

Editorial

Down . . . but not out

The institution of the federal "Green Plan" some five years ago was, in retrospect, a significant step forward in Canadian society's efforts to address environmental issues and to tackle the mounting problems caused by humanity's simultaneous treatment of the planet as a bottomless pit of resource extraction and a giant kitty litter for all the subsequent waste. Despite the misgivings of many active in the environmental movement that the program would not be much more than a public relations exercise to dress up "the environment" in a set of feel-good clothes of pamphlets, videos and traveling road shows, the Green Plan did in fact get down to work: research was funded, community initiatives were supported and educational programs were started. The clean up had finally begun, little though it was.

Now, however, that first small step for humankind (to paraphrase an extraterrestrial expression) has come to an end too soon, its legs cut out from underneath by the bright idea of the day - deficit reduction. The preoccupation by governments at all levels to balance the books has not only pushed environmental issues away from centre stage, but quite literally out past the wings and down the back stairs. Not only has spending on environmental programs and initiatives been reduced, the cohesive nature of the Green Plan, the notion of a dedicated effort towards the resolution of pollution problems and the development of sustainable options has evaporated. The cynical may have looked at the Green Plan as just another public relations exercise, but it did give environmental efforts an identity and public awareness was being built on its foundation.

The Green Plan is gone but should not be forgotten. The idea of a concerted action plan should be kept in mind even as environmental and sustainability issues fragment into their individual subject matters. With

regard to making agriculture a more sustainable enterprise within the economy, research is a key element. There is little consensus today, for example, on the use of herbicides in farming. On one extreme there are those farmers who still use herbicides like soap in a car wash - the field's dirty unless it's completely clean; and on the other side those who would pick poison ivy by hand rather than use a spray. Out of this wide range of opinions, one of the few points of agreement is that reducing herbicide use is a good thing. Even if for some it's an economic rationale - herbicides are increasingly expensive - rather than an environmental consideration, it is common ground to work on.

Having identified an issue which would receive broad support, research is the essential element for developing alternatives, whether it be cropping practices, new crops or alternate products. Unfortunately, just as the Green Plan has felt the knife's edge of budget cuts, so too has research. The isolated voices criticizing the short-sighted nature of research cuts is becoming a chorus, and there is no doubt that the most effective (but obviously not immediate) way to resolve the fiscal problems governments face today is to invest in finding solutions for tomorrow. We cannot wait for governments to get their house in order via budgetary reduction, funds for research are needed today. Governments won't transfer these funds via general taxes any longer. Which leaves but one alternative, direct taxation of agricultural products that are bad for the environment to raise the much needed research funds. For example, in the case of herbicides a tax could be placed at 5 - 10 % at the farm level and 10 - 25% at the retail level for consumers for their "cosmetic" use of pesticides. It isn't likely to reduce consumption of these products, but it will fund more environmentally friendly alternatives. The same type of approach could be taken for things like gasoline.

The concepts can work in tandem: development of common issues to address with regards to sustainable agriculture so that work can begin immediately, and generation of a new source of financial support to ensure the development of environmental alternatives regardless of their economic pay-back. A Green Plan (with teeth) funded from general tax revenues would certainly be the first preference, but waiting for its resurrection while doing nothing would be, well, acting just like a government. The spirit of the Green Plan may be gone . . . but it should not be forgotten.