

Open Letter

July 9, 2020

To The Honourable John Horgan, Premier
Cc: The Honourable Lana Popham, Minister of Agriculture

The COVID-19 global pandemic is a wake up call to take action to transform BC's food systems. The pandemic confirms the stark vulnerability of our global and regional food systems to economic, environmental, health, and social crises. Much of our food in BC travels thousands of miles, across many borders, and passes through many hands before reaching our plates. While climate change and the pandemic response are top of mind, our food system also suffers from deep social inequities, biodiversity loss, and water and soil degradation. The flaws in this system are becoming more apparent daily, as we see a range of immediate and medium to long-term impacts across our food systems.

The pandemic has caused significant disruptions but it has also presented an opportunity to make change as part of the pandemic Recovery Plan. BC can take transformative steps to simultaneously develop resilient food security and address the climate emergency. Now is the time to build and protect place-based food systems able to withstand future threats and disturbances. COVID-19 may well be the dress rehearsal for the ongoing impacts of climate change and for future global crises, for which we hope to be better prepared.

The direction and programs set for and by the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) contain much promise for the achievement of sustainable agriculture and food security in the province. Appended to this letter, we offer a range of recommended strategies that align with and extend the MOA's "Buy, Grow, Feed" mandate and that respond to the current crises. We believe that our recommendations are tangible, achievable, and address some of the key challenges facing the immediate and long term food security of British Columbians from both climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Grow BC:** BC's skilled fishers and farmers are deeply invested in their communities and food systems. The recommendations under this goal seek to stabilize, to the degree possible, the climatic, economic, and community contexts of their livelihoods.
- **Feed BC:** many of BC's fishers and farmers are highly motivated to make their product available to BC citizens. Our recommendations seek to lower barriers and optimize opportunities for domestic market access.
- **Buy BC:** the Buy BC program is an important means for making BC products more accessible to BC consumers. Our recommendations address additional structural, policy, and market barriers that face BC's fishers and farmers.

The authors of this letter come from diverse backgrounds, organizations and regions of British Columbia. Collectively, we bring decades of experience, expertise, and insight into the necessary steps to rebuild strong, sustainable, and innovative food economies across the province. We believe that BC's food producers are key to our collective food security. Now widely recognized as the essential service that they are and will always be, food producers and our domestic food economy are key and reliable pillars of our recovery from this current pandemic and any future shocks.

We also recognize that we are settlers in this place commonly known as British Columbia. Like all of society, food systems are subject to systemic racism and injustices, as perpetrated upon Indigenous and Black communities, People of Colour, and low-income people. The voices and priorities of these populations must be heard and addressed. We acknowledge that we do not speak on behalf of these groups and urge you to seek out, recognize, and support Indigenous food systems and traditional knowledge holders as leaders in the food and climate conversation, particularly at this time of crisis. We urge you to support Indigenous-led knowledge sharing on food systems and land relationships with settlers. Further, we encourage you to seek Indigenous participants to identify opportunities to strengthen long-term relationship building and to learn from Indigenous approaches to land stewardship. These measures will contribute positively to the government's commitment to achieve the objectives of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as stated in BC's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. There are also many groups that represent the needs and voices of Black and other People of Colour in the province who will have their own priorities and recommendations on food security and justice which should be heard, and heeded with clear acknowledgement.

The world will never go back to the way it was before COVID-19. However, we can seize the opportunity today to rebuild our food systems in BC to be secure, just, resilient, and climate friendly. To build a resilient, food sovereign British Columbia will require many new partners and new ways of thinking about and creating regenerative ecosystems and food access for all.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with you and to collaborate on implementing the recommended strategies. Our partners are able to provide expertise, resources, and additional recommendations. Please contact Anita Georgy, Executive Director of FarmFolk CityFolk director@farmfolkcityfolk.ca or 604-730-0450 ext 302 to liaise with the signatories.

