

KOKSILAH WATERSHED BACKGROUNDER

August 2020

The Koksilah Watershed is experiencing critically low summer flows putting the health and livelihood of its residents at significant risk.

The Watershed:

- Is located on southeastern Vancouver Island, south of the City of Duncan.
- Is approximately 30,000 ha.
- Has many streams and wetlands that feed the 44 km long Koksilah River which empties into the Cowichan River just before it reaches Cowichan Bay
- Was historically forested with predominately old growth forests
- Is important to the Quw'utsun' people who fished and called it home for thousands of years.
- Is important to the community for drinking water, for agriculture and forestry and for its beauty and recreation opportunities.

Current Situation:

- Approximately 80% of the watershed is used for forestry and 15% for agriculture; the remainder includes parks, IRs, residential, institutional, and commercial/industrial
- Approximately 92% of the land is privately held
- Land use has changed the watershed and its hydrology significantly
- <4% of the watershed has older forests
- The road density throughout the watershed is high averaging 4.5 km/km²
- Fish stocks have declined significantly
- In 1980 the Province stopped issuing surface water licenses because the river and streams were considered fully committed; groundwater use however continued to increase
- In recent decades, late summer streamflow in the watershed has been in significant decline
- Declining summer flows will worsen with the rapidly changing climate.
- Work by Provincial hydrology staff indicate that surface water and groundwater are intricately connected.

Short term Drought Response:

- For several years, the province has written to surface water license holders asking them to voluntarily reduce water use. In 2019, everyone with surface and groundwater licenses were advised that flows were critically low and water use needed to be reduced.
- On August 19th, 2019 the Minister issued an order that farmers stop irrigating hay and corn crops. <https://www.cowichanvalleycitizen.com/news/province-begins-restricting-water-use-on-koksilah-river/>

- This summer (2020) despite wetter and cooler weather, river flows are again becoming dangerously low. Water flows are being closely monitored and provincial water and agriculture staff along with the Cowichan Watershed Board, CVRD Director for Area E, ARDCorp and the Dairy Producers Association are working together to ensure drought response efforts are coordinated and communicated broadly.

Long term Watershed Management:

- The growing impact of climate change and land use on the health of the Koksilah watershed has led the Province and Cowichan Tribes to embark together on an important new initiative.
- In February 2020, the Province and Cowichan Tribes signed a Government to Government interim letter of agreement <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020FLNR0015-000248> regarding scoping out new tools for managing the Koksilah under the new *Water Sustainability Act* <https://www.bclaws.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/14015>
- Work is in the initial stages and community input will be sought September 2020.

Community Initiatives To-date:

- Water is the number one concern of residents across the Cowichan Valley Regional District and in 2018 residents supported a new drinking water and watershed protection initiative to enable the local government to help address water related concerns.
- Many community meetings have been hosted in the Koksilah Watershed to inform residents of the situation in their watershed and to discuss ways to conserve. Click here for June 2020 meeting summary <https://sites.google.com/a/cowichanstation.org/koksilah-watershed-working-group/how-do-i/view-meeting-summaries?authuser=0>
- The Cowichan Watershed Board initially worked with Dairy farmers in 2014 to address water related issues through a group environmental farm plan. In 2020, to hopefully avoid the need for another Ministerial order, ARDCorp is assisting farmers to reduce their water use through collaborative irrigation scheduling.
- The Koksilah Working Group, a community grassroots initiative, has commissioned an ecological assessment of the watershed to better understand the impacts of land use practices and where restoration and protection can help conserve water resources. Find the report and more information on their website <http://koksilahwatershed.org>
- Many individuals are acting to conserve, for example by checking for leaks, installing rainwater collection and storage systems, investing in efficient irrigation systems, switching to low flush and composting toilets, exploring permaculture methods, retaining trees and forest etc. (Many more people would be able to transition to more efficient technologies and storage solutions if they could access financial support.)

