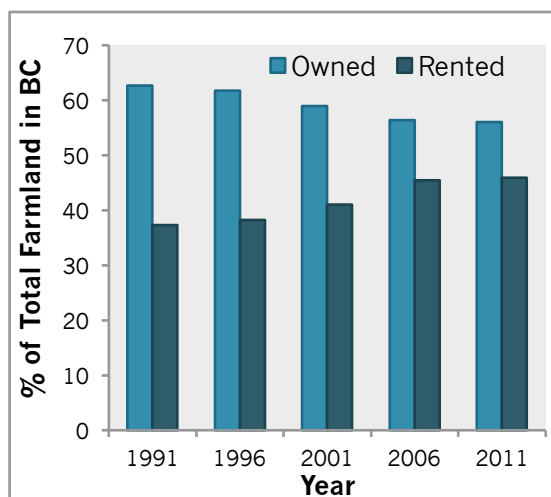


Figure 2: Trend towards declining proportion of total farmland that is owned by the operator and increase in rented farmland in BC.

¹ Statistics Canada. (2012). Table 004-0017 - Census of Agriculture, number of farm operators by sex, age and paid non-farm work, Canada and provinces, every 5 years (number). CANSIM (database). Last updated December 10, 2012.

² Statistics Canada. (2012). Table 002-0003 - Value per acre of farm land and buildings, at July 1, annual (dollars), CANSIM (database).

³ Agricultural Land Commission. (2010). Table 2: Area Included/Excluded from the ALR by Regional District, 1974 – 2009. Government of British Columbia. Retrieved from http://www.alc.gov.bc.ca/alr/stats/Statistics_TOC.htm. Accessed on May 3, 2013.

⁴ Statistics Canada. (2012). Table 004-0002 - Census of Agriculture, total area of farms and use of farm land, Canada and provinces, every 5 years (number unless otherwise noted).). Last updated December 10, 2012.

⁵ Statistics Canada. (2012). Table 004-0001 - Census of Agriculture, number and area of farms and farmland area by tenure, Canada and provinces, every 5 years (number unless otherwise noted). CANSIM (database). Last updated December 10, 2012.

Survey Participants on Land Access in BC:

"The cost of land is by far the #1 issue."

"With the extremely high cost of land, hard work and low income in farming, it is nearly impossible to farm in the B.C. region...Farming in B.C. is now for the rich/old/inherited people. Everyone else can only hope to rent (be subordinate to the owner)."

"Living in the Okanagan, land prices are the biggest challenge. To buy a large enough piece of land to farm profitably is almost impossible. Leases are a challenge as many properties are also for sale so it makes it less desirable to make improvements."

"The hardest part is finding affordable land. My dream farm is just down the road from me, but at over one million dollars, I don't have much hope in obtaining it!"

"Many parcels of land in my area have been taken out of primary agriculture due to large rural residences."

"Small farmers have tonnes of support out here, but land access (and REAL land access, wherein the land actually belongs to the farmer, because leasing is not the same thing), is an insurmountable issue for many."

"It's nearly impossible to purchase agricultural land without being in debt for the rest of my life."

Research Methods

The research used multiple methods. We conducted an online survey of beginning and prospective farmers in BC, interviewed farmers employing alternative models of land access, and interviewed farmer organizations providing support programs for beginning farmers and/or farmland access. We participated in regional events on farmer training, new farmer networking, and land access. We also engaged in participatory action research with the [Community Farms Program](#) and accessed census data to understand the larger picture around farmland access in BC.

Beginning and Young Farmers In British Columbia

We developed and distributed an online survey for young, beginning and prospective farmers through beginning farmer networks and organizations across BC, including [Young Agrarians](#), [Community Futures Fraser Fort George Beyond the Market Program](#), [BC Young Farmers](#), [Certified Organic Associations of BC](#), and the [UBC Centre for Sustainable Food Systems](#). We defined a prospective farmer as an individual who plans to start a farm operation within the next 5 years. In our study we defined young farmer as under 35 years of age to coincide with statistics Canada age classifications. We defined a beginning farmer as having farmed as a primary operator (not including work as a farmhand or apprentice) for less than 10 years. The survey was open from July 2013 to January 2014. There were a total of 59 prospective farmer responses and 35 young and beginning farmer responses.