Sincerely,

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Abra Brynne, Executive Director, Central Kootenay Food Policy Council
Dr. Kent Mullinix, Director, Institute for Sustainable Food Systems, Kwantlen Polytechnic University
Dr. Hannah Wittman, Academic Director, UBC Centre for Sustainable Food Systems
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Heather Pritchard, Executive Director, Foodlands Co-operative of BC
Jim McIsaac, Managing Director, BC Commercial Fishing Association
Kathleen Gibson, Sustainable Food Systems Advocate
Linda Geggie, Executive Director, Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable
Mark Gifford, CEO, Real Estate Foundation of BC
Sara Dent, Executive Director, Young Agrarians
Dr. Tammara Soma, Assistant Professor, Simon Fraser University

Appendix: Policy Recommendations

We believe that the framework and priorities found in the MOA’s current Service Plan and the Minister of Agriculture’s Mandate Letter have delivered important programs for British Columbia Agriculture and provide a useful framework for expanding actions that foster safe, sustainable, and resilient food systems. Our recommendations are aligned with the Service Plan’s framework and offer Strategies that we believe will help to evolve the Service Plan to more effectively respond to the current dual challenges of climate change and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

<h3>Goal 1 — Grow BC</h3> <p>Build sustainable production and help BC producers expand local food production</p>	
<p>Comment: Farming and fishing depend on stable environments and weather in order to achieve viable, sustainable businesses. Climate change is increasingly undermining both. Canada’s agricultural emissions are on track to increase over the next decade. Harvest yields are becoming ever more unpredictable as a result of climate change impacts, and ocean acidification is compromising marine ecosystems around the world. In order to help meet mandated emissions reductions in agriculture, and ensure that farmers and fishers are positioned to withstand the impacts of climate change and other disruptions, it is necessary to reduce GHG emissions from agriculture, increase carbon sequestration in agricultural soils, increase resilience of individual farms and fishing enterprises and sectors, and improve farmer and fisher livelihoods. The following recommendations address the mitigation measures that BC and Canada must take in order to meet our international climate change obligations, and foster adaptation by both sectors.</p>	
<h4>Objective 1.1: Enhance services and supports to the Agri-Food and Seafood Sector</h4>	
Key Strategies	Rationale
<p>Increase advisory, research, and education extension programs to be delivered to farmers and</p>	<p>Section 4 of the <i>Ministry of Agriculture and Food Act</i> states that one of the purposes and functions of the Ministry is to provide extension programs. The pandemic has made it clear that increasing the viability and supply of BC’s farming and fishing operations is a wise immediate and long-term strategy. In order to</p>

<p>fishers throughout the province.</p>	<p>effectively respond to the ever-changing impacts of climate change, as well as new domestic market opportunities, extension services are the most efficient means of providing objective, tailored, and sector-specific advice and information to primary producers. Professional agriculture, fisheries and business advisory services can be effectively delivered by suitably credentialed MOA public servants, and community and university partners, such as the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems at Kwantlen Polytechnic University and the Kootenay Boundary Farm Advisors. In addition to addressing management issues, these services will also help to increase business profitability, which is a key component in sustainability and succession for both the farming and fishing sectors.</p>
<p>Develop and deliver programs that incentivize reduced use of high-emissions inputs, especially nitrogen fertilizer, and a transition towards regenerative agriculture.</p>	<p>Emissions associated with nitrogen fertilizer are the largest single source of on-farm GHGs and they are on track to increase over the next decade. Improving efficiency in the use of nitrogen fertilizer can help reduce emissions, and can have the additional benefit of improving farm profit margins by reducing expenditures. Examples of suitable programs are crop insurance discounts for acres that could include cover-crops, integrated livestock, or N-fixing legumes, national cost-shared programs, and AgrilInvest matching contributions for extended and diversified rotations.¹</p>
<p>Support continuation and expansion of <i>Farmland Advantage</i> to provide contract opportunities for farmers to benefit from the environmental goods and services they deliver to the province.</p>	<p>Farmland Advantage and other community and environmental organizations work with farmers to enhance the natural values on their land. These natural values contribute to the well-being of all British Columbians and can provide an additional income stream to farmers that are proactively stewarding the water and ecosystems on their farms. Several jurisdictions in North America and Europe compensate farmers for the essential ecosystem services that sustainable, regenerative agriculture contributes to the public.</p>
<p>Work with the Minister of Public Safety and the Solicitor General to amend the Compensation and Disaster Financial Assistance Regulation that excludes those who derive less than 50% of their income from fishing or farming.</p>	<p>Rural and remote economies and communities function well because of diversity on many levels. Few residents in rural and small coastal communities have the luxury of one income stream – referred to in academic circles as occupational plurality. As a result, rural coastal and inland communities are populated by part-time postal workers, farmers, fishers, bakers, loggers, and bus drivers. BC’s Compensation and Disaster Financial Assistance Regulation provides no compensation to business owners negatively impacted by a disaster if they do not derive the “majority” of their income from that business. Multiple income streams, like biodiversity, can be a sign of resilience and strength in remote and rural communities. The prejudice against “part-timers” needs to be eliminated by amending the criteria used to determine assistance so that those who own fishing and farm infrastructure that is devastated by a</p>

