

Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY
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Title: Future of Food in the Kootenays Conference II: Rebuilding Local Food Systems

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Jon Steinman: And this is Deconstructing Dinner produced in Nelson, British Columbia at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY and syndicated on radio stations around the world. I'm Jon Steinman and for the next hour we will continue with Part II of our series featuring recordings from the November 2007 Future of Food in the Kootenays Conference. The title of today's broadcast is Rebuilding Local Food Systems and we will be listening to two keynote speakers who helped introduce the second day of the conference. If you missed mention of this during Part I of this series, we have also set up a page on our website featuring a collection of unedited recordings from the conference, and you can access that at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner. I'd also like to thank Global Public Media for posting their own page with the audio from the conference and I do encourage listeners to check out that great site of information at globalpublicmedia.com

fade out of background music

The voices we are about to hear on today's Part II of the Future of Food in the Kootenays Conference series will be those of conference organizers Nadine Steele and Andre Piver, Sinixt Nation spokesperson Marilyn James, local foodshed animator Abra Brynne and Don Low, an agricultural economist with the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands.

This broadcast will somewhat commence backwards, in that the first clip we're going to listen to is made up of segments of conference organizers Nadine Steele and Andre Piver as they introduced the conference on the first evening of keynote speakers. Now we have already heard from two of those evening speakers on Part I of this series, but given their content was more along the lines of *why* such a conference is so important, today's broadcast will begin to focus more on how communities can begin doing something about it. And as Nadine and Andre's comments are more in line with inspiring such action, here are Nadine Steele and Andre Piver, two of the handful of organizers putting on the Future of Food in the Kootenays conference.

Nadine Steele: Eight months ago our initiating group was sparked to action, by the publication of a Vancouver Sun article, about a report by the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture. The report concluded that climate change and rising oil prices are a threat to B.C.'s ability to feed itself in the future. Add to this reduction of available farmland, declining numbers of farmers, and serious water shortages, and we arrive at a new meaning for the expression "food security." So, it's our hope that this conference will highlight a way for us to move forward together.

First and foremost, we wish to acknowledge the network of local farmers, and all those involved in local food production and distribution. (*audience applause*) Our planning group also wants to acknowledge that we stand on the sturdy shoulders of a local group Community Food Matters, who held a food forum one year ago. Together we're at the leading edge of relocalization, and this event will be a model for other communities and regions. Our major sponsors who have made it possible to bring you this caliber of conference are Columbia Basin Trust, Kootenay Food Strategy Society, Selkirk College, Kootenay Country Store Co-operative, and the Regional District of Central Kootenay. We also thank our numerous co-sponsors, supporting organizations and businesses that are listed on the back of the program.

Andre Piver: Hello everybody, I see lots of very familiar faces here, so hello friends and neighbours, welcome! If you don't hear anything else tonight, please know that we hope to inspire you to be the change that you want to see. So, we're providing networking sign-up sheets as a vehicle to create or sign-up for food self-reliance related projects. So if you've already come here with some ideas, you know, take this opportunity to make them happen. Network with other people, they're right over there (*on*) the side wall of the room. And at any point today, and of course it's a big focus of tomorrow, is actually creating networks, creating the change, not just talking about it.

Jon Steinman: And that was Nadine Steele and Andre Piver who were both part of the group that organized the Future of Food in the Kootenays Conference held in Nelson BC in November 2007. On the second day of the conference, a number of keynote speakers introduced the focus for the day, and that was the series of workshops that delegates were invited to participate in, and we'll hear recordings from the workshops on a future broadcast.

But before the keynote speakers took the podium, a welcome address first came from Marilyn James. Marilyn is a spokesperson for the Sinixt Nation. The land on which Nelson resides is the traditional territory of the Sinixt Nation also known as the Arrow Lakes People. The Canadian government has officially declared the Sinixt extinct, yet, many descendants do still reside in the region, so much so, that right here at Kootenay Co-op Radio we host the weekly program Sinixt Radio hosted by Marilyn James herself. As should be integral to any discussion taking place in this country when the issue of land use and resources are the focal point, support and approval from the original inhabitants of the territory is of

course quite important. On the other hand, due to some technical difficulties, we weren't able to record the *beginning* of her welcome address, but here is Marilyn James sharing her thoughts and her support to conference delegates.

Marilyn James: . . . which brings me to another little important fact. Water is Life. Water is all about food. Water is critical. There are just under 1000 micro-hydro projects slated for this province, just under 500 for our region. When you take away the viability of a landscape to regenerate itself, and you take away the potential for future sustainable development, we create critical issues that our children's children's children's children will deal with, if they're able to survive the landscape that we've laid out. These are things that I feel compelled to mention, because these are critical issues. Obviously these are some of the issues that you might touch on today, these are issues that you'll be giving your efforts to and your passions. I'm just happy to see the people in this room, around this issue, because these are important issues and they decide all of our future.