Background of Prospective and Beginning Farmers

In our survey we found that 85% of prospective farmers and 72% of current young and beginning farmers were from non-farming backgrounds. Surveys of new farmers in Ontario⁶ and across the United States⁷ similarly found a large majority of respondents entering agriculture from non-farming backgrounds (73% of 432 farmers in Ontario and 78% of 1,053 farmers in the US). The trend towards declining young farmers and increasing average

⁶ Knibb, H. (2011). *Learning to Become a Farmer: Findings from a FarmON Alliance Survey of New Farmers in Ontario* (p. 28). Ontario: FarmON Alliance.

⁷ Shute, L., Avery Anderson, Bernhardt, H., Creech, T., vT Fleming, S., Oakley, E., & Shute, B. (2011). *Building a Future With Farmers: Challenges Faced by Young, American Farmers and a National Strategy to Help Them Succeed* (pp. 1–44). National Young Farmers' Coalition.

age of farmers has been occurring over the past 25 years in BC and is indicative of a decline in inter-generational farm transfers and an exodus of young people from agriculture. The preliminary finding that there are significant numbers of people entering agriculture from a non-farming background suggests an expansion of the traditional route of entry with potential implications for both the structure of agriculture in BC as well as for the programming and resource needs of these new farm entrants. Without land access through inter-generational inheritance and with land values and capital costs that are prohibitive to many starting out, some beginning and young farmers are finding alternative ways to access land and enter the agricultural sector. If a trend towards declining farm family transfers and a rise in non-traditional entry into the sector continues, the need for increased understanding of and support for alternative land access mechanisms and appropriate policies will grow.

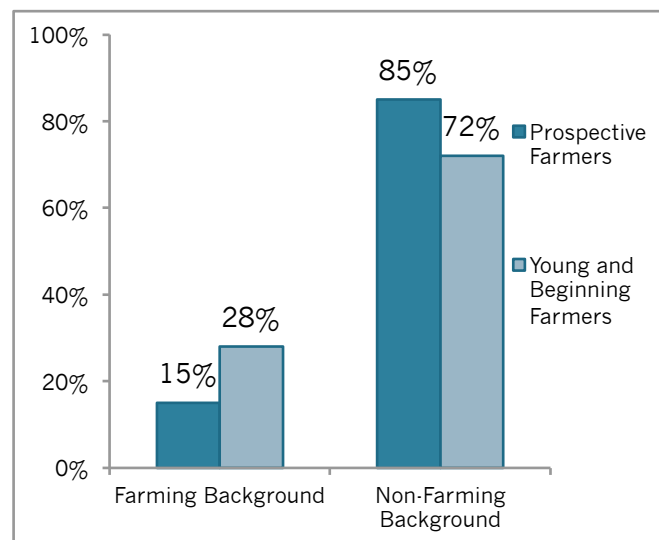


Figure 3: Proportion of survey respondents from farming and non-farming backgrounds. We defined a farming background as “having lived on a farm for 5 years or more at some point in your life.”

Education & Training

About 70% of respondents had completed a university degree but only 25% of respondents had completed a degree related to agriculture. About one-third of our respondents had completed a formal apprenticeship program through an organization, such as [UBC Centre for Sustainable Food Systems](#), [Richmond Farm School](#), [SOIL Apprenticeship Program](#), and the large majority of respondents - both of prospective and new farmers - had gained agricultural training through volunteering and/or on-farm employment. Respondents indicated that farmer-to-farmer mentoring programs are the most valued form of training. Our survey found that in comparison to the other barriers that farmers face, a lack of knowledge or insufficient training was not considered a significant barrier to establishment (see Table 1 below).

Land & Production

Survey participants indicated the highest levels of preference to farm on Vancouver Island, the Lower Mainland and the Okanagan, which correlates to the regions suffering from the most competition for land and highest land prices. Housing was identified as being very important or important to a large majority of respondents seeking land. The availability of housing on or near the land can be a challenge for farmers entering into non-ownership agreements such as leases, cooperatives, or farming on public land.

Our respondents expressed a clear preference towards small-scale farming, ecological production systems, diversified production and diversified income streams. 76% of beginning and young farmer respondents are farming less than 20 acres and 84% of prospective farmer respondents are seeking less than 20 acres of land. However 89% of current farmer respondents indicated they would like to expand their land base. Diversified production systems were predominant amongst respondents with 74% of the current farmers and 100% of prospective farmers selecting more than one production category. Diversification of income streams was also predominant, with 78% of farmer respondents and 94% of prospective respondents indicating that they do/plan to either generate revenue through non-farming activities on the land or with a second off-farm income. Environmental stewardship was of high importance to nearly all respondents and organic practices were indicated to be important but certification of less importance.