¹ This policy recommendation is drawn from a draft federal policy framework developed by [Farmers for Climate Solutions](#).

	natural disaster can benefit.
Objective 1.2: Ensure the Future of the Agri-Food and Seafood Sector by Protecting the Land Base and Animal, Plant and Human Health	
Key Strategies	Rationale
Support seed security by increasing the quality and quantity of seeds produced and available in BC.	Our reliance on international seed companies to supply a limited number of seed varieties puts our food systems at risk in the most fundamental way. Here in BC, we are particularly vulnerable as we rely on imported seed for the vast majority of our vegetable production. We have experienced how large transportation distances and international restrictions can disrupt the supply of food and seeds, increase costs to consumers, and shake confidence in our food security. Many seed companies saw a 300% spike in demand that forced the imposition of daily limits, delayed orders, restricted sales to home gardeners, and at least one US seed company stopped shipping seeds to Canada. As well, BC’s farmers, backyard and community gardeners overwhelmingly rely on imported seed that has not been bred for BC’s growing conditions and depends on international supply chains. To increase BC’s seed supply, it is necessary to significantly expand programs such as FarmFolk CityFolks’ BC Seed Security program and other community-university partnerships for research, technical training, participatory plant breeding initiatives, and extension services such as the Canadian Organic Vegetable Improvement Project led by University of British Columbia’s Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, and Kwantlen Polytechnic University’s Seed Lab .
Fully implement the recommendations in Revitalizing the Agricultural Land Reserve and the Agricultural Land Commission report to Minister Popham in December 2018.	As stated by BC Cattlemen’s Association , Richmond FarmWatch and many others, each class of farmland (1 through 6) is important and supports the diversity of production, crops, and sectors that collectively contribute to a secure and sustainable food supply for British Columbians. It is vital that each acre of the scarce and precious farmland in BC be preserved for food security and ecosystem services provision in perpetuity. The extensive consultation that resulted in the Revitalizing the Agricultural Land Reserve and the Agricultural Land Commission provides a host of well researched and considered recommendations that will help to ensure that the land necessary for agriculture in this province is not further compromised.
Provide inventories of industrially-zoned land <u>outside</u> the ALR in various locations across	Agriculturally zoned land in and out of the ALR is seen all too often as easily accessible land to be repurposed for activities other than active soil-based farming. The province’s recent commitment to supporting and promoting an agritech industry must not run counter to the findings of the MOA’s

