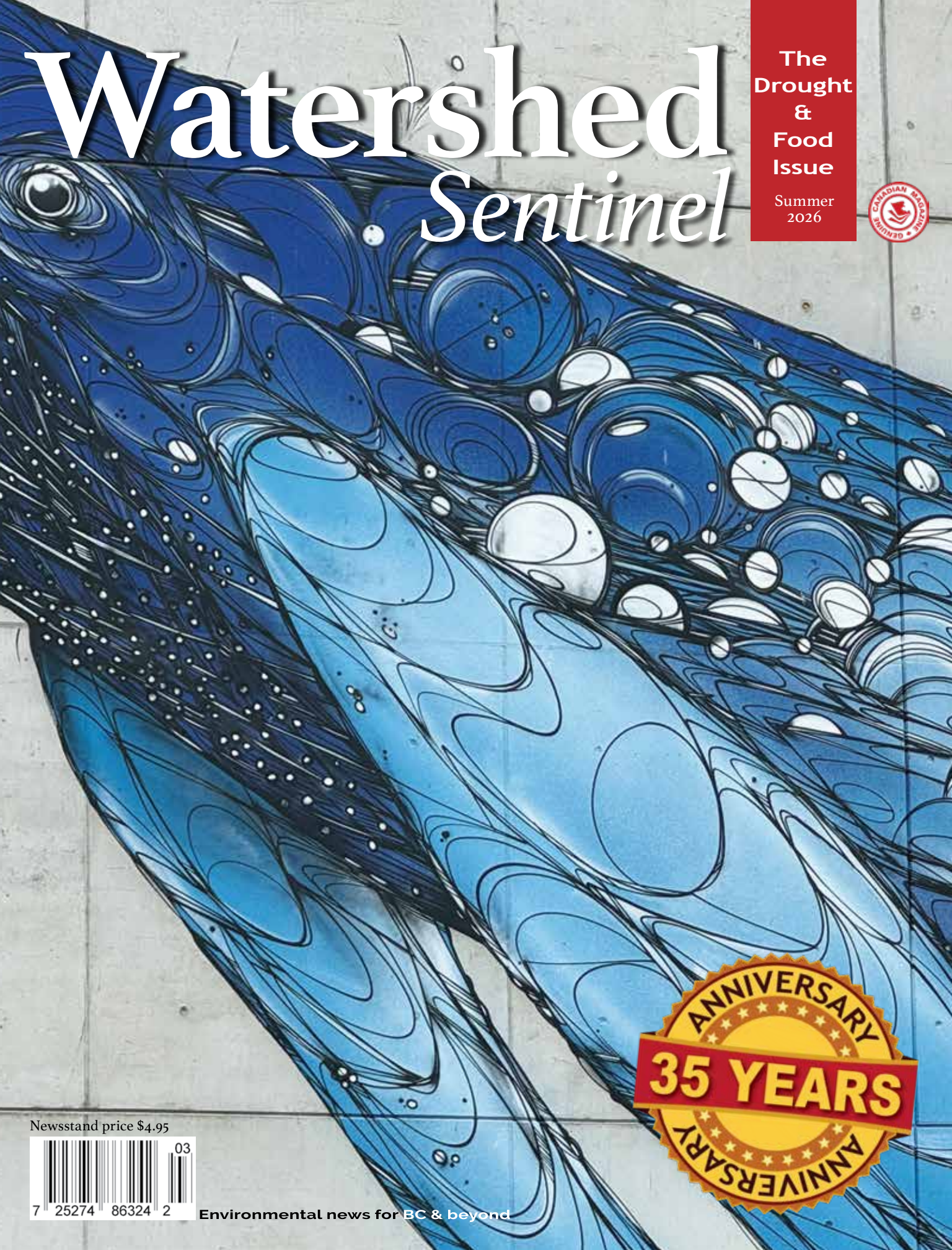
Watershed Sentinel

The Drought & Food Issue

Summer 2026



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Environmental news for BC & beyond

Wild Times

P36

Forest campaigner Joe Foy tracks BC Timber Sales' logging in spotted owl habitat near Harrison Lake, BC.

Photos ©Wilderness Committee

Watershed Sentinel

Summer 2026
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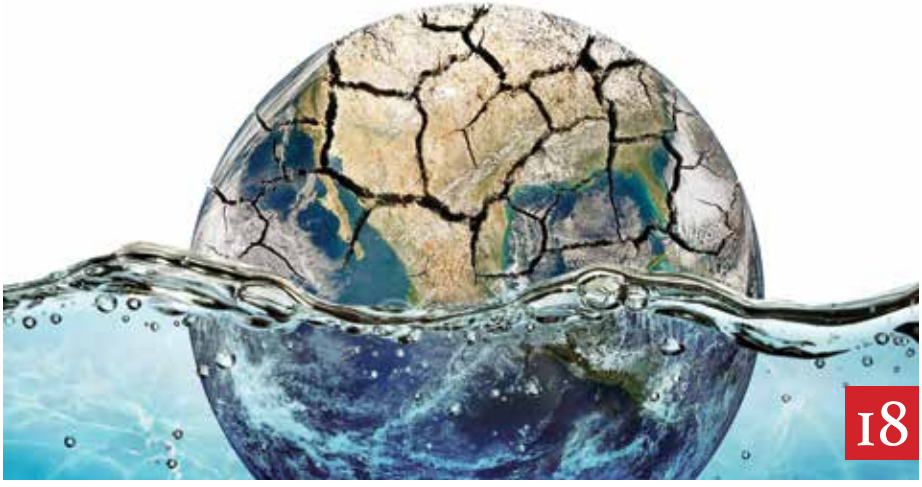
Features



Glacial Speed

Glacial melt will transform BC's hydrology and geology sooner than expected. Indigenous response is key.

Dust for Dinner

Supply-chain failures, drought-related crop losses, and price shocks have left one in four Canadians struggling with food security. In this new era, we are facing the consequences of sacrificing entire ecosystems and watersheds for cheap lumber and pulp.

Content

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Watershed Sentinel

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Giant Trees and Tiny Fish

I'm standing with a few neighbours in a fantastic, fairy-tale grove of majestic giant cedars, ferns, and flowering shrubs. At our feet is a muddy gully connected to the Salmon River. Nearby, the gully deepens and becomes a seasonal pool filled with tiny fish. The miraculous life cycle of forest, river, and salmon is playing out before our eyes like a big-screen nature documentary.

But when we zoom out for the wide shot, we see an excavator on a half-built logging road 200 metres away. The magic glade and its teeming pool are surrounded by flagging tape marking imminent road-building and clearcutting.