Barriers to Establishing a New Farm Operation in BC

Understanding and addressing barriers to entry and successful establishment is one part of addressing the overall issue of farmer attrition and maintaining a regional agricultural sector in BC. The farming sector overall, and in specific small scale farms in BC, face serious challenges to economic viability. Farms in the under \$100,000 revenue classes have an average negative income⁸ and the majority of farms are supported by off-farm income of the farmer and/or spouse. Addressing the barriers to entry needs to be coupled with programs and policies that address the long-term economic viability of farmers in BC.

Table 1: Respondents were asked to rate the significance of barriers to establishment, based on their experiences, on a 7 point scale. The barriers are listed in the table below in order of most to least significant and the percentage in brackets denotes the number of respondents who considered the barrier as 'extremely' or 'highly' significant.

Prospective Farmers	Current Young/Beginning Farmers
1. Cost of land (78%)	1. Cost of land (65%)
2. Lack of capital (65%)	2. Lack of capital (53%)
3. Lack of farmland that is currently available (45%)	3. Lack of farmland that is currently available (38%)
4. Lack of the appropriate type of farmland available (45%)	4. Access to credit (35%)
5. Access to credit (44%)	5. Low profitability in the agricultural sector (33%)
6. Negotiation of favourable land access (28%)	6. Lack of the appropriate type of farmland (32%)
7. Prohibitive zoning/government regulations (27%)	7. Lack of farmland in region (26%)
8. Low profitability in the agricultural sector (24%)	8. Negotiation of favourable land access agreement (26%)
9. Lack of farmland in your region (20%)	9. Prohibitive zoning/government regulations (24%)
10. Lack of markets/distribution channels (20%)	10. Lack of community or social support (18%)
11. Lack of community or social support (14%)	11. Lack of knowledge or insufficient training (6%)
12. Lack of training and resources for beginning farmers (10%)	12. Lack of markets/distribution channels (3%)
13. Lack of knowledge or insufficient training (6%)	13. Lack of training and resources for beginning farmers (3%)

The top three most significant barriers to establishment directly correlate with the high cost of farmland and issues with farmland accessibility in BC discussed above. These findings further support the need for research and initiatives to address farmland access in BC.

Attitudes Towards Alternative Land Access And Operating Arrangements

Alternative land access mechanism and operating arrangements have been identified as one strategy to overcome barriers to land access and establishment. In our survey we asked prospective farmers what their ideal access and operating arrangements were and then asked them to rate their willingness to participate in a set of alternative arrangements that exist in practice in BC. Private ownership was the dominant 1st choice at 67% of respondents and cooperative ownership was 1st choice for 22% of respondents and was the dominant 2nd choice at 39%. Any respondent who selected lease or hired farm operator as one of their three choices was then asked if they hope to own land in the future and 100% of respondents said they hope to own their own land in the future. There is a disconnect, which young and beginning farmers recognize, between the ideal and what is possible with respect to land access in BC. Prospective farmers attitudes towards alternative access and operating arrangements are shown in Table 2 below.

⁸ Statistics Canada. (2012). Table 002-0037 - Average off-farm income and average net operating income of farm operators by revenue class, incorporated and unincorporated sectors, annual (dollars unless otherwise noted), CANSIM (database).

Table 2: Prospective farmers were asked to rate their willingness to accept different types of land access and operating arrangements. A 7 point labeled rating scale was used ranging from ‘definitely’ willing to accept to ‘definitely not’ willing to accept the presented arrangement. The table below shows the findings, with the arrangements listed from highest to lowest level of willingness to engage.

Level of Willingness	Land Access Arrangement	Operating Arrangement
High	Farm transfer arrangement with retiring farmer Cooperative land ownership with other farmers	Individual or family farm (sole proprietorship) Incorporated family farm business
Moderate	Lease on publicly owned land Cooperative land ownership with farmers and non-farmers Lease on land owned by a cooperative of non-farmers Lease on privately owned land	Formal Partnership (written agreement) Formally registered cooperative Community farm or Eco-village arrangement Independent farm businesses sharing infrastructure on land
Low	Cropshare arrangement with a land owner Hired farm operator by a non-profit or social enterprise Hired farm operator by a private land owner Access arrangement with residential land owners	Incorporation with non-family members Informal cooperative Informal Partnership Hired farm operator/manager

Participant attitudes towards alternative land access and operating arrangements show a higher level of willingness in models with tenure security and a low level of willingness towards arrangements that lack tenure security and stability. This finding further informs the need to ensure that the alternative land access models and mechanisms that are developed for farmland access provide appropriate tenure to farmers and do not merely facilitate tenuous rental or land sharing situations.

