

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY FORUM: SUMMARY DOCUMENT Prepared on behalf of the Institute of Island Studies

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by Jane Ledwell, September 24, 2003
A taped record of the Forum is also available.

On Monday September 22, 2003, 75 Islanders attended an environmental policy forum in Charlottetown hosted by the Institute of Island Studies at UPEI and co-sponsored by five environmental organizations: the Island Nature Trust, the Environmental Coalition of PEI (ECO-PEI), the PEI Wildlife Federation, the PEI Council of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, and the UPEI Environmental Studies Program. An all-party panel consisting of NDP Leader Gary Robichaud, PC Environment Minister Chester Gillan, and Liberal Candidate Richard Brown addressed prepared questions on waste reduction, sustainable agriculture, and chemical contamination and then responded to diverse questions from the floor, including questions on petroleum exploration, energy rates and conservation, sewage sludge, and public transportation.

OPENING STATEMENTS

In their opening statements, the panel addressed some of the key themes of their policy agendas for the environment, mostly in general terms.

Gary Robichaud warned, "We can't trade away or negligently diminish our Island environment." He cited in particular Islanders' "heightened awareness of pesticides" and called on other leaders to take a stand on an issue he argued affected various sectors. His party advocates the acceptance of the Halifax Protocol to eliminate cosmetic pesticides, and a targeted reduction and eventual elimination of all synthetic pesticides.

Chester Gillan stated that his party sees the environment as a "key priority" and cited a program including "regulation, incentives, education, and, most of all, cooperation" to improve Island water, soil, and air quality. He pointed to the Province's State of the Environment report as an important means of documenting problems and progress. After citing a number of specifics from the PC platform, he concluded by stating, "We are all responsible for the environment, and working together, we can make a difference."

Richard Brown began his remarks with a comment that in twenty years of the environmental movement on Prince Edward Island, he has seen little positive change. In reference to Gillan's statements about new land use regulations, he added that "laws without enforcement are no good at all" and stated that a Liberal government would focus first on incentive programs for farmers and, failing that, developing "law that is enforceable and that will be enforced." He advocated for a provincial environmental auditor, "a person or organization with access to the full information available to government. . . . They would then report to the people directly."

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WASTE REDUCTION

Introduction: It has been estimated that municipal wastes in the United States have increased five times as quickly as the population over the 50-year period from 1920 to 1970; similar patterns apply to Prince Edward Island and the rest of Canada. Current patterns of production and consumption on the Island are much like anywhere else in the more developed world: unsustainable in the long-term without significant changes in how we manage and account for resource inputs and waste outputs.

To achieve the goal of waste reduction, we must move beyond traditional methods of disposal such as landfill and incineration, and establish the programs, policies, and partnerships that prevent waste production at source, while at the same time striving to minimize the environmental impacts of current disposal practices.

While reducing wastes through recycling and composting is commendable, it is an expensive and resource-intensive process that will never realize measurable reductions in amounts of waste generated. Recycling and composting programs are unsustainable without a meaningful program aimed at waste prevention. Waste prevention attempts to deal with wastes before they are generated, effectively eliminating the need for collection, transport, handling, separation, and disposal of waste materials. An effective waste prevention program could be an integral part of the Province's waste management policy, and could contribute to increased savings and enhanced environmental protection.

Question: What measures would your government undertake to evaluate the WasteWatch program effectively? What specific plans would your government undertake to enhance waste prevention on Prince Edward Island, and to ultimately reduce the amount of waste we generate?

Analysis: In response to the moderator's key question on waste reduction, some of the candidates made specific comments on WasteWatch, but none of the leaders concretely addressed the issue of waste prevention and reduction on PEI in any meaningful way. The environmental groups that organized the forum were disappointed that none of the candidates offered specific plans or even suggested that waste reduction would be a serious issue for their government.

Gary Robichaud indicated that his party does support the basic principles of WasteWatch, but complained that "the execution has been weak in parts." His party believes "WasteWatch should have been decentralized from the beginning," and argued that centralization has led to grumbling about insufficient pick-up times. He says it's time to "rethink the structural side of WasteWatch and to finetune the things we are doing."