For hundreds of years, through floods and drought, these remnant cedars – some eight meters in circumference – have held the river bank and its braided seasonal channels together. Human and animal tracks crisscross the floodplain from locals heading to the fishing spot and the swimming hole. A family of ruffed grouse and a small herd of elk dash into the forest as we dodge piles of black bear scat underfoot.

Zoom out further, and we see two fish hatcheries nearby, one on each side of the river. In the estuary, volunteers faithfully release salmon fry each year. Further out, mile after mile of clearcuts, roads, and tree plantations stretch to the horizon. Rubble-filled river channels, eroded banks, and scorched hillsides. Damaged watersheds and reservoirs.

We know what we need to do. Get a team together and find a way to protect those trees, those salmon, and that river.

—Zoe Blunt, Sayward BC, June 2026

At the 'Shed

Happy Summer! Planning an outdoor event or info table? Bring us along! Drop a line to get a bundle of magazines to hand out at your eco-savvy festival or rally.

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Speaking of costs, we haven't raised our subscription prices since January 2010! A lot has happened in those 16 years, and all that history is in our free archive at *www.watershedsentinel.ca/issues*. Meanwhile, postage, printing, and all our other expenses have gone up every year. This is a long-winded way of saying **subscriptions prices will be going up in January 2027**. Lock in your renewal now!

US clean energy milestone

Eclipsing LNG

For the first time ever, in March 2026, renewables together with nuclear supplied more power to the US than natural gas. The milestone in the shift to clean energy is a reflection both of the rapid buildout of wind and solar and the seasonal drop in power demand. However, rising power demand is complicating the transition away from fossil fuels, as tech companies install gas generators at new data centers and grid operators delay the retirement of aging coal power plants.

—www.e360.yale.edu
April 14, 2026

Data centre pushback grows violent

AI Rebellion

Across the US, bipartisan opposition to major data-centre projects is rising, driven by anger over job losses, water usage, energy costs, and tax giveaways. Unknown individuals targeted two proponents with bullets and a Molotov cocktail in April. Indianapolis councilman Ron Gibson and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman were not injured in what analysts are calling "isolated incidents."

Researchers at Data Center Watch say at least 142 activist groups across 24 states are now organizing to block data centre construction, and residents have blocked or delayed more than $60 billion in data-centre projects. The pushback crosses political lines; Republicans make up more than half of elected officials on record as opposing data centres.

—www.marketwise.com
May 21, 2026

Bad news for Atlantic currents

Running AMOC

The critical Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) current system appears significantly more likely to collapse than previously thought, after new research found that climate models predicting the biggest slowdown are the most realistic. The research reduced the spread of uncertainty by combining real-world ocean observations with models, and estimated a slowdown of 42% to 58% in 2100, a level almost certain to end in collapse. Scientists spotted warning signs of a tipping point in 2021 and know that the AMOC has collapsed in the Earth's past. Scientists called the new finding "very concerning" as a collapse would have catastrophic consequences for Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

—www.theguardian.com
April 15, 2026

Global food production warning

Food Insecurity

Rising global temperatures – worsened by climate change, war, trade disruptions and a looming El Niño – are increasingly threatening global food production, as detailed in an extensive new report from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The *Global Report on Food Crises 2026* reveals that acute food insecurity and malnutrition remain at alarmingly high and deeply entrenched levels. Over 80% of those facing severe food insecurity live in protracted crisis contexts, where conflict is the main driver, followed by weather extremes and economic shocks. At the same time, humanitarian funding for food crises declined despite growing needs.

— www.japantimes.co.jp
June 2, 2026

Trump family triggers backlash

Flamingo Revolt

The flamingo has become the mascot of intensifying protests in Albania sparked by a proposed massive luxury resort backed by Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. The proposed resort would encroach on the birds' breeding ground that lies within a formerly protected natural area that is also home to more than 200 migratory bird species, Mediterranean monk seals, and sea turtle nests.

Daily protests are now focused against the government amid calls for an inclusive national assembly to unite civil society in a quest for social and political change.Meanwhile, the European Union warns that the resort would violate EU environmental standards at a time when Albania is seeking admission.

—www.politico.eu
June 3, 2026
—www.forbes.com
June 11, 2026

UN says states are obligated to act

Climate Ruling

The United Nations General Assembly has voted to support a landmark ruling from the International Court of Justice that found states have a legal responsibility to act to prevent the climate crisis from worsening. The vote attracted a number of objections, with Belarus, Iran, Israel, Liberia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Yemen voting no. Al Jazeera reported in February that the US had sent a diplomatic cable urging UN member states not to support the resolution.

—www.aljazeera.com
May 21, 2026

Letters

AI, LNG, and the Hydro Deficit

Let's do some math. BC Hydro just updated its 2030 forecast and flipped a projected energy surplus of 1,711 GWh into a deficit of 989 GWh. That's a 2,700 GWh swing, driven explicitly by LNG terminals and AI data centre load.

Here's the part that should make every BC ratepayer furious. We all are paying to build the infrastructure to make all of this possible. The North Coast Transmission Line has doubled in cost from $3 to $6 billion. BC Hydro spent $82 million just to connect LNG Canada to the grid.

Discounted industrial rates are around $68 per 1,000 kWh while we pay $119 to $140. Ratepayers are literally subsidizing fossil fuel export infrastructure.

And the punchline? Powering Cedar LNG and Ksi Lisims would use the equivalent electricity of 700,000 homes (roughly all of Site C's output). Every megawatt committed to export LNG, or corporate AI cluster – built on the public dime – is a megawatt that can't decarbonize a bus, a ferry, a home, a hospital, or a school.

And to really hammer the ecological nail in the coffin – the Energy Minister has put new dams back on the table. After everything Site C cost (flooded valleys, Indigenous rights, $16 billion price tag), here we are again, handing our clean electricity to fossil fuel exports and corporate AI and calling it "nation-building."

The green transition is being cannibalized before it starts. And we – the lowly ratepayers, electors and taxpayers – will be paying for the privilege.

—Suzanne Senger
Sunshine Coast, BC

Mosaic Misinformation

Thank you for publishing "Love and Extraction," "Talk and Log," "Old Growth in the USA," "Fall from Grace," "The Impossible Dream," and "Forest Falldown" (*WS*, April/May 2026) – each article compounding the evidence of a catastrophic situation that warrants the enormous, ongoing fight by so many to defend our old-growth forests.

