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Sheep labour

Sheep from Whistling Wind Ranch in Kamloops have been tending the vineyard at St. Hubertus Estate Winery in Kelowna this winter. Their job keeps weeds in check, adds fertilizer and eliminates rodent tunnels. When there was too much snow to graze, they were fed hay. MYRNA STARK LEADER PHOTO

Growers scramble for workers

Farmers face uncertainty as pandemic shuts borders

by PETER MITHAM

LANGLEY – A cool end to winter means crops in the Lower Mainland have yet to kick into high gear, but many growers face the prospect of being short-handed by the spread of COVID-19, declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11.

"Most of us are finished pruning, the next big event that we would have come up labour-wise is planting," says Rhonda Driediger of Driediger Farms Ltd. in Langley and co-chair of the BC Agriculture Council's labour committee.

The labour committee oversees the Western Agricultural Labour Initiative, which administers the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program in BC. The province welcomes about 10,000 foreign workers each year. Just a third had arrived when Ottawa closed the border on March 18 to foreign nationals other than US residents.

"We really need [temporary foreign workers] who are working in the bee industry. They need to get here to assist in the hive preparation so we have them for pollination," says Driediger. "We'll be

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Province implements Bill 15

by PETER MITHAM

VICTORIA – The province has begun to give force and effect to Bill 15, passed last spring to change-up governance of the Agricultural Land Commission.

New regulations developed in consultation with representatives of local governments and a technical working group that included the Union of BC Municipalities, the BC Agriculture Council and the Agricultural Land Commission were announced March 12.

The old system of regional panels has been revamped to be more efficient and speed-up decision-making. All existing commissioners remain in place under the new structure. However, the chair of the ALC will now have greater input on government's appointment of new commissioners.

Criteria for decisions will include protecting "the size, integrity and continuity of the landbase" within the Agricultural Land Reserve to combat parcelization.

Reconsideration of

decisions must proceed within 90 days of the original decision.

The new regulations also implement the controversial clause that no longer considers landowners persons for the purpose of exclusion applications. Beginning September 30, requests to remove farmland from the ALR must now be made by local government.

The six-month window gives municipalities time to adjust their procedures to

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BILL 15

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accommodate the changes.

The changes set the tone for consideration of various controversial proposals across the province, such as an application the District of Kent is developing to exclude 43 acres in Agassiz for residential use. A mix of detached and multifamily homes are planned for the site.

The district describes the site as "expansive farmland" with Class 1-3 soils. The property has grown a variety of cole crops in the past, as well as corn. It's currently a tree farm.

Kent has marked the site for residential development since 2001, however, noting the presence of an adjacent subdivision.

A previous application to exclude 35 acres of the site in 2016 failed. The decision, rendered in 2018, advised the

district "any plan to develop non-farm uses in the area which includes the Exclusion Property, is of no force and effect and should be deleted from the OCP and the Regional Growth Strategy." The decision added that municipal zoning must be consistent with regulations governing the ALR.

The district is resurrecting the application in partnership with a developer – who has pledged a \$3 million contribution to civic amenities – to accommodate future residential growth, estimated at 1,386 people by 2041.

Parallel to the exclusion application, the district would like to include 102 acres of boggy land outside the dike.

Kent council had yet to make a decision on whether or not to proceed with the application at press time.