Chester Gillan defended the government's evaluation structure for WasteWatch, emphasizing commitment to an annual review and structures such as a WasteWatch liaison committee. He supported the basic principles of waste reduction, acknowledging that recycling (such as

WasteWatch) is the third and least of the "Three R's"— Reducing, Reusing, and Recycling. However, rather than express a plan for PEI to enhance reduction and reusing, he returned to discussion of WasteWatch and pointed to Islanders' leadership in this area, with its target of 65% waste diversion. He suggested that WasteWatch's source separation is making Islanders more aware of the amount of garbage they are generating, and this will have positive effects for creating the consciousness for waste reduction. He cited PEI's "48 million beer and pop bottles refilled each year" as a significant contributor to waste reduction. He also cited Island businesses who are undertaking to reduce waste — such as moving to bins from bags at a local grocery store — or to reuse recycled materials — such as converting tonnes of plastics to plastic lumbers, or crushing glass for industrial use. But he emphasized that "most waste prevention is consumer-driven."

Richard Brown emphasized that WasteWatch was brought in by a Liberal administration, with the support of a lot of members of the volunteer sector in East Prince, where the program was piloted. He agreed with Robichaud that there were structural problems associated with centralization and blamed the Conservative government for "mechanizing" the program at an expense of \$30 million, to create a product that Cavendish Farms now forbids its farmers from spreading on their fields.* He warned government that given the efforts people are putting in to WasteWatch, government had "better demonstrate to the population that what they're doing is good for the environment." He noted that in his Charlottetown riding, he was hearing a definite need for more pick-ups of compost and recyclables, calling Charlottetown "the fruit fly capital of the world," but admitting this is primarily an urban issue. He said that at the moment, he's hearing people dismissing WasteWatch, saying "forget it," and we can't have that. "If people aren't participating, the system can't work," he said. "The philosophy is great," he continued, "but the system may collapse." According to Brown, the Liberals would be committed to fixing the problems.

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SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE LEGISLATION

Introduction: Fish kills have tended to be the focus of land issues on Prince Edward Island, because they attract so much negative public attention on local, national, and international levels. The tourism and aquaculture industries suffer as our reputation as a pristine province gets drowned in pictures of dead fish. The issue of soil erosion gets less publicity, though it is generally regarded as one of our major environmental problems. The issues around soil erosion and deteriorating water quality have led many Islanders to question present-day methods of farming, particularly regarding the potato industry. Will our soils be fit to grow crops in the future? Will our children be able to fish in our rivers? What is happening to the health of Island waterways? These are questions we, as Islanders, ask ourselves.

As a result of these and other agriculture-related problems, the province now has some legislation in place related to sustainable agriculture. While there has been some resistance, farmers have for the most part been following the legislation setting out buffer zones along streams and keeping cattle out of waterways. The Crop Rotation Act and

restrictions on high-slope land have been less successful. While much of the public believes there is a mandatory three-year rotation, there are so many exemptions that it is hard to say whether the legislation is doing its job. The slope restrictions were actually ignored in many areas, though to date no charges have been laid.

Question: How would your government work to ensure that farming practices do not contribute to environmental degradation and the ability of other sectors to continue to flourish? Would you support the existing legislation? Would you strengthen the legislation or add new regulations? Do you think the Island can support over 100,000 acres of potatoes without environmental degradation and, if not, how would you go about reducing the acreage? What government programs do you propose to bring in to encourage and financially support farmers moving towards sustainable agriculture practices?

Analysis: The candidates responded to the key question on sustainable agriculture legislation in a more detailed and thorough manner than the previous question. Forum organizers noted that although the Minister of the Environment, Hon. Mr. Gillan, said quite concretely that he wants to see 100% of Island land in a 1-in-3 crop rotation by 2005, this promise would be impossible to keep, since some of the existing exemptions in the legislation are allowing 2-in-5 rotation, and it would be 2008 before anything could be done.