<p>the province in order to identify and establish suitable sites for the Agritech Industry.</p>	<p>Revitalizing Report. Every acre of farmland removed from the possibility of production further undermines the food security and well-being of British Columbians. The infrastructure necessary to support the emerging agritech industries can be located on land outside the ALR and not zoned for agriculture, while still supporting the development of an industry intended to complement our province’s agriculture.</p>
<p>Support long term, affordable access to land suitable for food production.</p>	<p>In today’s speculative real estate market, access to land is one of the greatest barriers to those wanting to produce food in our province, given market failure conditions for agriculture. It is critical that we support new growers and those wanting to expand their production to access land. Programs like the BC Land Matching Program delivered by Young Agrarians, the Foodlands Cooperative of BC, food and farmland trusts, and other land access initiatives are innovations that have been successful at developing opportunities for land access that support community-based food systems and inter-generational knowledge sharing among food providers. Enhancing the powers and budget of the Agricultural Land Commission and the MOA’s Strengthening Farming program, as well as exploring ways to create additional incentives to put fallow land into production will help to expand opportunities for new and established farmers.</p>
<p>Continue to expand resources for new farmer and fisher programs delivered by the MOA and by third-party organizations to ensure that there is a viable new generation of farmers and food growers, fishers, and provisioners.</p>	<p>It is a well known fact that farmers make up less than 2% of our population. The 2016 Agriculture Census reported that the average age of Canadian farmers continues to increase (55 in 2016) with the fastest growing age group over 55. The success of programs such as Young Agrarians and the Foodlands Cooperative of BC in lowering barriers and supporting new farmers is vital in contributing to the trends of increasing the number of farmers across the province.² BC Young Fishermen’s Network is working to address similar challenges in fisheries, where aging fishers combined with challenges accessing capital for boats, opportunities to fish, and connecting to markets create parallel barriers for new fishers. Creative programs that increase knowledge transfer, lower barriers to capital (loan guarantees by govt), and open new market opportunities are vital to enable and retain for the long term, those interested in entering these professions so vital to our province’s food security.</p>

² <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/96-325-x/2017001/article/54925-eng.htm>

Goal 2 — Feed BC

Build the availability, value and variety of BC food

Comment: There is no inherent superiority to local food. However, as the breakdown of global supply chains demonstrates, having the source close at hand provides greater security of access. Most of us rely on commerce or the marketplace to source food. There are those, however, who rely on their own skills and work to obtain at least a portion of their food. To augment food security for Indigenous people, wherever they may be able to practice traditional ways, we must ensure that they have access to the places and waterways from which they can source their foods and medicines. For those who rely on commerce to obtain food in exchange for money, we must rebuild our local food businesses and economies.

Objective 2.1: Increase the use of BC grown and processed foods by large BC based purchasers such as government facilities

Key Strategies	Rationale
<p>Work with BC Association of Abattoirs, BC Cattlemen’s Association, and Small-Scale Meat Producers Association to expand market access and opportunities for provincially inspected meat.</p>	<p>Large grocery chains and food distributors do not want to have to consider provincial borders as they move food across our landscapes. Thus, they will not purchase meat from provincially licensed abattoirs whose product cannot cross provincial boundaries. BC inspected meat is qualitatively equal, if not superior, to that produced in federally registered abattoirs. A program that increases the number of retail outlets for BC inspected meat and educates the consumer about the importance of supporting the farmers, butchers, and independent retailers who can and do provide provincially inspected meat will expand the opportunities for both the livestock sector and meat processors. It will also help to return stability to the sector and an increase in numbers for livestock producers across the province.</p>
<p>Eliminate Employment Standards exclusions for agricultural workers and review the private farm labour contracting system. Work with the Ministry of Labour to strengthen proactive, unannounced inspections to enforce health and safety for farm workplace conditions,</p>	<p>For many years, concerns have been raised about the conditions and treatment of immigrant and migrant workers so vital to many agriculture sectors. COVID-19 has taught us all just how essential these workers are. Their housing and work conditions, access to benefits and health care, safety and wages must reflect their importance to our collective well-being. Pathways to citizenship should be made available.</p>