During a recent visit, grandchildren were aghast at the scale of clear-cutting – visible from higher vantage points, and almost unnoticed by tourists passing through quickly by vehicle. These forests are being erased in plain sight.

At an Earth Day event in Nanaimo, Mosaic Forest Management had a booth with marketing material that claimed: "Drinking water in British Columbia is heavily regulated ... a primary forest activity must not cause a material adverse effect on the quality of drinking water that may affect human health at the point of diversion of a drinking water intake."

This is outright misinformation. Canada stands alone among G7 nations in failing to enact national drinking water regulations. While the forest industry may face some rules governing activity near specific drinking water intakes, extensive industrial logging unquestionably negatively impacts watersheds.

Can Mosaic be blamed for operating within the boundaries of existing law? Perhaps not. But they should be held accountable for disseminating false information. The public deserves accuracy, especially on matters of this consequence.

—Susan Blacklin
Qualicum Beach, BC

Despair Is Not a Solution

Was this the best issue ever, or am I just more concerned about the future than ever? (Or both?)

Are people in Ontario worried? Our family has a leased cottage in Algonquin Park, which is looking a lot like BC, with lumber companies chopping the trees down, seemingly with very few controls.

I'd like to see what you've come up with. Your publication acquaints us with mistakes and outright corruption, largely due to greed and lack of knowledge, which accounts for some of the devastation.

But despair is not a solution. I have one grandson – age 20 – whose hobby is car racing! We also have a Premier who was thinking of buying his own airplane!

Maybe I should give your magazine to the Huntsville library?

All the best! And thanks!

—Judy Lewis
Huntsville, ON

Mother Trees and Clearcuts

I was so grateful to find this latest issue focused on the status of old growth in BC (*WS*, April/May 2026). Having read Suzanne Simard's *Finding the Mother Tree* and currently reading her latest book *When the Forest Breathes*, I am shocked at how little changes in the destructive practice of clearcutting and the rate at which old growth is still being logged.

Selective logging was being carried out in the Cariboo as I was growing up, and my logging family had, in three generations, logged the same area three times.

These forest areas showed some loss of understory plants, but very little loss of wildlife and regenerative potential. This all changed as larger companies and machines were employed along with their insistence that clearcutting was the only "economically practical" way to log.

As Dr. Simard so thoroughly demonstrated with her peer-reviewed studies, older mother trees and some overstory forest must be maintained for effective regeneration of both planted and naturally seeded trees. Wildlife and undergrowth depend on this complexity of forest to thrive and survive. And yet the insistence goes on that clearcutting is the only solution to maintaining jobs in the industry.

What we are looking at now is failure of both government policy and industry by their focus on short term profits. And so we continue to let old growth fall. Please join me in demanding changes in forest policy to protect old growth and stop clearcutting. Let us listen to Indigenous voices rather than forest industry rhetoric.

—Marian Hargrove
Salt Spring Island, BC

Give the Forests a Break

After reading the recent articles in *Watershed Sentinel* about the state of forestry in this province (*WS*, April/May 2026), I said to myself: "Why is this such a shock and surprise?" For decades, the BC government has greatly overestimated how much timber can be sustainably harvested. This "falldown effect" results from failure to align the Allowable Annual Cut with the timber volume available for harvest as high-volume old-growth forests are depleted and replaced by lower-volume second-growth forests.

Since the 1990s, a series of government reports anticipated this situation: The BC Round Table on the Environment and Economy (1990), *Old Growth Strategy for BC* (1992), the Clayoquot Sound Scientific Panel (1994), *the Forest Practices Code Report* (1995), *Taking Nature's Pulse (2008)*, and, more recently, *A New Future for Old Forests* (2020). There was even an independent Forest Summit in 2021. All largely ignored.

Let's be honest. BC's forests aren't experiencing a downturn; they are collapsing. Yet we continue to cut at almost twice the rate the forests can sustain. The provincial government is ignoring this information to the detriment of the economy, the environment, and those who live here.

I recall in the late '80s and early '90s sitting on a Land Use Committee of unions, business, industry, government biologists and ENGOs, chaired by the Chief Forester. We discussed the pressing issues facing BC's forests, including the pending falldown effect. Now that open dialogue and objective voice of reason is missing. And the Chief Forester's Office is no longer independent.

BC's forests are more than just timber. They are an ecological gift supporting the fundamental building blocks of nature – soil, air, and water. These trees provide the green infrastructure of support for salmon, grizzly bears, and countless other species.

It's time to:

- Create a new forest paradigm that is ecologically based and builds on both the strengths and shortcomings of the past.

- Re-establish the Chief Forester as an office that provides independent advice on the annual allowable cut and the state of forests in this province.

- Develop community dialogue tables where disagreements can be discussed in a respectful manner based on common interests, not opposing values.

The forests are depleted – let's give them a break and let's talk.

—Bob Peart
North Saanich, BC

The Watershed Sentinel welcomes letters
but reserves the right to edit for brevity, clarity, legality, and taste.
Anonymous letters will not be published.

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Raising quota may increase risk

Up With Cod

DFO has raised the northern cod commercial fishing quota in Newfoundland and Labrador by more than 50% to 59,000 tons a year, 34 years after the start of the fishery moratorium. The announcement, which cites "healthy" stocks and the economic importance of the cod industry, was immediately denounced by Canadian ocean advocates who say the Fisheries Minister is ignoring scientific warnings and risks future population declines. Despite the federal government's claims of science-based decision-making, ocean campaigners say raising the commercial quota overlooks a number of factors, such as low numbers of the cod's main food source, capelin, which are also harvested commercially.

—www.oceana.ca
June 12, 2026

AB spent $5M on BC consultants

Buying Consent

The Province of Alberta has granted millions of dollars in contracts to BC consultants to "smooth the way" with First Nations opposed to new pipelines. The largest contract, with Delta-based Sedgwick Strategies, will cost AB taxpayers $3.4 million dollars by the end of its run. A second company, Blackfish Enterprises Ltd., landed a contract worth over $1 million. Chris Sankey, its controversial principal, is a former Lax Kw'alaams Band elected councillor and one-time Conservative Party of BC candidate. Sedgwick head Byng Giraud is best-known for his role in developing the Woodfibre LNG project currently under construction in Squamish.

—www.thetyee.ca
May 27, 2026

Fossil fuel and the *Charter of RIghts*

Legal Warning

Lawyers for My Sea to Sky, a BC environmental group, are putting Prime Minister Mark Carney and Alberta Premier Danielle Smith on notice that a new tar sands pipeline could be met with constitutional challenges. Ecojustice says public financing and subsidies for major fossil-fuel projects could trigger a high-level legal response. Many projects lack Indigenous consent, and adding to global warming could violate Canadians' fundamental rights to life, security of the person, and equality, Ecojustice says.