So with that, I want to welcome you to Sinixt territory. I embrace this work. I honor your work in this field. And for your thoughts, for your hearts, for your minds, for your coming together for our future, I offer you in your conference this tobacco. And I offer it to the North, to the East, to the South, to the West, and to our sacred mountain Frog Mountain. Grandmother and Grandfather, thank you for this day, thank you for bringing these people together, to talk about our future, to talk about the food that will feed our babies' babies when they come into this world. And that they take all the care and the honour, as if they were placing that food in the mouths of those babes with their own hand. Lim Limpt, Lim Limpt, Lim Limpt, Lim Limpt. (*audience applause*)

Jon Steinman: And that was Marilyn James – a spokesperson for the Sinixt Nation welcoming delegates at the November Future of Food in the Kootenays Conference hosted in Nelson, British Columbia. Following Marilyn was the day's first keynote speaker – Abra Brynne, who has appeared here on Deconstructing Dinner on a number of occasions. She is known as a foodshed animator given her many roles within food-related organizations in the region. She is among other roles, the Secretary of the Kootenay Organic Growers Society, the Board President of the Kootenay Country Store Co-operative and a regional assistant with the BC Meat Industry Enhancement Strategy. Abra prepared a speech on why local food systems need to be rebuilt, and provided a list of some steps to begin going about it.

This is Deconstructing Dinner.

Abra Brynne: Imagine a feast with your family or community. Everyone has participated in some way in creating this feast. There is conversation and laughter. Before you is a laden plate from which steam and amazing fragrances are rising. There is also a wonderful assortment of colors and textures to please your visual and oral palates. The taste of each mouthful explodes in your mouth

and makes you pause with the sheer sensory pleasure of it all. You are feeding your body and soul and even your community as you share this wonderful feast. Food holds a critically important role in our life, but in our culture we generally have little time for it, little awareness of the efforts and energy that have gone into the production of that source of nourishment and little respect or gratitude to those who have harvested and made that food available to us. We have become dumbed-down consumers and participants in perpetuating an industrial food system, with disastrous repercussions. Many of these repercussions have been or will be elaborated upon by others at this conference, but here is a partial list of what I perceive to be some of the disastrous repercussions:

- Pollution of our water, air and soils
- Massive topsoil loss, desertification and loss of forests around the world in favor of only marginal croplands
- Hunger even in the face of bumper crops
- Loss of small family farms and the death of many rural communities
- The death of demoralized farmers through suicide. This happens around the world as farmers crumble under the weight of ongoing crises of (*decreased*) income, exacerbated by increasing challenges from unpredictable weather.
- Loss of biodiversity
- Genetic engineering of crops and livestock
- Monoculture malnutrition and a host of related, utterly preventable diseases and conditions
- Deskilling of our populations. Most of us have lost the ability to raise and process crops or livestock, in addition to even knowing how to cook in our own kitchens.
- No democratic control of the food system almost anywhere in the world.

I would like to take a minute to expand upon this last point. We live in this wonderful paradox of the large corporations that control the food system claiming that the market, as in we the consumers, are actually in control. We, the marketplace, determine what is on our grocery store shelves, the size, the color, availability and shape. And that is true, but only to a very limited degree. I remember reading a number of years ago in a grocery industry publication that this proverbial marketplace requires that cantaloupes be the equivalent of a B-cup bra in size in order to be placed on produce shelves around the world. What a bra size has to do with the selection that a person makes based on what can be consumed in her or his household before the food is past its prime is beyond me.

The point I'm trying to get at is that our choices and therefore supposed control of the marketplace is utterly limited by what is on offer, because you can bet that that B-cup bra size has been incorporated, undoubtedly in other language, into the requirements for international trade in cantaloupes. Those whose product is neither a C-cup nor an A-cup win the commodity lottery and get to supply those cantaloupes to the grocery industry. We may be consumers with power in our

purchasing habits, but it is mostly a passive power, if that is not too much of an oxymoron.

Which is why I'm struggling to find a concept that can move us beyond passively accepting the offerings of the trans-national corporations that currently control the global food system, to *(being)* proactive participants in creating a better, more just and sustainable version. And we are running out of time to undertake this undeniably mammoth task. But I believe that it is possible, mostly because I don't think we have any other option, if we don't want to enter the endangered species list, though based on last night's presentations we may already be there. So I'm going to take a page out of Corky Evans' book and tell you a bit of a story to illustrate why I think it is possible.

I am the runt from a family of 13. Luckily I was not drowned at birth, and was raised, along with my 9 surviving siblings, on a farm in the Okanagan. We raised all of our own vegetables, fruit and most of our meat needs. And I had the luxury, through participating in a working farm, of being completely immersed in a healthy food culture. That food culture was based on some important principals.

- We all worked, offering what was within our capacity to benefit the whole clan.

- We worked in partnership with the cycle of the seasons, monitoring Mother Nature so that we knew when to plant the seeds, thin the apples, harvest the peas, and get the cattle into the corrals.

- Water was an essential component of our farm, as was the soil.

- Often things did not go as expected, but by having such a numerous workforce we could adapt.

- Our ability to adapt was also based on diverse crops and varieties and the fact that since we spent most of our time outside, we were able to catch and respond to any ecological changes quickly.