Alternative Land Access

In 2009 approximately 20 community farms in BC were documented and explored in a [joint report](#) by Hannah Wittman and the [Community Farms Program](#). Since 2009 the number of farms using alternative land access and the diversity of models and mechanisms that are being used has increased. There has also been a growth in new farmer networks and organizations providing land access support to farmers. In 2013 we recorded over 60 examples of farms or farm organizations employing alternative models of access across the province.

Based on interviews with farmers and organizations and background research on land access models we developed a typology of alternative access which integrates four elements: 1) the means through which the land is owned or held, 2) the means by which the land is accessed by the farmers, 3) the organization or operating arrangements on the land, and 4) the purpose of the operation (see Figure 4). We found that in practice these

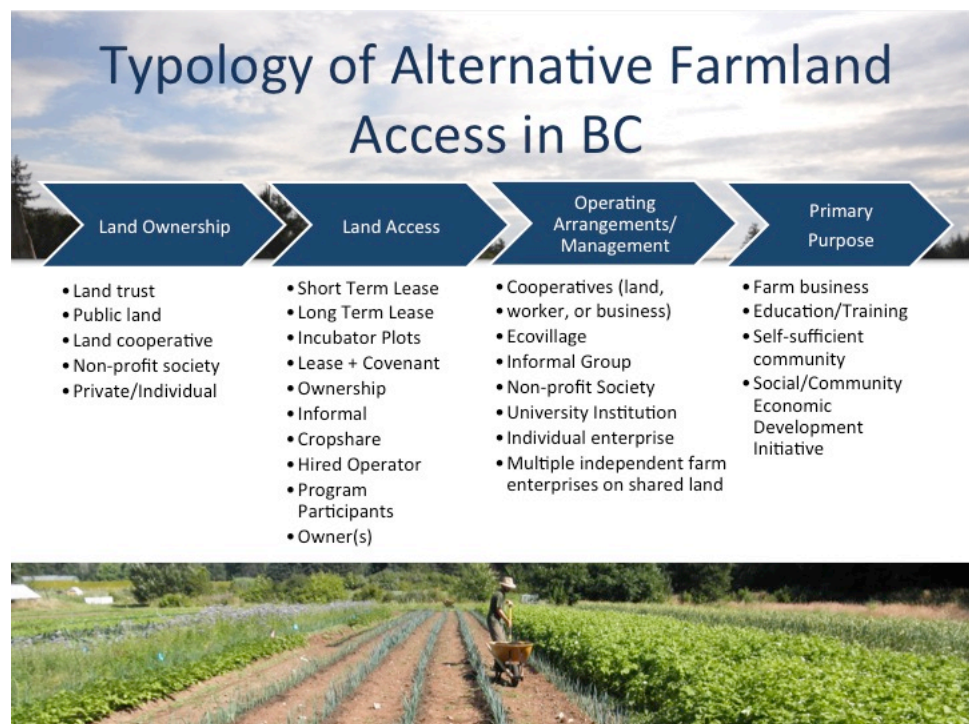


Figure 4: Alternative farmland access models and mechanisms in Birtish Columbia were found to be highly diverse and involve various combinations of the above four categories.

elements were being combined in all different ways to access and manage farmland and in many instances to serve additional social or economic development goals in the community.

The primary approaches that are being used to advanced farmland access through alternative means to private ownership are listed below. Within these approaches there are different models that integrate different mechanisms of land ownership, access and management.

