

Canadian-grown produce is key to sustainability

By Mark Pavilons

Changing weather patterns across the globe have impacted our food supply, and if we don't take more than a passing interest, we're in for a harsh awakening.

Local food experts are sounding the alarm bells that if consumers don't take note, they will not only be paying exorbitant prices for imported products, but we may one day find ourselves in big trouble.

The worst drought in California's history will result in an estimated loss of \$5 billion in production and indirect economic impacts. It will also inflate the prices of imported products in Canadian grocery stores later this year.

Canadians are paying record high prices for their produce. What's wrong with relying on imports?

According to Holland Marsh farmer and King Councillor Avia Eek, the produce industry is a global market. We have numerous trading partners outside of Canada, either because of availability of the produce or the fact it's just cheaper for the big chain stores to acquire it outside of our country. This is due to lower production costs, labour, different rules and regulations regarding crop protection.

Eek observed that in order to produce food you need water. You also need healthy soil.

California provides Canadians with much of our produce through the winter months. Canadians can enjoy home-grown carrots, onions, cabbage, apples, turnip, potatoes, rutabagas, beets, parsnips, root celery, and starting around March, tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers. But things like lettuce, cauliflower, broccoli, grapes, other tender fruits and veggies come from our trading partners outside of Canada.

If they have a weather event that wipes out their crop, or experience a drought or too much precipitation that impacts their food production negatively, we are impacted because at certain times of the year, we rely heavily on imports to feed us.

There is plenty of Canadian produce, but people are used to a variety of food throughout the winter, Eek observed. Think back to when you were growing up in our house we ate seasonally.

Truth be told, we do not pay nearly enough for the food we eat the prices we pay, do not reflect the true cost of food production in this country.

Buying locally serves a couple of purposes, she pointed out. It helps keep our own farmers viable and able to continue to grow and expand their farm operations to meet the needs of our growing population. It's expensive to farm when you consider land purchase, equipment purchase, labour costs, cost to keep up with rules and regulations for food safety, environment, human rights.

And, buying local gives us food security. Imagine if the borders were shut down, and no imports were able to reach us. Wars have been won or lost based on food availability!

Jamie Reaume, executive director of the Holland Marsh Growers' Association, said the age of cheap California produce has come to an end. And consumers need to be aware of this.

China has lost eight million acres of farmland to contaminated soil.

Climate shifts are taking place all over the world, and having devastating impacts on our food supply. Reaume noted Brazil, too, has suffered from a record lack of water. There's no coming back from that one, he observed.

We continue to ignore these (occurrences) at our own peril, he stressed.

The bottom line is consumers don't want to give up their non-seasonal food choices. They want to eat things like oranges, strawberries and kiwis year-round. In the consumer-driven marketplace, demand wins out, as long as consumers are willing to pay. Sustainability or self-sufficiency, is key and we have better opportunities here in Canada today. But the reality is we live in high-cost society.

Reaume pointed out Canadians have never known hunger.

He recently met with a delegation from Nigeria, which is going through hardship trying to find methods to feed 170 million people. Does accessing local food supply help? Absolutely, Reaume said, but it takes time to change our decades-old mind set. We've allowed a handful of companies dictate how we eat, but we have to start looking at the home front and our own national resources.

Jason Verkaik, of the Marsh-based Carron Farms, said we have to have relationships with other countries in a balance through an integrated system. In season, local growers can supply grocery stores with Canadian grown produce. But we rely tremendously on imports, too. The only way the system will ultimately work and flourish is with a solid base at home.

Verkaik said Canada and the U.S. share an estimated \$10 billion in trade of produce per year. While we export roughly \$3 billion, the majority is still imported directly or indirectly from the U.S.

These are staggering numbers, he said. If we rely 100% on imports, we're in big trouble, he said.

We need a solid national base if for no other reason than to sustain ourselves.
?We have to really encourage and promote local farmers as much as possible,??Verkaik said.
The continued health of our agricultural sector is key to our own sustainability.