

Green Scene: Colony Farm – The Land Use Plan

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Colony Farm has been a topic in the news recently including a number of letters to the editor of this newspaper. I am pleased this wonderful oasis of green in the Tri-Cities conjures up such passion from the people who value this regional park as a place to experience nature, hike on its trails or grow vegetables in its rich soils. However, not all the comments made about Colony Farm have been completely accurate; in particular, there appears to be some misunderstanding about the Land Use Plan for Colony Farm.

The 1995 Land Use Plan for Colony Farm was developed over an 18 month period (1993-1995) without the knowledge the Farm would become a park. This Plan, based on extensive public consultation, enshrined three values for Colony Farm – its rich agricultural soils, marvelous opportunities for walking, wildlife viewing and cycling along its dikes plus the valuable wildlife habitat contained in its fields, hedgerows and drainage channels. Significantly, this plan envisioned a place where these values would complement rather than conflict with each other. The Farm was seen as a setting where stewardship would be encouraged and opportunities provided to enhance public awareness and nature appreciation. The Steering Committee, on which I sat representing the Burke Mountain Naturalists, had no idea the land would become a new Regional Park. Thus, we recommended Colony Farm be managed as a non-profit land trust with the proceeds from agriculture used to support other activities. When Colony Farm became a Regional Park in 1996, the need for such a land trust was eliminated but the Land Use Plan became the framework under which Metro Vancouver (then, the GVRD) was to manage the lands.



The tall grass meadows on the Port Coquitlam side of Colony Farm provide rich wildlife habitat for great blue herons, owls, raptors, many songbirds and wild bumblebees. *Hilary Maguire photo.*

Although most (but not all) of Colony Farm Regional Park lies within the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), it comprises only 259 hectares of a total 1412 hectares of ALR land in Coquitlam and Port Coquitlam. Overall, Metro Vancouver has 60,940 hectares of land protected within the ALR which includes land in other Regional Parks. Colony Farm's Land Use Plan designates its fields for one of three uses, "agriculture", "wildlife habitat" or "integrated management". The designated agricultural fields lie entirely on the Coquitlam side of the river while the wildlife and integrated fields are mostly on the Port Coquitlam side in accordance with public's wishes to protect the valuable wildlife habitat found on the Port Coquitlam side of the River.

The wildlife designation especially protects the so-called "old field habitat", a type of habitat that is now exceedingly rare in the lower mainland. These tall grass meadows support many birds including short-eared owls, barn owls and great blue herons, all species at risk. In addition, such meadows also provide important nesting habitat for wild bumblebees which are important pollinators for many crops. The value of the old field habitat in these designated fields is augmented by hedgerows where berry-producing native shrubs attract a diverse mix of songbirds. The purpose of the integrated fields designated under the Land Use Plan is to also ensure continued biodiversity and species abundance while investigating the ways in which some types of agriculture, e.g., hay fields, could be compatible with such wildlife use.

This September, the Metro Vancouver Board released a draft Sustainability Plan for Colony Farm with public consultation planned for later this year or early in 2012. Some aspects of this plan have raised concerns with the Burke Mountain Naturalists. For example, a proposed commercial berry farm of several hectares would attract bears to Colony Farm and, thus, create a potential hazard for cyclists and hikers on the trails. In addition, a monoculture of berries would also attract starlings, a non-native and aggressive bird likely to usurp habitat from native songbirds. Opposition to this particular proposal has led to the misunderstanding that the Naturalists are opposed all forms of agriculture at Colony Farm. In fact, the Naturalists strongly support an expansion of community or allotment-type garden plots at Colony Farm where residents from all over Metro Vancouver could grow food. Given that a growing proportion of people will be living in condominiums in the future, access to a plot of land for growing food is a very beneficial service that can be provided at Colony Farm.

One thing should be clear, with its exceptional wildlife habitat, approximately 200 species of birds including several at risk and over 8 km of trails; Colony Farm is far more than just an agricultural park. Hopefully, the upcoming public consultation on the sustainability plan will foster fruitful discussions, stimulate public involvement and allow members of the public, in partnership with Metro Vancouver, to achieve the full potential of what was envisioned in the 1995 Land Use Plan.