1. **Cooperative or Community Farm:** Land is cooperatively owned by farmers and/or community members and/or the farming enterprises is structured as a cooperative businesses. The [Community Farms Program](#) developed the following definition: “A community farm is a multi-functional farm where the land is held “in trust” for community rather than owned privately. A community group or co-operative governs the land use agreements, and agricultural uses of the land are shared by a community of farmers. The primary focus of a community farm is local food production using sustainable agricultural practices. Land holders, land managers, and farmers work together by mutual agreement.” Cooperative ownership of land reduces the land cost at the individual level, cooperative operating arrangements allows for sharing of capital costs and sharing of knowledge and support networks for farmers. Cooperatives or community farms can be structured in several different ways.
2. **Land Trusts & Covenants:** A land trust is a not-for-profit organization whose mandate is to protect land for a particular value and/or to prevent undesirable land use changes. Farmland trusts operate using the same principles as nature conservation trusts but with a mandate to protect and manage agricultural land for the purpose of maintaining an actively farmed agricultural land base. The protection of the land is achieved either through land ownership (purchased or donated) by the trust or through the establishment of a legally binding covenant held by the trust and attached to the land title. Land owned by a land trust is effectively removed from the real estate market and is thereby no longer subject to development pressures and speculation. Land that is protected under a covenant can still be sold on the real estate market, however the covenant limits the uses of the land for all subsequent owners and as such removes the land from development pressure. Land owned by the trust is made available to farmer(s), typically through affordable long term leases.
3. **Public Land:** Land held by the municipal or provincial government is made available for agriculture. Access to the land is managed by a non-profit society or land trust organization and made available to farmers through leases.
4. **Incubator Farms & Agricultural Training Centres:** Land is typically public land or owned by a non-profit society and is managed by a non-profit society. Small plots of land are leased to beginning farmers for a limited amount of time (3 – 5 years). The managing organization often provides various physical resources such as equipment and infrastructure as well as provides training and educational resources to aid the beginning farmers. Having multiple beginning farmers on the same land also creates peer-to-peer support through the establishment phase. Incubator farms allow for beginning farmers to gain knowledge and establish their business in a supportive environment with very minimal capital investment and associated debt. There are also examples of agricultural training centres that focus on skill building, community food security and/or creating employment opportunities rather than farm operators specifically.
5. **Land Linking:** A third party organization facilitates connections between land owners with available farmland and farmers seeking access to farmland. The access arrangement is determined by the land owner and farmer and varies. Many land linking organizations also provide support services on tenure arrangements and drafting lease agreements to both land owners and seekers.
6. **Informal Access/Yards:** Handshake agreements or memorandums of understanding between land owners and farmers. Increasingly common in urban and peri-urban areas between residential land owners and farmers.

“The cost of land and the cost of start-up is prohibitive, and I am not willing to take on that level of debt. So I am actively searching out creative ways of sharing land ownership and start-up cost with others, in a cooperative fashion, as a way of supporting others in their farming pursuits.” – Survey Participant

“Sharing resources is key - farming is expensive and very time consuming. Sharing tractors, jobs, even creating a marketing plan together makes it work. The arrangement that is ideal for me is a community farm where each person owns and runs their own farm.” – Survey Participant

“I can’t afford my own land and I know that my current land tenure situation isn’t stable, but I can’t just wait around, I want to farm now.” – Community Farms Roundtable Participant, 2014

In our survey of alternative access models and approaches, we observed a rise in models that provide short term access - incubator farms, agricultural training centres, land linking programs, and informal access agreements. These models are particularly important for farmers who are just starting out. We found that there is still room for expansion of models that can provide longer term, secure access for farmers. There are many farmers who want to be on the land right away and models like backyard farming and land linking are enabling immediate access, which is important especially in terms of facilitating entry into farming and increasing new farmers.

It is also necessary to consider the root problems being faced and how farmland access strategies can challenge, and not just temporarily circumvent, unsustainable market driven land dynamics. Strategies such as land trusts and community farm models have the potential to remove land from market forces and both protect farmland from speculation or development and provide secure land tenure for farmers. Finding and supporting creative solutions to facilitate farmland access and grow new farmers through the private and voluntary sector must be integrated with public policy development that addresses underlying structural problems within the agricultural sector to enable the sustainable management of farmland for regional food production over the long term.

Next Steps

A more in depth analysis of the specific models and approaches as well as municipal and provincial policy recommendations are currently being developed and will be released in another report. Collaboration with the Community Farms Program is ongoing with the aim to support the continued development of the program and provision of resources to farmers and prospective farmers seeking support on alternative land access. With renewed funding from the [Real Estate Foundation of BC](#) and funding from [VanCity](#) the research team will be focusing on the advancement of regional and provincial farmland trust models for BC in collaboration with [FarmFolk CityFolk](#) and with [CR-FAIR \(Capital Regional Food and Agriculture Initiative Roundtable\)](#) based in Victoria. There is currently no provincial trust that will acquire farmland or hold affirmative agricultural covenants in BC. There are several small localized farmland trust that have been initiated but with limited capacity and scope. This project will investigate, provincial models, a regional trust network model, and a trust model integrated with municipal government.

Further Information:

[Farmland Access Research Program](#), at the [UBC Centre for Sustainable Food Systems](#)

[Community Farms Program](#), at [FarmFolk CityFolk](#)

[CR-FAIR \(Capital Regional Food and Agriculture Initiative Roundtable\)](#)

Young and beginning farmer networks – [Young Agrarians](#), [BC Young Farmers](#), [Community Futures Beyond the Market Program](#)

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