—www.aptnnews.ca
May 19, 2026

Kebaowek appeal upheld in Ontario

Nuclear Victory

The proposed Chalk River nuclear waste facility in the Ottawa River watershed must apply for a new Species at Risk permit, after an appeals court upheld a ruling favouring the Kebaowek First Nation, Sierra Club Canada Foundation, Concerned Citizens of Renfrew County and Area, and the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility. The appeals court agreed that a federal permit issued in 2024 did not adequately assess Indigenous consent, reasonable alternatives, and whether the site was the best option for preventing harm to species at risk. The proposed facility would affect habitat for Blanding's turtles and little brown myotis bats.

—www.aptnnews.ca
May 29, 2026
—www.raventrust.com
May 15, 2026

Supreme Court class action update

Fairy Creek Case

Fairy Creek forest protectors will have a second chance at class-action certification in BC Supreme Court. An appeals court set aside the original decision, finding that the judge who heard the original application made mistakes in law. Two plaintiffs, Arvin Singh Dang and Kristy Morgan, are seeking a class-action lawsuit on behalf of those whose Charter rights were infringed by the RCMP's exclusion zone and injunction enforcement. Over 1,100 people were arrested at the Fairy Creek blockades for defying a Supreme Court injunction in defense of old-growth forests near Port Renfrew in 2020 and 2021.

—www.biv.com
May 20, 2026

Residents line up to oppose project

AB Against AI

A proposed $10 billion AI data centre in Olds, Alberta has set a record for the most registered intervenors in recent history. Over 1,000 local residents registered and sent submissions about the project, which would cover 300 acres inside the town boundaries and include a 1.4 gigawatt gas power plant. Quebec-based Synapse Real Estate Group is re-applying after the Alberta Utilities Commission rejected its first permit application last March. The AUC flagged dozens of potential problems, including the emergency use of 600 diesel-fuelled generators, impacts to air quality, battery storage, water volumes, inadequate public consultation, wetlands disturbance, and noise mitigation issues.

—www.theenergymix.com
May 29, 2026

"It Will Never Be Built"

Coastal First Nations reject tar sands pipeline deal

from Coastal First Nations

Indigenous people on BC's Pacific Coast say a North Coast pipeline and oil tanker route would put their economy and way of life at risk, and they will never allow it.

In a public statement, Marilyn Slett, President of the Coastal First Nations-Great Bear Initiative and elected Chief of the Heiltsuk Nation, declared that an agreement between Ottawa and Alberta "does nothing to increase the chances of a pipeline and oil tankers route to the North Coast ever becoming a reality."

Prime Minister Mark Carney and Alberta Premier Danielle Smith signed a Memorandum of Understanding in May after months of discussion. Central to the MOU is a federal commitment to facilitate building a new pipeline from the Alberta tar sands to the Pacific coast for shipment to offshore markets.

Slett stated, "We have heard directly from the Prime Minister and the Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Tim Hodgson, that no project, and no route, will proceed without the support of affected First Nations and the province in which it is proposed."

The MOU asserts the parties' goal for Indigenous co-ownership of a future pipeline. But CFN rejects the idea outright. "No offer of equity or ownership will change our position," Slett clarified. "Governments and would-be proponents should be aware of our absolute determination to protect our economy and our coast, which contributes more than $3 billion annually to our region and employs 30% of the workforce."

Coastal First Nations launched in 2000 with the Declaration of the First Nations of the Pacific Coast, which includes the Council of the Haida Nation, Old Massett Village Council, Skidegate Band Council, Gitga'at Nation, Gitxaała Nation, Heiltsuk Nation, Kitasoo Xai'xais Nation, Metlakatla Nation, and Nuxalk Nation.

> "No offer of equity or ownership will change our position."

CFN works to protect the cultural and natural resources of its member Nations, promoting economic self-sufficiency and sustainable development throughout the North and Central Coast and Haida Gwaii.

As legally recognized rights and title holders, Coastal First Nations and the Lax Kw'alaams Band, along with the Province of BC, are calling on Ottawa to uphold the *North Coast Oil Tanker Moratorium Act* in its entirety, with no exceptions, Slett said in her statement.

Last year, member Nations pledged to use every legal tool in the box to keep oil tankers and the risk of a catastrophic oil spill out of BC's northern coastal waters.

"We have made repeated calls to the federal government to uphold Bill C-48, the *Oil Tanker Moratorium Act,* as it is foundational to the successful conservation economy we have built on the North Coast," reads a CFN statement from December 2025. "Coastal First Nations, along with the province of BC, have made it clear through our joint declaration that the tanker ban is not up for negotiation, and no MOU will change that."

"Throughout this process we have been met with a wall of silence from the federal government," the statement noted. "Such conduct is not honourable and is fundamentally at odds with Canada's constitutional, legislative, and international obligations to coastal First Nations."

"Our Nations understand the economic challenges Canada is facing," the statement reads. "This is why we much prefer to work with the federal government on truly nation-building, forward-looking projects and initiatives that are built in partnership with Indigenous peoples. We should be working together to protect our environment, diversify our economy, and create jobs that support our communities, instead of squandering everyone's time on politically-motivated MOU's that are only dividing our country further."

Read more: *www.coastalfirstnations.ca*

Water Is Sacred

Dene chiefs move to protect their watersheds

by Cassandra Blondin Burt

In the far north of Denendeh, Land of the Dene, stands the village of Radiłį Kóe, or Fort Good Hope, I was recently reminded by the late elder and former chief Frank T'seleie, in one of our last conversations together, that this town is older than the state of Canada.

The Dene Nation and Treaty 8 Chiefs stand in solidarity for the protection of their sacred waters. The integrity of their major waterways is directly threatened by Alberta's *Water Amendment Act*, Bill 7.

Jesse Cardinal, Executive Director of Keepers of the Water, explained why. "The recent amendments to Bill 7 introduced the potential for interbasin water transfers, allowing water to be moved from one watershed to another. This raises concerns about reduced river flows, cumulative impacts, and downstream effects on communities and ecosystems that they rely on.... So, while these changes may increase access to water in some regions, they do not increase the overall supply." Since watersheds are finite systems, moving water from one area to another puts more pressure on already stressed water systems, Cardinal said.

Dene leaders from all five regions of what is called the Northwest Territories gathered for the 55th Dene National Assembly in January 2026 to discuss major projects in Dene territory as well as the law and other community governance topics.