<p>transportation, and migrant worker housing. Coordinate with the federal government to prioritize permanent resident status on arrival for migrant workers.</p>	
<p>Work with the federal Minister of Fisheries and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to protect and promote fishery ownership for independent harvesters, Indigenous Nations, and coastal communities.</p>	<p>Federal policies in five Atlantic provinces protect ownership and control of inshore fisheries for independent harvesters and coastal communities. These policies have allowed harvesters to capture the major benefits from local fisheries, and in these times, pivot from export markets to focus on domestic. This is not the case in BC, as similar policies have not yet been adopted. As Danielle Edwards recently stated, exorbitantly high lease fees are precluding BC fishers from meeting objectives for fisheries in Canada with respect to fleet viability and equitable distribution of benefits. Pacific region fisheries require the measures that benefit fishers in Atlantic Canada and agricultural producers in supply management: namely, that only those actively involved in the sector are able to hold quota and the licence to fish. This would eliminate speculative investment in BC fisheries quota and licensing and ensure that they are accessible to those who live and work in BC's coastal communities and waters. Not only would this change foster a stronger sustainable fisheries economy up and down BC's coast, it would also allow for more BC wild fish to be landed, processed, and eaten in our province.</p>
<p>Objective 2.2: Foster Innovation and Develop a Food Hub Network to support food processing</p>	
<p>Key Strategies</p>	<p>Rationale</p>
<p>Continue and expand the food hub network initiative, rebuilding place-based infrastructure and local processing, including food and distribution hubs, abattoirs, butcher shops, fishmongers, milk processing, seed processing, and other sector-specific post-production infrastructure,</p>	<p>The stripping out of infrastructure has had a detrimental impact on local producers and on their respective communities. The loss of local abattoirs in 2007 saw a massive reduction in livestock on the landscape; up and down the BC Coast, residents can no longer access seafood harvested in nearby waters since the canneries have been shut down; when regionally-serving milk processing was centralized in the Lower Mainland and Alberta, local consumers lost access to milk produced just down the road and have experienced bare dairy shelves when there are disruptions from bad weather or pandemics. Rebuilding local food infrastructure across the province will help to bolster our collective food security, restore place-based economies with all the related benefits of jobs, pride, and provide domestic options when there are supply chain failures. In locations where no one sector has enough volume to support</p>

<p>allowing area producers to adapt, innovate, and thrive with the necessary support to access regional markets.</p>	<p>processing, multi-use processing facilities need to be enabled through both policy and funding. Co-operative business structures should be encouraged.</p>
<p>Work with independent harvesters, coastal communities and Indigenous Nations to rebuild the coastal infrastructure for local fisheries including maintained government wharves, shipways, local processors, and ice plants.</p>	<p>“Once a major employer in BC and the predominant economy in many coastal communities, fisheries have suffered extensive job losses. The effect this has had on coastal economies has been felt on many levels, including direct job loss in fishing but also the loss of ancillary services and infrastructure that supported a broad range of community needs...The decline of wellbeing in BC communities historically based on fishing is also well documented with increased unemployment and drug use, loss of infrastructure and youth retention, as well as increased youth delinquency and suicide.” (Page 19 & 24, Just Transactions Just Transitions: Towards Truly Sustainable Fisheries in British Columbia, 2018). With the necessary supports, coastal communities and fishers will be a vital part of our food security, rural communities, and thriving placed-based economies.</p>
<p>Fully honour historical and modern Treaties and support Indigenous communities in their pursuit of and implementation of aboriginal title.</p>	<p>The Tsilhqot’in Aboriginal Rights and Title is an important precedent and step forward in redressing the wrongs experienced by the first peoples of the land that has come to be known as Canada. Restoring meaningful and full control over their territories to Indigenous people will not only reinstate their inherent sovereignty but will improve food security for Indigenous households, which suffer from the highest food insecurity in the country.³ Restoring control over traditional lands to Indigenous people, widely recognized as skilled ecosystems stewards, will also contribute to mitigation measures against climate change.⁴</p>

³ <https://proof.utoronto.ca/resources/research-publications/aboriginal-peoples-and-food-insecurity/>

⁴ See, for instance, <https://www.indigenousfoodsystems.org/> and Project Drawdown: <https://drawdown.org/solutions/indigenous-peoples-forest-tenure>

Goal 3 — Buy BC

Build consumer awareness and demand and help local producers to market their products to grow their businesses

Comment: We know that British Columbians will be better served with a significant increase in domestic production for domestic markets. The April 2020 [Food Flows in Metro Vancouver Final Report](#) explores food sources and supplies in Metro Vancouver, highlighting vulnerabilities that come from the over-reliance on distant sources for the staples of a complete diet. Replacing imports with BC-grown and processed products will enhance our food self-sufficiency and economies across the province. The province also has an enormous opportunity and leadership role to play in mandating and properly financing universal school meal programs that will not only address child food insecurity (1 in 6 BC children experience food insecurity⁵) but also, if done well, will provide new opportunities for local food producers of all scales.

Objective 3.1: Build and leverage a strong recognizable Buy BC brand to help producers and processors expand sales and ensure consumers can easily identify local food and beverages.

