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## Different Opinions, Common Goals

*Bill McCurry*



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On May 5, 2015 the National Democratic Party (NDP) party won control of the Alberta Legislature. The NDP took office believing they had a mandate for change.

Fast forward to January 1, 2018 when new NDP regulations went into effect with two significant changes affecting greenhouse growers and garden centers: carbon taxes were phased-in, going up to \$50/ton of carbon dioxide emission, and mandatory overtime was promised to greenhouse employees after eight hours/day or 44 hours/week.

For 44 years prior, Alberta had exempted farm/agricultural operations from overtime and levied a reduced carbon tax. Now the NDP authored regulations saying anything grown in a greenhouse was manufacturing, not agriculture, and therefore wasn't exempt.

The sustainability and competitiveness of Alberta horticulture were threatened by the carbon levy. Overtime requirements would raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour over three years. (Many seasonal employees count on long summer days during the short growing season for banked hours to overcome winter unemployment.)

One retailer with a significant growing operation said his British Columbia competitors have 20% lower input costs than Albertans. Garden centers that historically bought some of his production were now trucking product 600 miles from the Vancouver area. The complicated British Columbia/Alberta carbon tax situations resulted, in January 2018, in British Columbia greenhouse growers having significant economic advantages over their Alberta competitors.

"No one threatened or fought with the ministry. We used good data to convince the ministry something had to change to protect Alberta's jobs and environment," horticultural specialist Dr. Mohyuddin Mirza told me.

The NDP's admirable new rules were negated by the law of unintended consequences. Unemployed greenhouse workers lost wages. Less carbon tax was collected. It became the industry's job to convince the government that horticulture needs heat to grow their products. The industry got together, and working with RedHat Co-op, hired Anna DePoli, a consultant/lobbyist who's also a communications expert. She helped convince the provincial government to grant a partial two-year overtime exemption to members of the Alberta Greenhouse Growers Association (AGGA). This exempted members from the new regulations for up to 26 weeks/year. (Cannabis production is specifically excluded from these exemptions.)

Debby Foisy, 2014 Green Profit Young Retailer finalist, is very active writing and speaking about our industry.

President of AGGA when these regulations were being debated, she passed the baton to Rolling Acres Greenhouse vegetable grower, Albert Cramer.

The new president allowed for a shift in perception by the agriculture ministry, the legislature and the general public. The Cramer family is one of the larger greenhouse cucumber/pepper growers in Canada. The regulations discussion was now clearly understood as threatening the province's ability to feed itself with local quality produce, not just grow "pretty flowers."

The "buy local" movement for greenhouse growers, both produce and floral, was suffering from a well-meaning, but detrimental, policy. Calm, professional and well-organized AGGA officers and members reasoned with the minister for an exemption. They worked with the ministry to craft a solution that, beyond the overtime relief, got an 80% rebate on natural gas heating fuel and various incentives for energy conservation and efficiencies. Perhaps not an ideal solution, but it does give the ministry and AGGA time to work together to reach their common goals. This is a great lesson in cooperation, logic and professionalism.

Off the record, some ministry employees told AGGA it was because they kept it low-key, out of the press and calmly professional that the ministry could proceed in a logical—rather than political—manner. Both the ministry and AGGA demonstrated how we can have different opinions and still work together to reach common goals. If only those in Washington, D.C. could learn from our friends in Alberta. **GP**

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*Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com) or (609) 688-1169.*