As long as the rivers flow

"'As long as the grass grows and the rivers flow' are words taken directly from Treaties 8 and 11," elder and former chief Gerry Cheezie told the National Assembly. "These words are not symbolic. They are promises. They are law."

"There is a crisis in our waters," Cheezie said. "The waters of Denendeh are at their lowest levels in more than 70 years.

The Slave River, the Great Slave Lake, the Liard River, the MacKenzie River, the Great Bear River, Great Bear Lake and the Peel River are all in distress."

In December 2025, Treaty 8 Chiefs in Alberta took joint action on Bill 7. Led by Chief Rupert Minnie of the Tall Cree tribal government, Chief Wilbur Hook, and Chief Sheldon Sunshine of the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, they announced their intention to litigate to stop the implementation of Bill 7.

"This legal action affirms what science already tells us," Cheezie said." Merging river basins is ecologically reckless, scientifically unproven, and a direct violation of treaty rights and safe and reliable water."

The chiefs' resolutions

Four resolutions were tabled during the National Assembly.

First, the chiefs adopted a framework for legal action on the failure of the GNWT Transboundary Water Regime. The 2015 agreement and related intergovernmental water governance frameworks were intended to protect downstream waters, but have failed to prevent cumulative impacts, degradation, and risks to water quality and quantity. The Mackenzie River Basin Transboundary Waters Master Agreement establishes cooperative principles and explicitly states that nothing within it shall derogate from Aboriginal and Treaty rights, yet provides no enforceable mechanisms to uphold or remedy breaches of those rights. Dene governments and communities continue to experience impacts to water, fish, and lands without effective decision-making, enforcement, or legal remedies under the existing transboundary water regime.

The second resolution upholds Dene law and opposes harm to Athabasca and Peace River waters. It notes that proposed plans to release treated oil sands mine water into the Athabasca River violate Dene law and risk long-term, irreversible harm.

Dangerous proposals

A nuclear reactor proposed for the Peace River also conflicts with Dene teachings that warn against creating dangers that will burden future generations with risks they did not consent to. Similarly, the proposed Mihta Askiy Data Centre on the Peace River would compound industrial pressure on the watershed and increase cumulative impacts with no respect for Dene Law and downstream peoples.

Dene law teaches that water is alive, sacred, and must be protected.

These projects are moving forward without the free, prior, and informed consent of Dene governments and communities.

The Treaty 8 Chiefs passed a third resolution affirming Dene legal orders and authorizing the Dene Nation to enter in a Memorandum of Understanding with Treaty 8 Nations of Alberta. The lands and waters of Denendeh are interconnected with the territories of Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta. The proposed MOU creates a framework for cooperation, solidarity, and collective protection of shared waters, lands, and rights. Dene elders consistently instruct that decisions affecting the land and water must be made collectively, with respect, and in accordance with the laws passed down through generations.

Dene law teaches that water is alive, sacred, and must be protected, as it carries the spirit of the land and sustains present and future generations.

Finally, the chiefs' conference authorized the creation of a Dene Nation Water Office as increasing industrial development, climate change, and regulatory pressures pose growing risks to the quality, quantity, and governance of water in Denendeh. There is a need for coordinated Dene-led leadership, expertise, and advocacy on water protection, policy, and governance across all Dene regions.

Cumulative impacts

A joint Chiefs Statement released by Keepers of the Water states, "Research and monitoring show the cumulative impacts of tar sands on our lakes, rivers, and streams, including toxic tailings, air emissions, and the devastation of the landscape. The massive tailings sites contain 1.4 trillion litres of corrosive fluid that is seeping into the environment over land, underground, and through off-gassing."

"Communities downstream continue to raise serious concerns about declining ecosystem health and elevated cancer rates," it continues. "Yet no comprehensive, basin-wide risk assessment has ever been completed to fully understand the contamination pathways and risks to human and environmental health."

As Fort Smith Elder and former Chief Francois Paulene reminds us, "We must stand together, and remember that Water is Boss, and there is no Plan B for water."

Cassandra Blondin Burt is a two-spirit Dene journalist, artist, and plant medicine maker living in Chief Drygeese Territory, Akaitcho Region, Denendeh.

Slashing the Safety Net

Ottawa proposes dismantling federal environmental laws

by Anna Johnston

On May 8, 2026, the federal government released a proposal to embark on what is arguably the worst gutting of its environmental impact assessment regime in the last half-century, along with dismantling other environmental laws protecting at-risk species, lakes and rivers, and fish.

Why is the Carney government dismantling our environmental safety net? Its stated reason is that environmental reviews can be complicated and time-consuming. The truth is that environmental laws apply to large, complicated projects with often enormous footprints and significant environmental effects. The Northern Gateway Pipeline would have been over 1,100 km long and crossed hundreds of streams and rivers, and a spill could have affected thousands of kilometres of coastline. The Site C dam flooded almost 10,000 hectares of land. Smaller projects contribute significant cumulative impacts. It takes time to understand what ecological harm these projects entail, not to mention the health and safety risks they pose.

What the government is proposing

First, eviscerating federal environmental impact assessments. The biggest rollback is to the federal impact assessment regime. The changes, along with agreements being negotiated with provincial governments, will ensure that only a very small fraction of projects will have a federal assessment. Any remaining projects will be rushed through an arbitrary two-year review that will consider only a narrow subset of environmental effects.

Pre-approved pipelines

Second, pipelines, transmission lines, and offshore energy projects will receive upfront approval before going through any environmental review, and prior to any formal opportunities to comment on the proposal. These projects will be exempted from the *Impact Assessment Act* and instead be reviewed by the Canada Energy Regulator under the *Canadian Energy Regulator Act*. CERA provides little assurance that reviews and engagement opportunities will be any more than checkbox exercises.

The discussion paper also proposes to allow "early construction" to begin before assessments are finished, and to give ministers blanket authority to weaken conditions of approval. What is more, federal officials will have to ensure that conditions of approval do not cost proponents too much to implement, without specifying who gets to decide what is too high a cost, and with no proposed consideration of the costs of more environmental harm.

Allowing harm to species at risk

A third set of amendments would allow Cabinet to authorize the extinction of southern resident killer whales and oth-

er species at risk. The proposal would amend the *Species at Risk Act*, a cornerstone of Canadian environmental law, authorizing the federal Cabinet to exempt projects from a critical protection power. Currently, ministers may not authorize harm to at-risk species that would jeopardize their survival or recovery. The amendments would allow Cabinet to override that protection and let projects wipe species off the map.

