



Twinned Watersheds Project researching how fish habitats are affected in low flows, 2021. CMitchell

Cowichan Watershed Update: Our Rivers are a Trickle but Community Efforts are a Flood



Jill Thompson is Interim Executive Director for the Cowichan Watershed Board.

It's summertime, and the livin' ain't easy. Not in the Cowichan Watershed, as we deal with the highest level of drought — level 5 — indicating adverse impacts on both communities and ecosystems are almost certain. www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/drought

At time of writing, with one week left in August, stress and hardship over low water supplies are the worst many of us have ever seen. Water is essential to local food, whether

that's the region's cherished family farms, or the original Quw'utsun local food - salmon. These are challenges to the basic needs of life. Here is some of what drought level 5 means for us:

By May, Cowichan Lake was already too low to ensure river flows could be sustained until fall unless there were heavy rains. Decision-makers had to choose between healthy spring water flows (so young salmon can grow and migrate to the ocean) or adequate fall flows (so salmon can swim back upriver to spawn). This heart-wrenching trade-off is almost annual now, and will continue until we raise the Lake Cowichan weir to catch and store more water in the spring. <https://cowichanlake-weir.ca/>

In June, 20 farmers in the Koksilah watershed, with the good of the community in mind, agreed to once again join an irrigation sequencing program. This involves taking turns with irrigation to reduce the overall



Cowichan River on Life Support in 2019. BHetschko



Koksilah farmer explains irrigation challenges to Watershed Planning Team, June 2023. JThompson

draw by about half to leave more water in the River.

In July, a swimmer reported dozens of dead salmonid fry in the Cowichan River between Skutz Falls and Horseshoe Bend. Subsequent sampling revealed a significant fish kill over a 7 kilometer stretch of the river. Government agencies have taken samples and are trying to identify the cause. (CTV News, July 18th) In August, commercial groundwater users were ordered to stop using their wells if they had not applied for a license during the 2016-2022 application period. Licensing groundwater is necessary to monitor and regulate scarce water resources, but the implementation came as a shock. Even farms and businesses that have held surface water licenses for generations have had these rights curtailed in recent years due to water shortages. Last week, Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society discovered 60 dead fish in Somenos Lake. By mid September, unless it rains significantly, Cowichan Lake will no longer be able to sustain minimum required River flows. Electric pumps will be needed to keep the Cowichan River flowing - putting our heritage river on life support. Again.

There is good news! Fantastic people are working very hard in a variety of ways to change the trajectory to a better future. For example: In May, Cowichan Tribes and the Province launched a Watershed Planning process aimed at creating BC's first Water Sustainability Plan that will take

a "whole of watershed" approach, include community advisors and engagement, and incorporate indigenous teachings. Learn more at www.koksilahwater.ca CVRD, Cowichan Tribes and Catalyst are all working together to raise the weir. Engineering is complete and fundraising is active, with about half the funds in place. Recent media on this is available at cowichanwatershedboard.ca/news/

UVic is running a citizen-science project that has community volunteers monitoring tributaries throughout the Koksilah watershed to better understand how water moves through our watershed, above and below ground. Search "Xwulqw'selu Connections".

An ongoing multi-year study is improving the understanding of fish habitats and populations during low flow conditions. Search "Twinned Watershed Project".

Cowichan Tribes just brought in trainees to help local organizations learn "whole of watershed" approaches to restoring riverscapes and working lands. And much more!

So while the facts are grim, take comfort that we're in a better boat than many to ride this out, as long as we all keep paddling together. Nutsamat kws yaay'us tth qa'. We come together as a whole to be stronger as partners for the watershed.

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