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COUNTRY LIFE IN BC

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Province signals ALR changes

New year, new rules for landowners

by PETER MITHAM

RICHMOND – Changes are coming to what's allowed within the Agricultural Land Reserve, but ongoing fallout from regulations introduced last winter following the passage of Bill 52 are prompting the province to give landowners a heads-up.

"There's a sense of urgency on some of these issues that would make us want to move quickly," assistant deputy minister of agriculture James Mack told a gathering of farmers institute representatives in Richmond on November 29.

The meeting, the second annual gathering of farmers institutes organized by BC agriculture minister Lana Popham, marked the final bilateral meeting in a public consultation process on supporting farming in the ALR that began September 19 in Merville. The consultation included eight public meetings that attracted 626 people as well as an online survey that drew 1,832 responses. Bilateral

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Winter wonderland

The Shuswap River winds its way through snow-covered farmland north of Enderby. LAUREL NEUFELD PHOTO

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Growers support piece rates

by PETER MITHAM

VICTORIA – A study of BC piece rates the BC Ministry of Labour commissioned in September 2018 has shown broad support for the existing system.

Published in December, the study found 90% of growers support the existing system whereby government setting rates for workers who pick fruit and vegetables. Workers in the Thompson-Okanagan region expressed 94% satisfaction with the piece rate, with 87% saying they

wouldn't be harvesters if paid the minimum wage.

The piece rate in most sectors generally pays above minimum wage. Data from workers themselves indicate grapes, prune plums and cherries pay best, delivering \$29.15, \$20.54 and \$18.30 an hour, respectively. The minimum wage is \$13.85 an hour.

However, the study concluded that berry pickers in the Fraser Valley often don't receive minimum wage. The situation is particularly acute in blueberries, where the

study found "harvest workers were making less than minimum wage in all cases." Workers reported making the equivalent of just \$4.62 an hour.

However, berries are the commodity that would also be hurt most by any increase in piece rates to ensure that workers receive at least minimum wage for their efforts. Right now, according to the study, harvesting costs work out to 40% to 50% of the price blueberry growers

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