Key Strategies	Rationale
Continue to expand the availability of the Class D license for Regional Districts and Electoral Areas so that livestock producers far from a suitable abattoir for their respective livestock species have the ability to slaughter their animals and sell the resulting meat legally.	Many parts of the province have never recovered from the impacts of the 2007 change in the Meat Inspection Regulation, despite the introduction of the graduated licencing system that is lauded around the world. The recent expansion of the availability of Class D licenses is an important step forward but more need to be made available if we are ever to see a return to the levels of local livestock production and meat supply that existed prior to 2007.

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<https://proof.utoronto.ca/resources/proof-annual-reports/priority-health-equity-indicators-for-british-columbia-household-food-insecurity-indicator-report/>

<p>Work with the Small Scale Meat Producers, BC Association of Abattoirs, MOA and Health Authorities to ensure inspection systems in A/B and D/E facilities are congruent, and provided by the MOA's Meat Inspection Branch at agreed intervals. Consider adding video for some inspections.</p>	<p>Oversight of all classes of licences needs to be taken back under the MOA's Meat Inspection branch. This would provide consistency and even the playing field. Having ALL meat processing under one regulatory authority would improve the current system and make it easier to address the challenges posed by regional sales restrictions.</p>
<p>Continue to work with the BC Association of Farmers' Markets and other partners to ensure that farmers markets get the investment and support necessary (such as operating capacity, dedicated equipment and infrastructure, and political leverage) to operate, expand and become more viable and resilient in communities throughout the province.</p>	<p>Recognized as an essential service, farmers markets are critically important to consumers, farmers, food processors and other vendors. Largely community driven and operated by grassroots non-profit organizations, farmers markets lack any tangible investment by provincial and municipal governments in their human capital, dedicated storage, equipment and infrastructure, and resources to operate viably and sustainably. In fact, many municipalities are not operating a market in the 2020 season which is devastating to farmers who rely on the markets. The goal would be to ensure that 100% of markets in the province are operational this and every year.</p>
<p>Objective 3.2: Help producers and processors expand sales in priority export markets.</p>	
<p>Key Strategies</p>	<p>Rationale</p>
<p>Expand the focus from export to more proactively include</p>	<p>The international market place will always force BC producers into price wars with global producers and into long, vulnerable supply chains. We recommend prioritizing domestic, short</p>

<p>domestic markets and provide support to food producers (farmers, fishers, processors) to better understand and access domestic (provincial) markets.</p>	<p>supply chain markets. We recognize that large producers of single commodities may need transition strategies in order to find domestic outlets for some or all of their products. Like those seeking to access export markets, new farmers, fishers, and those seeking to expand locally often face challenges understanding domestic market requirements when it comes to product sizing, packaging, labelling, and access. The Central Kootenay Food Policy Council's Domestic Navigator is modeled after the successful <i>Export Navigator program</i> and is "shovel ready".</p>
<p>Collaborate with the Health Authorities to support small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) and processors to access domestic institutional food services contracts.</p>	<p>Through their public health personnel and services, the five regional Health Authorities in the province have the ability to assess and help address any food safety risk that may exist at SMEs without obligating them to implement prohibitively expensive HACCP systems. Such a partnership could open up new opportunities for SMEs, particularly for institutions that are not serving highly vulnerable populations who require an extra degree of caution. Institutions of all sizes can benefit by sourcing product from their local food producers.</p>
<p>Expand the Buy BC Program to include meat, seafood, seeds, and bedding plants, and allow BC grown vegetables to be traced all the way back to BC grown seeds.</p>	<p>Despite the fact that the Buy BC branding includes images of seafood and meat, none are included in the list of product categories currently available on the Buy BC web platform. This must be rectified in order to maximize the potential of the marketing platform.</p> <p>The Buy BC Program has increased demand for local food, but this concept has not been applied to seeds. By promoting this crucial part of the local sustainable food system to the general public, we will raise awareness of the importance of localized seed production.</p> <p>To support transparency and education, there could be tracking and labelling of seeds to confirm they are locally produced in BC, tracking and labelling bedding plants that were produced from local BC grown seeds, and an incentive program for farmers who sell at farmers markets to create a system for identifying food products they sell that are produced using local BC grown seed.</p>