

News Release

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Major funding announced for Cowichan River water supply study

Colwood, BC – Major grant funding from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and Province of British Columbia will enable the Cowichan Valley Regional District to explore the feasibility of increasing water storage levels in Cowichan Lake to provide sustainable water resources for fisheries in the Cowichan River system.

A multi-party proposal for \$4 million to the BC Salmon Restoration and Innovation Fund (BCSRIF) was put forward by the CVRD in collaboration with Cowichan Tribes, Paper Excellence and the Cowichan Watershed Board to focus on two key activities necessary to move forward on attaining a long term water supply for the Cowichan River. The first component will be development of detailed engineering designs and permitting for a new weir in Cowichan Lake, as well as strategies for the removal of the existing weir. The second component of the project will be determining the Cowichan Lake natural boundary in order to conduct private property impact assessment associated with an increase to lake levels if and when a new dam is constructed in the future.

“This is great news for our region, as this work is direly needed to prevent further damage and degradation of fish populations in one of our heritage river systems,” said Ian Morrison, Chair of the Cowichan Valley Regional District. “We are grateful to DFO for recognizing the importance of this work, and to our partners for their collaborative efforts to seek a viable solution that will protect the vital resources of fish and water.”

The funding was announced by the Honourable John Wilkinson, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Canadian Coast Guard, at an event yesterday in Colwood, BC along with several other projects being supported by BCSRIF on Vancouver Island.

“We are using the BC Salmon Restoration and Innovation Fund to modernize the region’s fish and seafood sector and solidify our reputation as a provider of world-class products,” said the Honourable Jonathan Wilkinson, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard said. “These investments will ensure that the fish and seafood sector in British Columbia is positioned for long-term environmental and economic sustainability, while helping to create meaningful employment opportunities in coastal and Indigenous communities in BC.”

Since 1989, the Cowichan Valley has experienced drought-stricken years more often than not, with 2019 projected to be the worst on record. Emergency pumping from Cowichan Lake into the Cowichan River, needed to maintain minimum water levels necessary for spawning fish, is anticipated to begin August 29 at 11 a.m. This temporary solution is not sustainable, particularly due to the impacts on the lakeshore, water lines and infrastructure.

“Lack of water surety is becoming one of the valley’s biggest issues threatening the recharge of local drinking water aquifers, water supply for agriculture and our Crofton mill operation, and putting the health of the river at risk,” said Brian Baarda, CEO of Paper Excellence. “We’re relieved to see both governments supporting this work that will lay the foundation to increase water storage to more effectively handle climate change impacts.”

"This project is a great example of what can be achieved when all levels of government come together with local citizens, and commit to being resilient in the face of climate change", said Tom Rutherford, Executive Director of the Cowichan Watershed Board. "There is no doubt that the legendary salmon and trout runs that have helped build local cultures and communities in the Cowichan Valley are at risk. The science-based, collaborative approach demonstrated by this initiative provides us all with hope for a sustainable water future for the Cowichan Valley and beyond."

"Today's announcement that the CVRD and Cowichan Tribes' application for funding under the BC Salmon and Restoration Innovation Fund (BCSRIF) has been approved in principle is very welcome news for our region," said Alistair MacGregor, MP for Cowichan-Malahat-Langford. "Upgrading the Cowichan weir is necessary for the long-term health of the Cowichan River, something I have continuously pressed the federal government on since first being elected. I'm extremely pleased to see this important first step, which will allow for the weir design and impact engineering to proceed."

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For more information, please contact:

Kris Schumacher
Manager, Communications & Engagement
Cowichan Valley Regional District
250.746.2635
kris.schumacher@cprd.bc.ca