Government sources, as reported by the *Toronto Star* (May 15, 2026), have confirmed that the government intends to use this power to authorize harm to southern resident killer whales. The Carney government could use the power to greenlight a pipeline and oil tanker project, and to approve ports, LNG, and other projects in the orcas' habitat.

Harming waterways and fish

The paper further discusses allowing harm to lakes, rivers, and fish, and proposes weakening both the *Canadian Navigable Waters Act* and the *Fisheries Act*, two more flagship environmental laws. The *CNWA* protects lakes and rivers by (ostensibly) regulating major projects' effects on the navigability of those waters.

The Carney government is proposing to narrow the types of activities that require a permit to impede navigation, but it does not specify which activities the government plans to exempt. It is worth noting that until 2012, every project that impeded navigation required a permit and an environmental screening. Now, we could be looking at a small handful.

Regarding fish, the discussion paper proposes to make permission to offset harm to fish habitat "more flexible," though it does not specify how.

Federal Economic Zones

Finally, the federal government is taking a page out of Ontario Premier Doug Ford's playbook and proposing legislation to create "Federal Economic Zones." A key feature will be the ability to exempt projects from environmental impact assessments if a regional-scale assessment has already occurred identifying standard mitigation measures as conditions of approval. As an example, the paper talks about energy corridors, a key ask of the oil and gas industry for years.

There are a few things to note about this proposal. The government doesn't need new legislation to allow itself to use regional assessments to exempt projects from impact assessment. It has that power under the *Impact Assessment Act*. Why, then, would it need new legislation?

The discussion paper says that Federal Economic Zones would remove the need for "separate project reviews, make the permitting process simpler, and reduce risks for investors." Given the sweeping new powers already granted by the *Building Canada Act*, it is easy to suspect the Carney government intends to give itself even greater power to exempt projects from environmental laws in these zones.

Risks of deregulation

Environmental laws exist for a reason. So why is our federal government – along with provinces like BC, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia – proposing to fast-track projects by removing environmental safeguards?

We know from experience that when environmental safeguards and processes are weak, disasters can happen, often with significant health and safety costs. The cleanup costs can run in the hundreds of millions, even billions of dollars, much if not all of which is borne by the public.

Projects may promise short-term benefits, but those stated benefits must be weighed against the possible short-term and long-term costs. Failing to do so is not just shortsighted, it's grossly irresponsible.

Public comment on the discussion paper ends July 22. *http://bit.ly/maypress.*

Anna Johnston is a staff lawyer with West Coast Environmental Law. Read the full article at *http://wcel.org/blog.*

> When environmental safeguards and processes are weak, disasters can happen.

Youth Climate Leaders

Young Indigenous people are turning teachings into action

by Desiree Mannila

A common theme in climate action is preserving the natural world for future generations: the future parents, teachers, decision-makers, knowledge-holders, and storytellers.

Nunitsa Rainwater Pootlass

Right now, Indigenous youth across BC are witnessing the firsthand effects of environmental decline. They are living through the erosion of the ecosystems that breathe life into their culture, while also navigating practical barriers, industrial pressures, and political decision-making that threatens their futures.

In March 2026, the First Nations Leadership Council gave a voice to future generations through the Uplifting Youth Climate Leaders Project, an initiative that supports Indigenous youth in climate leadership, advocacy, and relationship-building. The project included an in-person gathering hosted on the ancestral land of the Musqueam people, home to hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓-speaking Coast Salish people, the stewards of the Fraser River for time immemorial. Through storytelling and knowledge sharing, the Youth Leadership Council (YLC) discovered common priorities that would later shape their Calls to Action presented at the First Nations Summit Climate Gathering.

The Calls to Action are grounded in their collective experiences spanning their different communities. Together, YLC demanded increased protection for lands, water, and salmon; more opportunities for land-based and intergenerational learning, and higher support for Indigenous stewardship and self-determination. Most important, the youth demanded that younger generations be given a meaningful voice in the decisions that they will ultimately inherit.

Fresh perspectives

Raised within Treaty 8 Territory, the traditional lands of the Dane-zaa and Cree peoples, Cassidy Keutzer fostered a deep respect for the land through hunting, harvesting, and exploring the outdoors with her family. Keutzer's kinship ties stem from the Aniyvwiyaʔi and Chahta Nations of Oklahoma.

Keutzer described her upbringing rooted in traditional practices. "Before I could walk, I was put in slings and taken along on hunts." Unfortunately, those memories now hold the impacts of deforestation witnessed in her backyard. "The mountain is missing its face. It's a brand-new cut block, and it really stands out like a bald patch, devoid of life. When those mountains lose their foliage, it makes way for erosion and for slumping and mudslides." She recounted a flood that took out her front yard, and the times her family was put on evacuation notice.

Some of her most cherished memories were gathering mountain blueberries on

the mountaintop and foraging for morel mushrooms after wildfire season. "There was this mountain breeze that was just keeping the heat of the day off – warm and quiet." Keutzer recalled. "You could hear the birds' songs, and a couple of eagles overhead."

For Keutzer, these are more than childhood memories; they are reminders of what is at stake, and why Indigenous youth must be included in environmental stewardship. "We're a rung on the ladder on the way, but we're not towards the top," said Keutzer. "If we could be bumped up just a little bit more, then we could really start to see this new insurgence of youth leadership in the climate sector really start to take shape."

"I think youth offer fresh perspectives – we bring energy to a space where burnout might be prevalent," she adds. "As much knowledge as the older generation has, and the work that they're doing, youth are right in the thick of the now."

For the next generations

For Nunitsta ("the one that brings life into a room") Rainwater Pootlass, climate leadership derives from her childhood learning from elders in her Nuxalk and Tsilhqot'in communities. "My grandpa always fought against clearcut logging," Nunitsta recalled. "He ended up in jail for protecting the land."

She explained that he built a sense of responsibility within her. "Always protect the land and try to make it easier for the ones that will come after you ... Focus on the next generation." Those teachings were reinforced by her father, who continued to teach her lessons from those already passed on, as they spent time on the land and sea. Today, Nunitsta works for her Nation as a Salmon Projects Coordinator, weaving Indigenous knowledge systems with fisheries science to monitor and preserve salmon populations.

Once upon a time, the horseflies would indicate that the coho were coming.

However, the most drastic changes aren't found on graphs or data sheets, but her lived experience of displaced harvesting times. "If the salmonberries are coming out and the swallows are coming out, then that's when we can start harvesting for Chinook salmon. Now that's changed with climate change and rising sea temperatures." She added that teachings from the elders don't always reflect the modern changes affecting her territories. "Once upon a time, the horseflies would indicate that the coho were coming. You can't really rely on that anymore."

