



NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

Community Leaders Meet to Address Drought

On Thursday July 3 Cowichan Watershed Board (CWB) hosted a meeting of community leaders and key stakeholders to discuss actions and options for responding to current drought conditions in the area. Local government staff and senior staff, MLA Doug Routley, Tim Kulchyski of Cowichan Tribes, and representatives from Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (FLNRO), Island Health, Catalyst Paper (a major water user in the region), and a several stewardship groups gathered for the meeting.

CVRD Chair and CWB Co-Chair Rob Hutchins described the Cowichan River flow situation as grave. The combination of a dry spring and low snowpack has led to Cowichan Lake being almost 40 cm lower than it should be at this time of year. As a result river flows have been reduced from the 7 cubic metres required in Catalyst Paper's Water license to 5 cubic metres per second to try and make the water stored behind the weir at Cowichan Lake last until the fall rains come.

While the well fields that underlie the lower Cowichan and Koksilah are not currently threatened impacts of low river flows are serious. Possible impacts of drought that were discussed at the meeting included:

- water quality -particularly in the area below the Joint Utility Board sewage lagoons.
- damage to fish populations -as the wetted area of the river recedes - including: stranding, habitat loss, increased competition, temperature stress and if the drought continues into the fall loss of adult chinook salmon due to inadequate flows for migration and increased exposure to seal predation;
- loss of opportunity for Cowichan people –particularly utilizing the river and fish and wildlife for ceremonial, food and cultural purposes; and,
- economic impacts linked to:
 - a forced shutdown of the water dependent Crofton mill,
 - reduced recreational opportunities, and
 - in the longer term impacts on commercial and sport salmon fisheries.

Other possible impacts discussed included localized well failures, conflict between people with different priorities for water use and regulatory issues.

Participants also discussed a number of actions undertaken to date.

- Catalyst Paper has asked its 600 employees to come forward with suggestions to save water and to do their best to conserve water. Management has also begun to explore the feasibility of pumping water over the weir at Lake Cowichan.
- Local governments have implemented Stage 2 watering restrictions and are monitoring sewage discharge into the river closely.
- DFO intends to monitor the Cowichan closely and with Cowichan Tribes make preparations to truck chinook salmon to spawning grounds as a potential mitigation measure;
- The Cowichan Watershed Board has been rolling out a water conservation challenge to water providers and public information initiative, kicked off by David Slade on May 19 at VIU;
- Island Health will beef up water quality monitoring as required; and,
- Stewardship groups have been moving juvenile fish that are stranded in side-channels and pools into the main stem of the river and are participating in public education initiatives.

FLNRO's Provincial Water Stewardship Manager Valerie Cameron reported that much of Vancouver Island is already at Stage 3 and verging on Stage 4 of the Province's Five Stage Drought Profile. FLNRO coordinated a provincial government drought planning session the previous week. Cameron congratulated the meeting participants on their actions and the collaborative approach being taken in the Cowichan noting that this the first meeting of its kind to occur in the province this year.

Next steps discussed by the group were:

- Continued monitoring of water levels, and water quality;
- Further exploration of options such as
 - pumping water over the weir;
 - reduction of river flows to 4.5 cubic meters per second (possibly as early as July 10).
- Ongoing communication among stakeholders and with the media and public;
- Continuing to pursue a longer term solution.

"By working together, we can act more efficiently and effectively on behalf of the watershed and our communities," concluded Rob Hutchins.

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