- Our hard work, from hauling rocks and irrigation pipes, to picking countless apples and processing the seemingly endless supply of harvested vegetables paid off in the fruits of our labor. A wondrous, healthy, vibrant food supply all produced on the 8 acres surrounding our farmhouse.

My experience of a food culture went beyond the farm boundary, since in the 1960's and 70's of my childhood, there still existed locally the elements of a food system that we need to rebuild here.

Our tree fruit went to the Vernon Fruit Union, a storage and marketing co-operative for local orchardists. Our cattle were killed humanely on *(our)* farm by my father, and then taken to a butcher two miles away to be cut and wrapped and brought back to the farm. We got eggs and chicken from my maternal grandparents, and our milk was delivered to our home by the local dairy, the North Okanagan Creamery Association. Our cheddar cheese was the best in the world, produced by a small local company known as Armstrong Cheese, sourcing their milk from area cows.

When I was 18 I started working at Butcher Boys, the grocery and butcher store that cut and wrapped our farm beef for years. I worked in the meat department at a time when a large portion of the back end of grocery stores was still allocated to meat coolers so they could hang whole and half carcasses of various species. The butcher had the skill and the ability to cut exactly what the customer requested. And that customer knew the difference between a chuck and a sirloin.

At the ripe old age of 46 I look back and I mourn the passing of that food system, and the critical knowledge shared and used by the community of people who participated in it. However I am profoundly aware that everything I learned came from my parents and was only a portion of what they knew by necessity for surviving the Great Depression.

Both my parents grew up on farms on the Prairies in the Dirty Thirties, my father on a 3/4 section mixed livestock and grain farm in Saskatchewan, and my mother on a small subsistence farm in Manitoba. Both my parents survived childhoods of deprivation and hunger. Both their families had to abandon their respective farms in the 1930's, my father's from economic disasters of the Great Depression, despite their amazing innovations in creating soil health on their farm, and my mother's from a genuine locust plague combined with the economic challenges of the Depression. I share their stories with you only to illustrate that enormous challenges to our food supply have existed and been overcome in recent history, but not without loss and great sacrifice and labour.

On the topic of the Great Depression, I'm sure it will come as no surprise to anyone that the return to farmers for their hard work during that terrible period was abysmally low. What is more horrifying is that our current Prairie farmers who produce commodity crops are receiving a lower return than their counterparts in the Great Depression. According to the National Farmers' Union, a combination of government subsidies, increased debt loads, which now exceed 52 billion dollars, and all farm income are the main factors that allow farming to continue, despite sub-Depression level net incomes. Moreover, while the low incomes of the 1930's persisted for a decade, their current crisis is entering its 22nd year.

It is genuine insanity that we have a food system that does not pay farmers even the cost of production, never mind a living, by which I mean the ability to pay *(for)* their clothing and housing needs, to put some money away for emergencies or for the inevitable teenage growth spurts from their children and send them on to college. I mean, think of it – we consistently jeopardize our daily food supply by not adequately paying our most important industry, for lack of a better word, the one that ensures that we eat every day.

One could argue that low prices simply go hand in hand with commodity crops; in other words, the basic ingredients of many processed foodstuffs, from our daily bread to the high fructose corn syrup that can be found in almost any food

product. However, low food prices are also the bane of small-lot vegetable producers. Even if they only produce for their local marketplace, they are forced to join the billions of farmers worldwide struggling to make a living in the current global market. That market focuses almost exclusively on one characteristic, that of price. So our farmers here are in a constant price war with farmers in Chile, in China, in California. The farmers who win this war are those who accept the lowest possible price from the big corporations. Price wars may seem like a good thing for the consumer, but at best it is only a short-sighted good. For price wars, like any war, are devastating for those involved and for their communities. So devastating in fact, that between 1981 and 2001 we lost almost a quarter of all of our farms in Canada. During the same period farmers in the global south who supply so much of our annual food supply here were driven off the land, committing suicide, working as slave-labor in massive mono-cultures, drinking ever more polluted water, and losing their life-giving forests.

Part of my deep commitment to a local food system is based on an equally deep commitment to global justice. By not procuring our food from the global south, there is at least the possibility that the landless can be returned to their farms and grow food for their own communities rather than ours. By sourcing our food locally, we reduce our food miles and the corresponding abuse of the limited supply of fossil fuels and increase in global warming. By knowing the hands that raised our food, we can build communities of trust and respect. By having a reliable and locally available supply we foster our own food sovereignty where those of us who produce and consume the foods have the control over how it is done. We have the ability to ensure that those who produce the food receive a fair price for their goods. We can ensure that everyone in our communities is fed. Ultimately, having a locally-controlled food system allows us to bring our values, be they economic, environmental, cultural or social, to that system.

So how do we do it and what needs to be done? There is no easy or quick solution. Like all good things, especially those as complex as a diverse food system, it will take hard work, a long-term vision and a real commitment from each of us as individuals, as a community and ideally with the collaboration of our governments. This is not a job for the faint-hearted, but ultimately I think it is a job that must be undertaken by anyone who eats.

