Paul Olsen

(A recollection by Rita Weerdenburg)

Paul was the president of CNLA at the time the nursery sector in BC was seriously impacted by the Sudden Oak Death outbreak. As SOD or *P. ramorum* as it was more commonly called to avoid confusion to the turf sector, was classified by CFIA as a quarantine pest, infested plants were ordered to be destroyed by CFIA. Besides the obvious financial losses associated with plant destruction, impacted growers faced other significant costs of plant disposal and site clean-up and sanitation.

Although it was very rarely achieved, CNLA set out to lobby the CFIA to compensate growers for these losses. Much background work was required and several trips were made to Ottawa by Paul and myself to meet with various bureaucrats and AAFC Minister policy advisors. While the bureaucrats were listening and obviously sympathetic, obtaining a commitment to a compensation package was elusive. One last meeting was scheduled between Francois Guimont, the then president of CFIA and several of his key advisors, and a small contingent of CNLA reps, with Paul as the industry spokesperson.

By a rather strange coincidence, at more or less the same time, potato cyst nematode (PCN) was discovered within a relatively small area in Quebec. Also a quarantine pest, this discovery resulted in the destruction of some potato crops. A day or two before the CNLA’s meeting in Ottawa, CFIA publically announced a compensation package to the impacted potato farmers.

The CNLA-CFIA meeting did not go well for President Guimont. He was very defensive about the compensation package paid to Quebec farmers and this was all that Paul needed to go on the offense. Diplomatically but forcefully, Paul accused Mr. Guimont of favoritism to farmers in his home province, while ignoring the plight of the BC nursery sector. Desks were pounded. Literally. Although President Guimont insisted throughout that there was no personal favoritism at play, the CNLA contingent was not buying his story. Within a few days CNLA was informed that CFIA staff had been directed to draft a compensation regulation.

Thanks to Paul’s persistence, his earlier relationship-building skills with policy advisors, his keen perception to recognize a unique opportunity and his skill to turn that opportunity to his own advantage, nursery growers in BC collectively realized millions of dollars in compensation payments at the height of the *P. ramorum* “crisis.”