"I fear for the next generation," Nunitsta said. She reflected on a conversation she had with her younger cousin that made her realize that younger people are noticing the impacts of climate change as well. Her cousin spoke of her childhood, watching their family spend more time harvesting and preserving salmon. "I don't want her to feel terrified of not getting enough salmon for a winter," Nunitsta said. Shortly after, she joined the YLC, determined to bring forward her concerns. She explained she wanted to pave the way to a better future, acknowledging that environmental changes pose a risk to youth engaging in cultural practices alongside their families. "We don't want our younger siblings to have to face the same issues that we are currently facing."

Holding on to hope

Despite the challenges they face, Keutzer and Nunitsta believe that with increased access for youth, change is inevitable. Nunitsta shares an optimistic view for the future. "It's exciting to see the current youth generation wanting to protect or change things to make it easier for the next generation."

"Hold on to some hope – don't throw in the towel yet," said Keutzer, "As youth Indigenous climate leaders and activists, we aren't giving up anytime soon, and we still have so much hope for how things can improve and change for the better. Keep fighting the good fight!"

Paxala, Desiree Mannila, is a proud member of the Da'naxda'xw/Awaetlala Nation and *Watershed Sentinel's* staff reporter.

Glacial Speed

Indigenous response to a fast-moving crisis

by Sidney Coles

In Canada's northwest, glaciers play a pivotal role in climate resilience and planning, and they are melting at historic rates.

In 2015, Garry Clarke (UBC) and colleagues projected that by 2100, the amount of glacier ice in BC will shrink by 70-80%. Deglaciation at that scale will transform the geology and hydrology of the province, causing the formation of new proglacial lakes, river "piracy" (course changes), outburst floods, and the release of new pathogens and pests. It's expected that by the end of the century, Canada will have hundreds more post-glacial lakes held in place either by bedrock indentations, or landslides, or moraines (accumulated glacier debris that create berms).

Glacial retreat will also expose previously hidden geology ripe for mineral exploration and extraction. In the Golden Triangle, a highly mineralized, remote part of BC's northwest, melt will expose some of the richest ore beds in the world. A map of registered mineral claims in the Iskut River watershed shows that almost half of the land base is covered by claims.

In May 2026, 70 Indigenous and non-Indigenous experts and leaders from northern BC, Yukon, and Alaska came together in Whitehorse for the Glacier Futures gathering. The intention of organizers was to build cross-boundary relationships and facilitate knowledge-sharing about the profound and rapid changes in glacier landscapes, and how they are shaping ecosystems, communities, and cultures downstream.

In western Canada, glaciers are replenished by snowfall that melts over the summer months. The balance between snowfall and melt determines whether a glacier is gaining mass or losing it. Provincial data shows snowpack was 34% below normal in BC in 2025, and the provincial snow survey stations interactive map shows just how quickly snowpack melted in the month of May. Log Cabin station, the northernmost station in BC, recorded a dramatic drop in snow depth, from 125cm to 90cm in a single week.

Researcher and spatial analyst Kara Pitman told participants at the gathering that more than half of the world's glaciers will disappear by 2100 if warming is not limited to 1.5 degrees Celsius. "The landscape we see today will change dramatically over the coming century. Global acceleration of glacier mass loss reflects the global warming of the atmosphere," she said.

Large-scale protections of watersheds and their glaciers are needed to "protect the health of emerging ecosystems so that they can support fish, wildlife, and water into the future," says Jonathan Moore, professor of aquatic ecology and conservation at Simon Fraser University.

Recognized Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), such as Meares Island Tribal Park and the Meziadin IPCA on Gitanyow territory near Terrace, represent a Nation's vision and plan for lands and waters in their traditional territory. They are defined by that Nation's stewardship approach and reflect their unique governance and traditional laws.

However, the majority of recognized IPCAs address the current environment and don't account for the changes that glacier melt will bring in coming decades.

The landscape we see today will change dramatically over the coming century.

Ice recession impacts traditional hunting grounds, as tree lines creep upward and animals such as mountain goats lose habitat crucial to their survival. Flash flooding caused by outburst floods can cause sediment to impact salmon bearing rivers and creeks.

Programming at UBC's Centre for Indigenous Land Stewardship, when applied to glacial melt, offers frameworks that can slow or buffer its impacts and expand how institutions and communities manage these new ecologies. But the Centre's director, Garry Merkel, sees roadblocks ahead. "Until we change our pattern of what we're doing as humans, it's going to catch up to us somehow, and I think that's a lot closer in the future than a lot of us think it is." He doesn't trust that government is up for the post-glacier challenge. "I have come to the conclusion that the Province is not capable of implementing large-scale strategic things like this. It just is too unstable."

Moore also sees government reticence blocking the way. "The challenge is that current federal and provincial policies sometimes seem to be ignoring climate science and implicitly assume that the world isn't changing."

Merkel believes the Centre's four-year program can slow climate impacts by teaching students how to work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to create future economies built on a more ethical way of living. The program is about building land stewardship systems "grounded in [Indigenous] ethics and worldviews, and then translating belief systems into governance systems and structures based on looking after the land," he says. Those systems "need to work with the rest of the world, and not just in isolation." He believes they can lead by example, and that governments at the municipal level would benefit most.

In a 2023 systematic peer-reviewed study published in *Science* magazine, Moore, Pitman and co-authors affirmed positive correlations between Indigenous land stewardship and conservation outcomes. Globally, 60% of Indigenous lands are under threat by industrial development and climate change. A major source of that threat in BC is mining.

"First Nations and local communities are really leading the way in proactive stewardship approaches," says Moore. "Their Land Use Plans often incorporate data from climate science and combine that with local knowledge values." In the multiple communities he and Pitman work with, that data includes glacier monitoring and hydrology data.

Cooperation between researchers, traditional knowledge keepers, and Indigenous leaders may offer the best formula for addressing what will be one of the biggest environmental upheavals of our time.

Sidney Coles, PhD, PhD, is a journalist and human rights advocate living in Victoria on the traditional territory of the lək̓ʷəŋən people.

Cable Bay on Hold

Public opposition halts an industrial rezoning proposal

by Ben Wickham

The popular Cable Bay Trail just south of Nanaimo runs along the edge of one of the area's most ecologically rich corridors. The trail winds through a mosaic of coastal forests, wetlands, and wildlife habitat, reaching a rocky shoreline that overlooks the tidal rapids at Dodd Narrows.