Jon Steinman: And you're tuned in to Deconstruction Dinner and today's Part II of a series featuring recordings from the Future of Food in the Kootenays Conference held in November 2007 in Nelson, British Columbia. You're listening to Abra Brynne speaking to an audience of 170 delegates on the second day of the Conference. Abra is known in the area as a foodshed animator and is involved in a number of local food and agriculture-related organizations. Following the remainder of Abra's talk, we will listen in on Don Low's presentation, and Don is an agricultural economist with the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture and Lands.

Abra Brynne: Over the past year or so, there has been great interest in our province in food and its source. It is hard to imagine anyone who has not heard of the “100 Mile Diet.” There have been “Eat Local” food challenges in all corners of British Columbia, generally held at the height of the local harvest season to encourage participation. Having been involved in the effort to foster local production for going on 15 years now here in the Kootenays, I can’t help but be heartened by all this activity and attention. However we have to get serious about more than local fruits and vegetables, which are pretty accessible and downright tempting in the heat of July, August and September. We have to take a hard look at what really makes up our diet, and for most of us that includes grains, dairy and meat on pretty much a daily basis, in addition to all those lovely fruits and vegetables.

I’m running out of time, so I’m going to try and skip over a few things. I wanted to elaborate on grains, and we do have some grain farmers over in the Creston area, and they need markets, and we should be their market, for a fair price. Canada’s prairie farmers are famous around the world for producing very high-quality grains, however in the past 40 years we have gone from a nation with 9.8% of the population in farming, to less than 2%. This is not by accident. There was a federal task force commissioned in 1967, which made a recommendation that two-thirds of family farms should be forced out of agriculture. That’s our government policy. Agricultural policy over the past 40 years has ensured that this has indeed happened. There are horrific stories of the challenges that farmers in Canada face. And I’m going to skip over a bunch of this because I just don’t have time. But, I wanted to raise that point because WE affect government policy. We can turn that around. We want those two-thirds of farmers back, at least.

In the foreword to Peter Rosset’s recent book “Food is Different,” George Naylor, the president of the National Family Farm Coalition in the USA, proposes some revolutionary but really only logical proposals around national agricultural policy. One of them pertains primarily to grains, and that is to help create food reserves so that bountiful crops create food security, rather than depressing prices. Imagine how wonderful it would be to have such a visionary government, that it created policy that genuinely supported our communal food security, both by creating food reserves for the hard times and by ensuring that the farmers are properly compensated for their work. This kind of vision was actually held by the government of India, and probably other governments in the south, until international trade agreements forced them to get rid of their food reserves.

George Naylor’s other proposal includes the following: to create a fair price floor so that corporate buyers pay for commodities, rather than taxpayers. The big corporations benefit greatly from the heavy subsidy program that exists in the USA, and ultimately benefit from the support programs that exist for Canadian farmers as well. In 2004 when average realized net farm income from the marketplace was negative \$10,000, forty-one of Canada’s largest agribusiness

companies posted the largest profits in their history. So our taxpayers aren't helping the farmers, they're helping the big corporations get bigger. Food is vital to our existence and we need to pay enough for it, so that we keep each and every farmer on the land. We need to make sure that they are getting their fair share of each food dollar.

We all need protein. I'm going to talk about meat now. And the many vegetarians and meat eaters who love tofu are fortunate to have Jeff Mock at the helm of SilverKing Tofu here in Nelson. But many of us want and perhaps even need to have meat in our diets. The U.N.'s Food and Agricultural Organization produced a report last year rather dauntingly entitled "Livestock's Long Shadow." Mass production meat is full of problems and I won't go into them here, there's a wealth of resources out there for anyone who's interested, but here in the Kootenays we have a history of sustainable livestock production, using land that may not really be able to produce any other foodstuffs. With the flooding of many of our valleys, hillsides can be more conducive to grazing than to cropping.

As most everyone knows, our government brought in changes to the meat inspection regulation in 2004 that have had a huge impact on traditional meat production systems across this province. These regulations are proposed as a food safety measure. Some feel that they are equally driven by international trade agreements. Whatever the case, we have seen a fairly dramatic decrease in the number of animals on the land and in the availability of locally-produced meat. This has had all sorts of repercussions, from increased weed pressure because they are no longer being grazed down by the animals, to the loss of an important fertility source for soils from the manure, to the loss of farm-tax status and increased taxes.

I personally have become intimately familiar with this regulation and its interpretation and enforcement over the past 15 months. I've been working with abattoir operators and proponents across southern BC who wish to pursue licensing. I'm on contract with the BC Food Processors Association, through the Meat Industry Enhancement Strategy to assist abattoir operators to understand and meet the many and diverse regulations and requirements that are required of them in order to obtain a license.

However I'm happy to be able to report that we have two abattoirs, both new builds, who are pursuing licensing in our region, and I have their permission to share this information, Tom Tarzwell in Creston, and the Slocan Valley Abattoir Co-operative, which will be based near the village of Slocan. I'm telling you about this because this is a long-held dream of mine coming true, to actually have commercially-available meat in this foodshed. But I am also soliciting your very real support of these hard-working people. If we want to eat meat, and meat (*which*) we know is not loaded with chemical and hormones, from animals that have had good lives and were well handled right through to their death, then we need to have abattoirs in our home region. We need to educate ourselves about

how a modern-day plant is run and to help allay worries about noise, smell and frankly, the killing. We need to encourage our local governments to support the local abattoirs, through policy on issues like waste disposal and land zoning. And we need to be prepared to pay a fair price for the resulting meat.

