



## News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Cowichan Water Use Plan Unveiled for Cowichan Region**

**Duncan, BC** – After months of deliberation, the Cowichan Water Use planning process has resulted in recommendations for water supply and storage options for the Cowichan Lake and River system. Recommendations were presented during a public meeting held in the Town of Lake Cowichan on June 11.

Water use and supply in the Cowichan Lake and Cowichan River system has long been a source of concern for residents of the Cowichan region. The impacts of climate change, including hotter, drier summers and lower snowpacks, have already resulted in one-third less water flowing into Cowichan Lake than when the weir was originally constructed in the 1950's.

“During many years, there has no longer been enough water to support the varied needs of fish, local residents, industry and other users. By 2050 critical snow pack is projected to decrease by 85%, reducing lake inflows in the spring and early summer. This will be compounded by a reduction in summer rainfall of 17%,” said Jon Lefebure, Cowichan Valley Regional District Board Chair. “Further, water storage to support continued flow in most years will not be possible in the future without additional storage and adjusted management regimes.”

A community planning process to explore options was initiated by a partnership of the Cowichan Valley Regional District, Cowichan Tribes, the Cowichan Watershed Board and Catalyst Paper. Further, a 19 member Public Advisory Group (PAG) that includes representatives from local, provincial and federal governments, First Nations, industry, local community and interest groups and area residents has been meeting since November to evaluate potential water supply and storage options for the Cowichan Lake and River system.

The PAG carefully assessed the alternatives and the tradeoffs for ensuring adequate flows and water levels for fish and other aquatic species, avoiding flood risk for lakefront property owners, and minimizing impacts on water users on the lake and river. At its final meeting on May 8, the PAG reached consensus on a preferred water use alternative, presenting its proposed recommendations during the public information session on June 11.

More information on the Cowichan Water Use planning process can be found at [cowichanwup.ca](http://cowichanwup.ca)

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## Backgrounder: Summary of Preferred Alternative

### Infrastructure

#### Weir Height – Increased Storage Capacity

The PAG recommends **increasing the height of the weir by +30cm on an interim basis** until a more detailed assessment is carried out to confirm that the height of the weir is below the minimum elevation range of the natural boundary. New infrastructure would be built to accommodate up to a +70cm increase in storage capacity but be operated at +30cm until such time as the compensation issues are resolved.

A longer term **maximum weir height increase to +70cm**, would only be allowed after a compensation mechanism was established and agreed to by individual property owners for any increases above the natural boundary and their affected property rights.

#### Pumping – “Negative” Storage Capacity

The PAG recommends allowing for **temporary pumping to be used as an emergency measure** to maintain a minimum flow of 5cms down the Cowichan River during future severe summer droughts.

### Operations

#### Timing of Control Period

The PAG recommends **starting to store water and control outflows to the Cowichan River one month earlier** than current start date. Timing of control may be modified based on a review of in-season hydrological conditions.\*

This recommendation is conditional that control should start **no earlier than March 1** unless a detailed flood risk analysis concludes that there would be no increased flood risk associated with an earlier start date.

#### Flow Releases to Cowichan River

The PAG recommends adjusting the magnitude and timing of spring flows, which incorporate:

- Minimum flow targets, including “hard” targets, to meet in all years, and “soft” targets, to meet in wetter years when water is available.
- Lake level targets, including a target date (April 1) for when water should be stored to the top of the weir and a drawdown limit to no more than 20cm below historical “zero storage” levels.
- These flows may be modified based on in-season hydrological conditions\*

This recommendation is conditional that a detailed assessment of flood risk demonstrates there would be **no increase in spring flood risk** over the current weir and operations.

#### Rule Curve Updates

The PAG recommends modifying the rule curve to ensure that lake levels are targeted to reach close to the zero storage by the end of the control period (to avoid increased flood risk associated with fall storms).

\*i.e., snow pack levels, short term weather forecast, long range seasonal forecast, environmental monitoring, etc.

**Support for this alternative is conditional on these recommendations:**

1. Refine the alternative parameters through an assessment using an updated climate change dataset and longer projected time series
2. Complete a more detailed flood risk analysis using a longer projected time series
3. Complete a more detailed assessment of the natural boundary to determine the elevation range in relation to any changes in the weir height, and depending on the results, develop a preliminary compensation framework to be implemented with the alternative
4. Develop an adaptation plan from present day until the 2050s (full implementation of the alternative) to transition the new facilities and operations from the current hydrology in the watershed to those forecast in the future
5. Operationalize to allow for in-season management based on in-season conditions (i.e., snow pack levels, short-term weather forecast, seasonal forecasting, environmental monitoring (e.g., snorkel surveys), etc.)
6. Complete a more detailed erosion assessment and develop a mitigation mechanism (if adverse impacts as a result of the operations are demonstrated)
7. Include a 10–15 year review period once implemented, based on necessary environmental field work and monitoring
8. Partner Organizations petition the provincial and federal governments to take responsibility and follow through with the PAG consensus recommendations