Looking Ahead:

- The Koksilah, unlike the Cowichan, does not have a large lake with a simple option of increasing headwater storage.
- Unless water use is reduced and natural hydrological functioning protected the situation will continue to worsen.
- The Koksilah Watershed and the community needs a plan that:

- limits water use to a level that can be sustained into the future
- limits water use to a level that can sustain a healthy functioning aquatic ecosystem.
- shares a limited resource for the most benefit for all
- ensures best practices for restoring and maintaining hydrological functioning in all land management activities
- reduces tension and finger pointing among resident users, recreational users, First Nations, farmers and forest companies.
- Farmers, forest companies and other commercial/industrial interests need a plan to provide more certainty about their business - how to invest and how to manage into the future.
- Farmers need a plan that recognizes the challenge of food security in a rapidly changing world.
- Local Government needs a plan to support better decisions about land use –where development should and should not happen
- The new Water Sustainability Act enables the development of a legally enforceable Water Sustainability Plan - The Province has taken an important first step with Cowichan Tribes towards undertaking a sustainability planning process. It will take continued political will, resources and time to make it a reality.
- In the meantime, we can help by:
 - advocating for a plan,
 - advocating that further development be paused until we know what the watershed can sustain, and
 - advocating for everyone to do their part to conserve water and restore environmentally damaged lands.

Make Sure Your Voice is Heard for Better Management of the Koksilah Watershed:

- Advocacy works. Never underestimate the power of the community to press for action. Elected Officials pay attention when citizens take the time to contact them. Government has lots of competing issues and the squeaky wheel usually does get the grease.
- Letters or calls from individuals carry far more weight than form letters or group letters.
- Short clear asks are most effective.
- Requesting a response helps ensure your response has been counted.

Provincial Contacts:

- Hon. John Horgan, Premier 250-387-1715 john.horgan.MLA@leg.bc.ca
- Hon. Doug Donaldson, Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development 250-287-6240 doug.donaldson.MLA@leg.bc.ca
- Hon. George Heyman, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy 250-387-1187 george.heyman.MLA@leg.bc.ca
- Hon. Scott Fraser, Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation 250 953 4844 scott.fraser.MLA@leg.bc.ca
- Hon. Selina Robinson, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing 250 387 2283 selina.robinson.MLA@leg.bc.ca
- Hon. Lana Popham, Minister of Agriculture 250 387 1023 lane.popham.MLA@leg.bc.ca
- Sonia Furstenau, MLA Cowichan Valley 250 387-8347 sonia.furstenau.MLA@leg.bc.ca

Cowichan Valley Regional District Contacts:

- Aaron Stone, Chair CVRD Board and Mayor Ladysmith 250 245 6403 chair@cvrd.bc.ca
- Blaise Salmon, Director Area A: Mill Bay/ Malahat 250 510 3294 Blaise.Salmon@cvrd.bc.ca
- Sierra Acton, Director Area B: Shawnigan Lake Sierra.Acton@cvrd.bc.ca
- Mike Wilson, Area C: Cobble Hill 250 715 6874 Mike.Wilson@cvrd.bc.ca
- Lori Iannidinardo, Area D: Cowichan Bay 250 510 3504 Lori.Iannidinardo@cvrd.bc.ca
- Alison Nicholson Area E: Cowichan Station/Sahtlam/Glenora 250 510 3544
alison.nicholson@cvrd.bc.ca
- Ian Morrison, Area F: Cowichan Lake South/Skutz Falls 250 510 7163 Ian.Morrison@cvrd.bc.ca
- Lynne Smith, Area G: Saltair/Gulf Islands 250 701 1407 lynne.smith@cvrd.bc.ca
- Colin Haime, Alternate Director Area H: North Oyster/Diamond 250 616 3986
colin.haime@cvrd.bc.ca
- Klaus Kuhn, Director Area I: Youbou/Meade Creek 250 701 3145 klaus.kuhn@cvrd.bc.ca
- Michelle Staples, Duncan, 250 746 6126 mayor@duncan.ca
- Tim McGonigle, Town of Lake Cowichan 250 749 6681 tmcgonigle@lakecowichan.ca
- Al Siebring, Municipality of North Cowichan mayor@northcowichan.ca
- Debra Toporowski, Municipality of North Cowichan 250 710 4186
debra.toporowski@northcowichan.ca
- Kate Marsh, Municipality of North Cowichan 250 710 6841 kate.marsh@northcowichan.ca