Tom Tarzwell's plant will be a private business serving the many farmers in the Creston Valley and beyond. The Slocan Valley Abattoir Co-operative is just that, a co-operative seeking members to help steer this project through the building stage and onwards as it goes into production next fall. Members in the Co-op can also invest in this essential part of our local food system.

And I know that I need to wrap-up, but in answer to the first question posed last night, "How do we get them to do something?" I'm paraphrasing. I would like to suggest that we don't get *them* to do anything, we get ourselves to take on a specific part of rebuilding the food system that interests us, and that we have or want to acquire the skills for. Here's a partial list of concrete suggestions, far-ranging since we need to rebuild the knowledge base, expand the area of land under production, address policy at all levels of government and rebuild the physical infrastructure:

- Join the few select area farmers and backyard gardeners who are working to secure a bio-diverse gene bank for our annual and perennial crops and our livestock. I'm a firm believer that locally-adapted varieties have the best chance of surviving climate change.
- Find a way to re-establish local distribution for farm-product. Some of you may remember the locally-owned food distributor that served this area for 40 or 50 years before going under with the pressure from the large corporate distributors, and this was only about 8 or 10 years ago.
- Build long-term produce storage facilities so those crops can be available to us all winter long.
- Work on creating a food or agricultural policy or charter for your local government, municipal or regional. This policy can create the framework and vision to foster agricultural activities and increase our communal food security.
- Wrap your head around international trade agreements and how and why they impact our food and agricultural policies, and then write something so that the rest of us can understand them, and what we must do to counter their destructive interventions in our food system. And once you've mastered that, you can move on to supply management.
- Support Alex Atamanenko's "Terminator" campaign, which I believe is kicking into high gear in December.
- Grow your own food.
- And never eat without truly appreciating and celebrating the gift of that food.

Food is about so much more than just fueling our bodies. It is about the cycle of life, as other beings give their lives to nourish ours. Food is also fundamental to our cultural identities and to our survival as communities. And just food is about a global community that is properly and well fed. In the name of long-term

communal food security, to combat global warming and to eat in solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world, we have to rebuild our local food system. Thank you. (*audience applause*)

Jon Steinman: And that was Abra Brynne, speaking at the November 2007 Future of Food in the Kootenays Conference held in Nelson, B.C. Abra is known in the area as a foodshed animator, and is involved with many food and agricultural organizations in the area.

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Jon Steinman: And this is Deconstructing Dinner – a syndicated weekly radio program and podcast produced in Nelson, British Columbia at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY. I'm Jon Steinman and today's broadcast marks Part II of a series of shows featuring our recordings from one of the first regional food security conferences ever held in Canada. The conference was organized with the intention of inspiring the communities in the West Kootenay region of the province to become more involved in rebuilding a more socially and environmentally responsible local food system. A team of Deconstructing Dinner volunteers were on-hand at the conference to record the keynote speakers, question and answer periods and workshops, and we've set up a page on our website where all unedited recordings and presentations can be accessed. And that website is cjly.net/deconstructingdinner

The next speaker at the conference that we'll hear from was Don Low. Don is an agricultural economist working in the industry competitiveness branch for the British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture and Lands. Don is based in the Ministry's Creston office. Prior to his role as an agricultural economist, Don was the District Agrologist, a profession that has somewhat disappeared in many parts of the country, and those positions that *do* remain have changed significantly from their more traditional role of advising and supporting farmers on the operations of their farms. Don also operates a large cherry orchard called Quiet Valley Farms.

Now I do want to provide a little background on the community of Creston because it is increasingly becoming recognized as an important agricultural region to help ensure the food security in the southern interior of the province, and there are a number of new connections being made between Nelson and Creston and you can expect to hear a lot more about this community on future broadcasts. And what also makes this particular connection so important is that in most regions across Canada, it will become increasingly important for urban centres to begin reaching out to the rural and farming communities outside of the city, and perhaps the connections being forged between Nelson and Creston is a small example of this.

Creston is about an hour and a quarter drive southwest of Nelson situated not too far from the American border, that is, south-east of Nelson, and its history is

very rooted in agriculture. The first apple orchards were planted in 1901, and strawberries became another primary crop within ten years earning the neighbouring community of Wynndel as the Strawberry Capital of the World. About 17,000 cases of strawberries were produced per year and were often shipped across the border. Livestock became another important agricultural commodity when in 1920 there were 1500 cattle and 300 horses, and the hay for the animals was also being grown in Creston itself. After the Depression, large scale cultivation of wheat began to take place and in that same year, Creston's first grain-elevator was built with a second being built the following year. In 1940, construction of a creamery began which followed with a pea plant opening in 1941, and by 1950, a third grain elevator was constructed. Now since some of these agricultural booms, today, there is little wheat being grown in the area and some of it has been replaced with alfalfa and canola. Fruit growing on the other hand is still a strong sector.