Chester Gillan said that his government has brought in regulatory measures "we believe are working," and he asked Islanders to "give it time to let it work." He indicated that he felt that the government's implementation plan has been successful. It involved 1) education for farmers on the principles of crop rotation, 2) enforcement last year, resulting in 45 warnings, and 3) a combination of education and enforcement this year. (The department contacted farmers by phone during planting season this year, and subsequently issued only one warning during the growing season.) He said, "Crop rotation is in its infancy, but I am hopeful and confident that we can achieve 100% crop rotation by 2005." He cited a government plan to allow property tax exemptions for land taken out of production by buffer zone and other regulations, and a complementary plan to reforest those lands. He also pointed to the increases Islandwide in engineered soil management, from 75 hectares in 1995 to approximately 1650 hectares currently. Likewise, 66% of Island farms are now preparing environmental farm plans that emphasize cross-compliance with regulations. Gillan also praised the Food Trust for "encouraging better prices for food products" by adding value and seeking new markets for Island products.

Richard Brown emphasized that in the Liberal Party, "We believe in natural, not chemical processes, on the land," and cited research showing that during the drought of 2001, those farms that used manure on their land yielded higher than those relying on chemicals. He called for follow-up and a report from a process to assess best practices related to the Farm Practices Act, and he called on government to "look at purchasing buffer zone areas," and to work with the farm community on this issue. Brown gave support to the principles behind the Crop Rotation legislation and claimed continued support for the legislation, but called for "speed[ing] up its implementation, because at some point in time, the land is just going to give up."

Gary Robichaud said, "The current state of the agricultural economy as we know it is not sustainable, as any grower will say." He pointed to the loss of top soil, pressure for increased acreage and yields in potatoes and stated, "Massive monoculture is not the future of this Island, which is one of the most fragile ecosystems in the country." He commended government for its Crop Rotation legislation and urged "full implementation," elimination of exemptions, and more monitoring and enforcing of regulations. He responded to Gillan's comment that only one warning was handed out this season by asking if this is "because everyone is complying? Or because of less enforcement?" He continued, "PEI could be a North American leader in organics, if the government encouraged this option." He also said that his party supports the National Farmer's Unions advice on maximum potato acreage (70–80,000 acres) and also supports the proportionality formula on reduction of acreage. Likewise, the NDP accepts the NFU policy of zero tolerance on spray drifts. In closing, he urged government to help growers "get off the monoculture treadmill."

** Note: A later commentator pointed out that Cavendish Farms is also in the fertilizer business and could have self-interest and profit-motive at heart in banning compost from its fields.*

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CHEMICAL CONTAMINATION AND ECOSYSTEM HEALTH

Introduction: Potato production and much other agriculture involves the application of fertilizers, either natural or synthetic. The goal is to supply some of the limiting chemicals to maximize plant growth. In most cases this is accomplished by spreading chemical fertilizers, usually containing nitrogen in the form of nitrates, phosphorous, and potassium. Ideally plants use all of the nitrates provided in their growth, but to maximize growth and ensure there is sufficient present, often more than is actually needed is applied. These unused nitrates are water soluble and find their way into our watertable. Until recently it was thought that layers of rock, soil, and clay prevented penetration into the deeper areas of the watertable from which all PEI's drinking water originates. However, in recent years, well water on PEI has shown increasing levels of nitrates.

Because the ingestion of nitrates can lead to health risks, the Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality have set a limit of 10 milligrams per litre (mg/L) as acceptable for human consumption. In some regions on PEI 20 % of wells produce water above 8 mg/L and over 5% are above 10 mg/L. The number of wells exceeding standards is increasing. At the same time, much lower concentrations have been shown to affect our health. In one large study a concentration of 2.5 mg/L was shown to result in three times the level of bladder cancer in women ages 55 to 69, as opposed to those drinking from wells with nitrate levels of less than 0.4 mg/L. Studies of amphibians and fish have shown developmental and health problems when exposed to nitrate levels currently deemed satisfactory by the Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality standards.

The impact of pesticides and herbicides on aquatic life is well illustrated by the number of fish kills that have occurred in recent years. In these incidents, not only is the fish population decimated, but often most aquatic life is killed.

