

He's been there, done that

Province's new agriculture minister brings wealth of experience presenting industry's case to government.

By Judie Steeves

British Columbia's newest agriculture minister is in an interesting position. After several decades as a lobbyist on behalf of agriculture, he now listens as the various agriculture sectors lobby him.

Steve Thomson, raised on a century-old Kelowna farm that is still in the family, was first elected this spring as MLA for the Okanagan-Mission riding in his hometown.

But, in between he served as general manager for the B.C. Milk Producers and in 1992 became general manager for the B.C. Fruit Growers' Association. During that time he was elected president of the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce and he went on to serve as chair of the provincial body.

He then did consulting work for the agriculture industry while the B.C. Agriculture Council was formed. He became executive director of the new farming body in 1998, taking his leave late last year to make his first foray into politics.

From his new perch, Thomson warns, "We won't get everything we wanted. However, I hope the industry



Kelowna's Steve Thomson, a longtime lobbyist for farmers, knows the challenges that lie ahead on 'the other side.'

will trust me, in terms of timing."

He admitted it could be a rough ride for someone who has worked so long on behalf of industry and now finds himself the minister to whom industry looks for solutions.

"I won't be able to deliver on everything that I fought for when I was on the other side, but I will do my best," he promised.

"I hope in six months industry will still view me as being in their corner; working on their behalf," Thomson added. "I grew up on a farm, so I understand the issues and I'm committed to listen and understand."

Thomson explained he has to work within the caucus to help the others

understand industry's contribution to the province.

He noted that having fellow farmers such as Ben Stewart (elected MLA for Westside-Kelowna and named Minister of Citizens' Services and Minister responsible for multiculturalism and the Public Affairs Bureau) and John Slater (elected MLA for Boundary-Similkameen and named parliamentary secretary to the environment minister, for water supply and allocation) in caucus, helps to get farmers' views understood in government.

But, the reality is, government is currently facing serious fiscal challenges, so Thomson said his first priority will be to ensure that ministry

resources are being used as efficiently as possible.

The agriculture portfolio in B.C. is very complex because there's a very diverse farming economy in this province. There are small operations and large ones, and they provide a range of products, from grains and meat to horticulture.

In fact, B.C. is probably unique in Canada for its agricultural diversity, which makes it extremely challenging to balance the many different interests—and there's seldom a one-size-fits-all solution to a problem.

As well, Thomson's portfolio includes more than just agriculture. Aquaculture, food processing and lands are also part of his new responsibilities, and he says he has lots to learn about that side of the ministry.

He does have some goals he'd like to achieve, including the use of waste energy and possible opportunities for farms in earning carbon offsets.

Along with the federal government, at the end of July, Thomson announced a continuation of the popular Environmental Farm Plan program, and he said there won't be any major changes to it.

Previous ministers had committed to moving the AgriStability program from Winnipeg to B.C., and beginning in the new year, this province's farmers will have an office in Kelowna where they can discuss problems with staff—who are expected to be more familiar with local issues.

Thomson wasn't sure how many new staff would be hired here in B.C. and

how many will transfer from the Winnipeg centre.

The first couple of the years of the AgriStability program, when it replaced the Canadian Agriculture Income Stability program, were devastating for the tree fruit industry, in part because of a complete lack of understanding of how that sector of agriculture works by staff at the main office in Winnipeg.

Growing perennials like trees, which don't even produce a crop for the first few years, is entirely different from something like grains, which have to be planted and harvested each year.

"That will be a big help to more effectively deliver the program," commented Thomson.

He also expects production insurance to remain as it is. Industry wants it to remain affordable, he noted, and it will remain a core part of the program.

Thomson said the ministry also wants to increase agriculture's profile with the public with a branding program, but cost is an issue. Elements are already in place, including the school snack program using local produce, the farmer's market program and the restaurant industry's Eat B.C. program.

All of it should be under a single umbrella, Thomson believes.

Other matters he is working on including rural/urban interface issues and access to affordable water for the agriculture industry, as well as regulatory issues with local government.

Thomson would not commit himself on continuation of a replant program because he said that's tied into fiscal factors.

"We have to look at it in terms of all the programs for industry," he said.

He was not optimistic that he can section off a bigger slice of the provincial budget pie for agriculture at present, but said he wants to work with industry to position it for the future.

Harmonization of the provincial sales tax and the federal goods and services tax could result in an estimated savings of \$15 to \$16 million to the B.C. agriculture industry, said Thomson, with not only a decrease in the cost of doing business, but also less paperwork.

The premier's appointment of Thomson was well-received by those in the agriculture industry, with BCFGA president Joe Sardinha commenting he might just be the best-qualified minister the province has ever had. "It's quite an honour for a newcomer to the legislature to be named agriculture minister," he added.

"He's worked with every commodity group."

However, Sardinha admitted it would be difficult for the new minister to balance all the different interests when it comes to the provincial budget.

That's not to say he wasn't hopeful Thomson will be able to convince his cabinet colleagues to increase the provincial budget allocation to agriculture, despite the lean times.



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