And so that's a brief introduction into the Creston area, on the agricultural side of the community, although I'm sure Deconstructing Dinner listeners at CIDO in Creston are already well aware of the community's history.

But moving on to Don Low's presentation, as with Part I of this series, we've archived the visual presentations of speakers at the Conference on the Deconstructing Dinner website, and Don Low's presentation can be found there, so if you're near a computer, you can follow along while listening to the audio you're about to hear. And so here's Don Low. (*audience applause*)

Don Low: Thank you, Andre. I'd like to correct just one thing, and that is I'm not really the last of the agrologists that knows anything about crops, they're still out there, they're just not in the type of jobs anymore where they are able to apply their skills. So the knowledge is still out there, although as we baby-boomer generation retire, we are losing that knowledge somewhat.

I'm happy to be here. When Andre called me back, about six months ago to talk about this, and asked if I was interested in participating, I thought, oh, this looks like one of those kind of out-there Nelson things. (*audience laughter*) And I wasn't really sure if I wanted to participate. But as he talked, actually the second thing I said to him was, "Have you talked to Abra yet?" (*audience laughter*) But as he talked, I thought yeah, this sounds kind of interesting and I would like to participate. And I've really enjoyed being here last night and also certainly enjoyed Abra and John so far this morning, it's been very good.

So Andre asked if I would talk about the economics of farming in the Kootenays, or local food production. And so I wanted to give it kind of a more jazzy title, so I called it Local Food Production, Can We Afford It? As Andre said I'm an economist with our Industry Competitiveness branch, I deal mainly with competitiveness issues in primary agriculture. I was the District Agriculturalist for a number of years based out of Creston, until the government in their wisdom

decided that was not a priority anymore. And so that's why I have my new job as an economist. I much, much more enjoyed my job as a District Agriculturalist, where I got out to farms and ranches and worked with people out in the field, or had people come into my office on a daily basis. And as he said I have a farm-business management background, both in agricultural lending, in teaching farmers and ranchers, and in farming. Our current farm, our cherry orchard is our second farm, we were actually pig farmers back in Alberta quite a few years ago. My wife's still trying to forget about that. *(audience laughter)*

So I have to give you my cover-my-butt disclaimer, the views expressed by me are strictly my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the policy of the government of British Columbia. In fact, you're pretty sure they don't. *(audience laughter)* I got to lots of meetings where I look around the room, these are meetings in Richmond or Victoria, and I'm the only guy that doesn't have a Blackberry. And that's how you know where you are in the food chain. *(audience laughter)* And so I look around and I see if there's somebody else without a Blackberry, I know that that person and I are going to end up doing all the work. Everybody else is in management. *(audience laughter)*

And of course my other hat is as a producer, my wife and I have a cherry orchard in Creston, and this past season we sold 110,000 lb of late-season cherries. We should be up to about 150,000 to 200,000 lb when we're in full production. So, when I thought about how can I handle this topic, Can We Afford It? I thought well I can prepare an extensive analysis of the economics of local food using data, statistics, graphs and charts. And then I realized, it's been so long since I've been to graduate school I have no idea how to do that, and you certainly wouldn't want to hear it. So that's not what we're going to do. So when I thought about this topic, could we focus on consumers, producers, community, society as a whole, each of those areas we could spend time on. And looking at consumers, can consumers afford it? – I really love Barbara Kingsolver's new book "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle," and she's got some great quotes in there. She said about consumers, about her experience: "If we'd had to purchase all of our vegetables as most households do, instead of pulling them out of our back forty, it would still be a huge moneymaker to shop in our new fashion, starting always with the Farmers' Market, and organizing meals from there." And really what brought that about was quite a radical change in their eating habits, and the way they ate. And in doing so they saved, it was very affordable. They could afford to spend more money locally, and still save money.

But what I really want to do is focus on what I know, and that's on the producer. I want to tell a little story I guess, about two local producers, one an organic vegetable producer and the other a conventional fruit producer, and also a little story about one not so local producer. This is the Moore family in Creston, some of you from Creston and maybe some of you from here will know them, cause they have an organic vegetable farm and produce mainly organic carrots and organic potatoes. And I know they have sold through the Co-op here, I believe,

and in the Slocan, and they also ship to Calgary. I don't have a pointer there, but we've got Dad there, we've got two sisters, Mom sitting down there at the basket with her twin sister, a son-in-law, and even Granny back there helping out. They're harvesting these organic carrots. So, this day was very much a family effort, they've got six kids I think. So here they have their wonderful organic carrots, they're getting ready to get them cleaned, you see they've got the high-tech machine there, the cement mixer to wash the carrots, they dump them out onto there, and those carrots are wonderful! They are so sweet and so good, I was really amazed.

Okay, this is the second producer, in the background there you can see those kind of white things, those are actually covers over a cherry orchard, two acres of the orchard are covered with these plastic covers, goes towards the back there and they farm 11 acres of cherries altogether. They live in a wonderful straw-bale house, first permitted straw-bale house in B.C. And that's looking the other way out into the orchard. This is their picking crew at coffee break, all French-Canadian pickers, the industry really relies on French-Canadian pickers, they earn between \$15 and \$30 an hour to pick cherries, so they're very well paid, they're happy to be there. The woman who owns this orchard actually bakes them homemade muffins every morning for picking, so they're happy to be there. And there's the other guy, as you might have guessed it's my wife and I. This is our farm.