Outside agricultural use, pesticides and fertilizers are also being used extensively at golf courses and for cosmetic use in homes and gardens and other urban and rural sites. Recently, there was even talk of the Province applying the pesticide Round-up to control plant growth on the Confederation Trail.

Question: Given these concerns, what action would your government take to reduce or eliminate the use of these chemicals?

Analysis: The candidates responded to key questions regarding chemical contamination without making commitments regarding reduction or elimination, with the exception of Gary Robichaud, who had stated his party's concerns and commitments on this question in his opening remarks. Forum organizers noted his commitment to the Halifax Protocol to eradicate cosmetic pesticides and would support Robichaud's call for the other leaders to take a stand on this issue and, like the NDP, to commit to targeted reductions in chemical use, within specified timelines. Organizers also noted Richard Brown's comments on the importance of "natural processes" on the land, and took to heart his comment that the amount of chemicals currently in use is "scary."

Richard Brown began by saying that chemical contamination was a "major concern," especially as it related to drinking water. He noted that Islanders are digging deeper wells because of the penetration of chemicals and asked "How deep can we go to get clean water? Pretty soon, we're going to run out of pipe." He reiterated that his party prefers natural processes to chemical processes on the land and wants to "work with research areas and farmers." He suggested that one goal should be to expand the list of banned chemicals by 50%. Referring to the earlier discussion of WasteWatch, he said, "If we could use our compost, that would be one improvement."

Gary Robichaud began by pointing to the bottled water by his microphone: "Can you imagine twenty years ago buying bottled water on PEI" he asked. "Suddenly, we're vulnerable to horrific effects of fumigants in wells . . . and boil water orders," he said. One major problem he cited was that we can't test for some chemical contamination on the Island, since the facilities do not exist, while we "should be on the cutting edge of this R&D technology." He pointed to the concerns of shellfishers regarding pesticide runoffs. He also said that the NDP supports the Halifax Protocol banning cosmetic pesticides and the Audobon Formula for golf courses (advocating the least amount of chemical usage). Robichaud concluded by saying that water has to be the number one priority, and that the NDP will strongly push for government to look at establishing adequate water testing facilities here on PEI.

Chester Gillan first responded to Brown's recommendation that the list of banned chemicals be expanded by saying that Health Canada and the PMRA provide safeguards for agricultural products, and it is up to them to register "crop protectants" for safety. He indicated his government has lobbied the PMRA to make "lower-risk products" that are available elsewhere also available in Canada. He went on to cite the government's "active partnerships" with growers to encourage Integrated Crop Management for potatoes, looking at best practices from elsewhere. He said that moving the Pesticides Control Act to the Environment portfolio has been an important move, and he cited limits that the Province has placed on a number of specific

products. He also cited a review of the Pesticides Control Act, through a subcommittee of industry stakeholders and members of the general public. He cited partnerships with Environment Canada to continue long-term monitoring and research related to potato crops and fish kills. He also noted the government's program to provide \$2,500 grants to growers for innovative programs to reduce pesticides (such as testing compost tea as an organic means to reduce late blight). He concluded by stating, "If we can put more content, more organic matter, in our soil, we're going to get less run-off from healthier soil."

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QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

There was no assigned speaking order for responses to the following questions. Candidates had the chance to offer to speak first to questions raised from the floor.

Question: Tony Reddin asked what the candidates' governments would do regarding untreated sewage sludge being spread on Island fields.

The NDP advocated for an immediate ban and criticized current legislation that allows for spreading with a "simple registration." Robichaud said, "We're saying this is a practice on PEI which is completely unacceptable."

Chester Gillan said, "Sludge is an insidious issue" and indicated that the policy is that in future, all sludge will have to go through the Island's treatment plans. He pointed to a \$45 million deal with the Federal Government to increase waste treatment in Charlottetown, Summerside, and Stratford within the next year and a half.

Richard Brown said that the treatment plant proposed for Riverside Drive is an issue in its own right and a potential threat to the Hillsborough River and he called for "a full public assessment of that project." He did not see putting treated sludge into rivers as a solution to the problem.

