

Farm Worker Housing Policy Review

The availability of farm help housing is of substantial concern for many in the agriculture industry. Accommodations are needed for both permanent farm help and for temporary farm workers, including migrant workers. The increasing cost of housing locally puts additional pressure on farmers seeking seasonal and affordable accommodation.

Farmers are open to building on farm housing to address this need, but are limited by regulations which are designed to protect arable farm land. Local and provincial government bodies, agricultural organizations and farmers are all seeking greater clarity around policies which allow farm worker housing. For example, the 2008/09 Agricultural Land Commission Business Plan noted that a great deal of the Commission's work was addressing requests around farm worker housing in the Agricultural Land Reserve. The Peninsula Agriculture Commission also held a workshop on this topic.

Regulations which govern this housing are found in local bylaws, the Local Government Act, Agricultural Land Commission Act and the Employment Standards Act. The intersection of these regulations, as well as balancing the various needs of the community makes decisions about farm worker housing complex. Common concerns voiced about proposed housing include permanence, size, location, use of arable land, concentration, and access to services such as recreation and transportation. The question of how one might determine bona fide farm worker housing, versus the encroachment of housing on farmland overlays these discussions.

Central Saanich, a rural municipality on Southern Vancouver Island, has recently faced substantial public discussion around a proposal for farm worker housing. As a municipality, Central Saanich has committed to supporting agriculture, including provisions in the Official Community Plan. They have identified the need for clear criteria to determine eligibility for approving additional dwelling(s) for farm employees. Other municipalities, also struggling with this issue, would find these criteria helpful in determining their own processes and policies.

The Community Council applied to CMHC's "Affordability and Choice Today" fund to do a review of Farm Worker Housing policies working with the District of Central Saanich. The grant has been approved and the project will be implemented beginning in September.