The question I want to ask is "Are these farms sustainable?" Moores' – they told me this is really the first year that they felt like they'd made much money in 17 years. They've been farming for 17 years, the last 9 I believe organic, the last 7 years certified Kootenay Organic, growers' certified. And I asked him why, he said "Well we've actually raised our prices to the point where we feel like we're making money." So they took that plunge and raised their prices. They've relied heavily on family labour. And they said that for the most part they've tried to pay their kids minimum wage. The kids don't want to farm, they hate the colour orange, they hate it. The kids are growing up and leaving. And so their big issues are labour and also water, as was mentioned earlier, water is a big issue and it's getting to be a bigger issue, there are pressures on it. And they're wondering what they're going to do for retirement. Now, I don't want you to get me wrong, I asked them would they do this over again, they said yeah, they enjoyed the lifestyle. I think sometimes you enjoy it more when you look back on it than when you're actually in it, because it's darn hard work. It's very hard work.

For the Lows, our picking labour is well paid. We work long hours, as do the Moores. We produce top-quality cherries and although we use pesticides, we residue-test so we have no pesticide residues on our cherries, we're very careful about what we do. There's not a lot of net income left after expenses, and I'm sure that's the same with the Moores. It's a risky business, especially with regards to weather, but also with regards to markets. And we have been very dependent on export markets and we're not happy about that.

The last business I want to talk about is, anybody ever seen a cocoa tree before? When they talked about the 5 basic food groups last night, you know, caffeine, alcohol . . . the one they missed was chocolate. So I had to talk about this. This is the cocoa plantation that we managed where we lived in Papua New Guinea, 20 years ago, that's when we were there. So that's what a cocoa tree looks like. That's my wife and I when I had dark hair, she was only, just a little bit skinnier. In the plantation, a lot of the work is done by the women, as it is in a lot of Third World countries. And here they're gathering cocoa-pods to bring in. And there they break the pods and out comes the cocoa bean, which is the most awful, caustic, gooey thing you can imagine. It has no similarity to what you'd think cocoa would be. And then it's fermented and then it's finally laid out and dried. This is a solar drier. And then it's sorted by hand and put into the bags there and sent off to a middleman who then sells it to Mr. Mars or Mr. Hershey or Mr. Nestle, whoever's buying cocoa. And these women, that was important for them to earn money. This is subsistence agriculture. These women and these people lived, they depended on their gardens for life. And if there were bad weather events, which there were when we were there, then people starved. So they depended on the money they either made in the market, or from working in the cocoa plantation to provide subsistence.

So I just want to put forward some principles to think about as we talk about sustainability. First of all, embarking on an agricultural enterprise is a lot of work. It's risky, and usually there's a lot of disappointment and failure that come along with the successes. And so when you're looking at getting into an agricultural enterprise, you really have to weed out the hype and take a hard look at it. Another thing to remember is, the middleman usually earns his or her money. You know we always talk about those awful middlemen, but boy, if you have to do that work yourself, it's a lot of work. There's always a concern about producers who get involved in managing outside of their production area, so whether it's processing or marketing, where you don't have the expertise.

The next principle is you need to take an honest accounting for your time. Producer-run businesses often fail to honestly account for a producer's time. And all those things that you do, like going to meetings, planning, product development, record-keeping, packaging, delivering, distribution, all those things take time. And you need to account for that time realistically, and I guess one of the good things about if you pay people to do it, then it's automatically counted. It's important to get all the help you can, as you're entering into a venture, an agricultural business venture. So, government grants are fine, community initiatives, great, local flavours, all those things that can help, they're great, but in the long term sustainability is going to have to be found in the marketplace, I believe. You need to follow the rules, and there's lots of rules there, whether it be about production, about labour, once you start getting hired labour it's a big issue with Worker's Comp and those kinds of things, and food safety issues.

Does price matter? We've got a new ethical consumer, maybe most of us would consider ourselves somewhat in that category, but we still have economic and time pressures. So if we're getting into a business, is our plan depend on people going out of their way to get our product, cause that may reduce or limit your market. Customers may be well-educated but not necessarily affluent, and maybe that applies particularly in this area, we don't have the affluence here that they do in Vancouver to spend extra money on food. And we all at some point have a choke level, where we're going to say, hey, the price is too high, or the time it takes me to get it is just too great.

Filling niche markets – niche markets can be fickle and limited markets, and overproduction on a local basis can really impact the local market. So you have to consider that. Moores raised their prices and are doing well this year, maybe if one or more (*other*) people got into carrots, it wouldn't be so good.