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Question: Jim Munvies of the Public Transportation Coalition asked the candidates about their parties' commitment to province-wide public transportation.

Richard Brown indicated, "The Liberal Party supports provincial money being used to support Charlottetown transit system, bringing in Cornwall and Stratford." He also said that his party would discuss with the school boards the possibility of integrating public transit with school bus systems.

Chester Gillan said that whether looking at city or provincial transit systems, "Ridership is the main issue." He said on the city level, Charlottetown has to have its own system and that it should start small and grow bigger when the public is educated to ride. He mentioned the proposal that taxis have been proposed as one alternative to large buses. On the provincial level,

SMT has a good ridership, and this is and should be separate but might be a good model to start with. He said it will take "an effort on the part of Islanders to give up their cars."

Gary Robichaud said that a positive effect of the escalating cost of car insurance might be helping encourage Islanders to do just that. Addressing the question of ridership, he mentioned past failed experiments by saying, "It's a no-brainer. With a three month experiment, it's hard to get people to change their habits. We need a permanent plan — a plan that is reasonable." He also mentioned that a system run on taxis would be an environmental problem and said PEI is "the only place on earth that believes that taxis and buses can't co-exist." He said studies elsewhere have shown that taxis get used more when there is a good bus system also in place.

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Question: Irene Novaczek asked the candidates their parties' policies on petroleum exploration in in-shore waters, commenting on PEI being cut out of past negotiations and the threat of exploration on 20,000 groundfish and shellfish jobs in the Southern Gulf, not to mention marine tourism.

Chester Gillan said that his government had expressed concern to the Minister of Fisheries when this issue came up and said that PEI's government supports the stand of fishers in PEI, NB, and NS. He said the PEI government had tried to "work with DFO to alleviate effects," and that PEI's opposition had been noted, though there has been no movement. PEI will continue to push to keep exploration to deeper off-shore waters. "We are monitoring the situation and will continue," concluded Gillan.

Gary Robichaud said he was suspicious of the motives, criticizing the PC energy platform and what he called their "Island energy gamble," focussing on the potential of natural gas for long-term energy solutions. He warned against a "mega-complex way of thinking" about energy issues and questioned whether or not a PC government would be cautious in its approach to exploration if natural gas were at stake.

Richard Brown said the Liberals believe in public environmental assessment processes and said we can't sacrifice ground fisheries for exploration.

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Question: Bruce Smith of the Island Nature Trust asked if the candidates would support an exemption for the Island Nature Trust lands — or for all properties designated for Natural Areas protection — from the provincial limit for land holdings by one individual or company.

Richard Brown commended the work of the Island Nature Trust. He said he had worked with the Trust to develop a private member's bill, put forward in Brown's name, on just this issue. He said that the Trust is a public trust and should be given permission to own more land in the public interest. He promised to reintroduce his bill, if elected.

Gary Robichaud said that the legislation on land holdings was never meant to restrict this type of initiative, and the "case for exemption is obvious."

Chester Gillan said that the issue is not new to government, and that after much discussion, the government is close to a decision. However, he stated, "It is very difficult to allow one organization or group to exceed the amount for whatever reason they wish, and . . . laudable objectives are not the only criterion." He says they must achieve the "right fit" and the "proper wording."

Richard Brown rebutted that many Acts have exemptions, including the Crop Rotation Act.

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Question: Andrew Trivett asked what policies and plans the candidates' governments would have on reducing demand for energy and supporting renewable energy.

Richard Brown spoke to the Liberal Party's "Real Energy Plan for PEI," putting "everything on the table." He committed support for the wind farm and suggested it might be a good idea to exempt energy efficient appliances from sales tax, as one possibility. He said the Liberals were committed to working with Maritime Electric to reduce rates, and working with IRAC to make legislative changes to save Islanders 20%.

Chester Gillan said there is concern that the price we are paying — mostly for NB hydro — is too high and we need to be able to do better in the future. He said his government has a plan and will continue to work on that plan. He said natural gas is one possible source to pursue, since we can't be as dependent on power generation from the mainland. He said he doesn't believe we can get to 20% wind-generated energy on PEI, since the "wind regime does not blow equal across PEI." He mentioned Irving's plan to use smaller numbers of wind turbines. He mentioned the potential in hydrogen and ethanol, saying it will be important to use a number of sources, rather than the one most used now.