So moving ahead, what do we need to do? We need to have realistic expectations, we need to have good business planning and I always get people who say, well business planning is a big pain in the neck, not worthwhile doing it. But I've seen lots of businesses fail because they never did any business planning in the first place, and it would have been evident that it wasn't a viable business. Use all the available expertise that you can get. Look to the market for long-term sustainability. But as we learned last night, global forces are on our side, I think as far as local food production goes. So, regional food, can we afford it? I think it's optional now, it looks like it's going to be more necessary in the future. It solves more than one problem. It enhances our rural communities, we have decreased dependence on multi-nationals, and we've reduced our carbon footprint, we help enhance the health of individuals and reduce obesity. And I think that's a huge benefit. So what am I going to do? Well, I said to my wife, she's here today, she's my biggest critic, we're going to grow a garden, but we've always had a garden, wherever we've lived we've had a garden, it's in our genes. Her parents have always had a garden, my parents, my grandparents, we've always had a garden. And we love it. She does all the work but the garden is her therapy away from the orchard.

Buy as locally as possible and pay a fair price. We are going to sell as locally as possible. My wife and I are sinners, I mean we exported – 80% of our cherries went to Europe this year, air-freighted. And we're not going to do that anymore, we're very unhappy with that. (*audience applause*) When we were in Europe a month ago, we visited with German cherry farmers who grow the same cherries we do, and when our cherries reach their market, their price goes way down. And it's crazy, it's crazy. They've got the same product there, and we're not going to export there. So we're finding a new marketing guy. And we're going to look for the most sustainable alternatives.

I like this quote from Dr. Bruce Ames, an molecular biologist who's very involved in the food industry, he says "Do what your mother told you to do, don't smoke,

don't drink, and eat your fruits and vegetables." We're still going to go for chocolate, that's about the only addiction I have left, good dark chocolate. And finally another quote from Barbara Kingsolver, "Eaters must understand that how we eat determines how the world is used." And so we can through time, I think, make that change that Abra was talking about. And, by pushing the market with our buying habits we continually shape our buying choices and the nature of farming. Thank you. *(audience applause)*

Jon Steinman: And this is Deconstructing Dinner and that was Don Low speaking in November 2007 at the Future of Food in the Kootenays Conference held in Nelson B.C. Don is an agricultural economist with the Creston Office of the British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture and Lands. Don also operates a commercial cherry farm.

soundbite

To close out today's broadcast, I did want to play one of the questions posed to the keynote speakers during the question and answer period following their presentations. One question in particular elicited a very important response from Abra Brynne whom we heard from earlier on the broadcast. And so here is conference delegate John Alton of the West Kootenay EcoSociety posing a question to Don Low and Abra Brynne.

John Alton: I would love to hear what you think is some of the best opportunities for agriculture in the Kootenays, like what might be selling for a good price that we import right now, like maybe berry crops. Yeah, what do you see as some of the best opportunities for people to get into, in agriculture?

Don Low: That's the question I really hate the most. *(background laughter)* I can't tell you how many times I would get people coming to my office and saying, "I just bought this piece of land and what do I do with it now?" And the first thing I say is "Well you should have come in before you bought the piece of land." *(audience laughter)* It's very difficult to tell people what crops to grow. I think the most important thing to do is for people to do their own market research. And so go and talk to food co-ops, look around and see what products are selling for good prices, whether there's a shortage in the market, and then go from there. You have to consider things like, okay these guys are getting a good price, if I grow this product, can I expect that price? Is there a possibility of somebody else doing it, or 2 or 3 other people with my idea, and then flooding the market? So it's always tough, and the problem with local markets is: the more local, the more likely that your own production can affect the market, especially in small markets. Right? In Vancouver, it doesn't matter, in big cities it doesn't matter, the market is almost unlimited. But in smaller, local areas, you really have to consider that. I'm not going to tell you what crop to grow, I can just tell you what is the process.

Abra Brynne: If you don't mind, I'd like to respond additionally, cause I think it's true that our locally-owned businesses, the market is pretty much saturated for a lot of the staple crops like carrots and potatoes and onions, as many farmers have discovered. But we haven't made a dent in Overwaitea and Safeway, and part of that is because of their procurement policies. So I think if we actually got serious about import replacement into this area, the vast majority of our food really could be locally-produced, and there's a much larger market, if we can get those markets opened to local producers. *(audience applause)*

Jon Steinman: And that was Abra Brynne and Don Low responding to a question posed at the Future of Food in the Kootenays Conference. And again, be sure to check out the page that has been set up on the Deconstructing Dinner website featuring recordings from the November conference. All of the unedited recordings have been posted there including some of the Powerpoint presentations used by the speakers. And you can also expect upcoming shows featuring recordings from the conference, and in particular from 3 of the 4 workshops that delegates participated in. And we hope that all of these shows and recordings can act as a resource for other Canadian communities looking to rebuild local food systems that support improved health and well-being, local fair trade, environmental responsibility and resilient local economies. And that website again is cjly.net/deconstructingdinner.

ending theme

That was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant John Ryan. And I also thank CJLY volunteers Chris Born, Neil Sorochoan and David Strongman for helping with the on-site recording of the conference featured on today's broadcast.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

This radio program is provided free of charge to campus/community radio stations across the country, and relies on the financial support from you the listener.

Support for the program can be donated through our website at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner or by dialing 250-352-9600.