Gary Robichaud said his party's key concerns are about the viability of natural gas supply. He said that with a diversity of generation of electricity, he believed wind energy could be as high as 20% as we develop and use better technologies. He pointed to potential to use solar power, biomass technologies, and hydrogen as other renewable energy sources. He said, "The key is to look for a variety of areas and to vary renewable and non-renewable source." But, he also said, "it can't work without massive education about reduction of energy consumption." Reexamining how we use our power has to be part of any energy plan.

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Question: Reg Pendergast asked what the exemptions are to the Crop Rotation Act, why they are there, and how soon the candidates would propose to get rid of them.

Chester Gillan reiterated his hope to raise the numbers of fields in three-year rotation from 60% to 100% and noted how important it is that we increase the organic matter in the soil. He urged use of practices from the past of mixed farming to build up the soil.

Gary Robichaud said that the absence of alternative crops to potatoes is a real problem, with the way the agricultural economy is set up for farmers, and that they are pressured to push land to its limits, even though they know it is unsustainable.

Richard Brown said we have to set a goal of exemption reduction, working with research facilities and farmers.

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Question: Ken Bingham asked what pressure the candidates' governments would put on the Federal Government to solve the problems created by the 1956 causeway to Robinson's Island in the National Park.

Gary Robichaud said the causeway is a major concern, since it is creating a dead inland lake, with impacts on fishers and consequences for soil erosion. He said while it's a major local issue, it's a minor listing for the Federal Government. Still, he said, this has to be an area in which the federal government corrects the problem.

Richard Brown said that the causeway isn't the only problem bridge, commenting that "On PEI, we seem to want to block our rivers off." He said we need to work towards full flushing on bridge systems Island-wide.

Chester Gillan said that the convenience of crossing estuaries that came out of Development Plan projects has not been to the Island's gain. But, he said, it comes down to dollars. He said we have to continue to come up with ways to motivate the federal government to solve this and similar problems. He also cited development as part of the issue, saying, "The problem is ourselves, and the solution is crass economics."

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Question: Nick Boragina brought up the issue of air pollution and asked if the candidates thought public transport buses would cause air pollution problems and why Islanders don't have to have their cars tested for emissions.

Chester Gillan discussed the Island's participation in the Climate Change Protocol, whose intention is to bring the problem of climate change "to the home shores." He suggested links between PEI asthma rates and air pollution. He also said that the Kyoto Protocol outlines what we can do regarding cutting down emissions, and public transportation would be one means.

Gary Robichaud said that we have to, as a first principle, reduce the number of cars on the road, and also keep roads in better shape. He said the technology for emissions control on buses is diverse and said in many provinces, emissions testing on vehicles is an annual requirement.

Richard Brown said air pollution is an issue on which government can lead, instead of following, by helping develop alternative fuels. He mentioned the model of hydrogen use in Iceland.

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Question: Harry Baglole asked if the candidates would support increasing and protecting Island livestock as a way to diversify agriculture and reduce pressure to plant unsustainable acreage of potatoes. He mentioned the Icelandic horse as a possible livestock niche investment.

Chester Gillan said that increasing livestock would be a good start. He cited the leadership of the Food Trust in adding marketing expertise to potatoes and meat. He also said PEI has more horses per capita than any other province, but that our exhibitions are showing declines in attracting livestock. He cited the leadership of the Atlantic Veterinary College at UPEI, including its world-renowned programs in swine and fish health.

Gary Robichaud said that there has to be greater emphasis on finding what niche markets could sustain us and pointed to the growth in the organic market, saying, "This is an opportunity we must seize." He said we should brand ourselves as international leaders in organics.

Richard Brown also praised the Food Trust and the Atlantic Veterinary College and suggested working with the University to diversify agriculture and to lead the way.

Moderator Ann Sherman thanked the candidates.

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