When the Cable Bay Rezoning Application arrived at Nanaimo City Council, it came with the momentum that large projects often carry: years of planning, a polished presentation, and the assumption that growth is inevitable and necessary. But what followed was less predictable. Residents organized. Neighbours who had never spoken to the council before stepped up to the microphone. Environmental groups mobilized. And after weeks of hearings, the application was pushed back to the drawing board because the community insisted on a deeper accounting of what would be lost.

The rezoning application submitted by Nanaimo Forest Products (Harmac Pacific) sought to change 74 hectares of land adjoining the Cable Bay Trail from Rural Resource zoning to Heavy Industrial. The change would allow wood and paper processing, log sorting, and other industrial activities not compatible with residential areas. The new bylaw would establish a legal framework for future industrial development in one of Nanaimo's most ecologically sensitive corridors.

Many residents raised immediate concerns about ecosystem fragmentation, wildfire risk, and the cumulative impacts of carving new neighbourhoods and industrial "parks" into the city's remaining natural spaces. For others, the issue was housing related: Nanaimo is growing, and growth requires places for people to live and jobs for them to do. The hearings highlighted a tension that exists in every fast-growing city: the need to remain livable and economically functional while protecting the natural places that drew people there in the first place.

> How many wild places are lost simply because the public never finds out about them in time?

The volume and calibre of public input were eye-opening, setting a record for the longest rezoning hearing in Vancouver Island history. Residents brought hydrology reports, species inventories, and wildfire modelling. They asked council to consider not only the technical merits of the proposal but the broader context: the city's climate goals, biodiversity strategy, and the long-term cost of expanding infrastructure into remote areas. The work was unpaid, often exhausting, and driven by a belief that decisions about land should not be made lightly.

The hearings also exposed an underlying tension: many of the people affected by the proposal live outside Nanaimo's municipal boundaries and have limited influence over city decisions. As Cedar resident Tammy Tait told CBC News in April, "We have a vibrant community, we have an agricultural community, and unfortunately, because this is a city zoning issue, we don't have the same level of say as a city resident would have."

Others spoke about the land itself. During the hearing, island resident Tina Docharty warned city council that: "The proposed rezoning of Cable Bay would damage a fragile ecosystem, with runoff flowing into tidal waters. This area needs protection; a place where wildlife, the ecosystem, and the community can thrive."

Nanaimo's council pressed pause on the Cable Bay rezoning application because people showed up. But many proposals move forward without this level of scrutiny. How many wild places are lost simply because the public never finds out about them in time? The public hearing is not the start of public input on a development proposal; it's the end. City and regional councils often disregard residents' evidence, no matter how compelling. How backwards is a system that requires communities to fight, repeatedly, to protect landscapes that sustain them?

Ben Wickham is a writer from Nanaimo, BC with a background in education and public service. His passions for writing and nature come from his father and mother, respectively.

Fighting Fossil Fuels

Grassroots challenge to gas-fired plants in Nova Scotia

from Living Ecosystems and Power

Pictou County residents opposed to two proposed 300-megawatt fossil-fuel-powered generating plants filed for a judicial review in the Nova Scotia Supreme Court in May.

The petition calls on the Court to examine the provincial Environment and Climate Change Minister's decision to approve the plants just 59 days after they were proposed by the Independent Energy System Operator (IESO), a non-profit created by the Province in 2024 to take over electricity planning, procurement, and grid operations from Nova Scotia Power. The plants will reportedly burn methane and diesel for electricity at the two sites, which are just 15.8 kilometres apart in the headwaters of the East and West Rivers.

Living Ecosystems and Power (LEAP), which describes itself as a "growing grassroots movement of concerned citizens," emphasized in a statement that this case is not about opposing development, "It is about ensuring that environmental decisions affecting rural communities – and the ecosystems that sustain non-human life, including endangered Atlantic salmon – are made lawfully, transparently, and with proper oversight."

Comments submitted to the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada raised serious concerns about salmon habitat, river health, species at risk, lack of consultation with First Nations and impacts on treaty rights. But on May 15, IAAC announced it had made an "early decision" not to undertake a separate federal impact assessment for the two plants.

Building the two gas plants will destroy wetlands where rare Canada Warbler nests were documented in a recent site evaluation. The small migratory songbird, which overwinters in Colombia and Venezuela and breeds in forested wetlands in Canada, is federally protected under the *Species at Risk Act*. Loss of nesting habitat has contributed to the species losing over half its population in recent decades.

Environmental consultants also documented Black Ash *(Wisqoq)*, which is culturally significant to the Mi'kmaq and already threatened, and the Eastern Wood-Pewee songbird, listed as a species of special concern federally. So far, no water studies have been conducted in streams in either watershed where Atlantic Salmon *(Plamu)* are known to spawn.

Nova Scotia is on the verge of reworking its entire electricity system, with major reforms underway to modernize its grid, integrate renewables, and meet the province's climate commitments. In this context, the applicants say they are deeply disappointed that the Minister approved projects designed to operate from 2030-2060 with the option to extend operations to 2075 – a 45-year fossil fuel lifespan.

"A fossil-fuel facility running until 2075 is not 'temporary' or 'transitional,'" LEAP's statement says; "it is a multi-generational commitment that extends 25 years past Nova Scotia's legislated net-zero deadline. This raises serious questions about whether the decision aligns with the province's climate goals, energy transition plans, and the legal requirements of the *Environment Act*."

On April 20, Pictou Municipal Council unanimously passed a motion requesting independent third-party analysis of alternatives to gas plants. Instead of acknowledging the request, the Premier reframed IESO – the proponent – as an "independent third party," suggested concerns were "emotional," and told residents to trust "the experts."

Shortly after the Municipality issued the request, it received a six-figure invoice for a provincially ordered audit – the only audit of its kind in Nova Scotia. In an interview with the *Halifax Examiner*, Robert Parker, warden for the Municipality, said the bill was "excessive," and that negotiations are ongoing with the Province to have it reduced.

LEAP has formally requested a meeting with Premier Tim Houston to discuss community concerns, unanswered questions, and barriers to public participation. "We are asking for a conversation," LEAP said. "The people of Pictou County – the very residents of the premiere's own constituency – deserve transparency, respect, and a voice in decisions that affect their environment, health, and future."

For more information: *www.leappictou.org*

Dust for Dinner

In North America in the early 1900s, wheat was king, and large-scale agricultural operations were busy tearing up deep-rooted prairie ecosystems to plant rows of annual crops.

When a multi-year drought began in 1929, those fragile crops failed, and the prairie winds took hold of the desiccated topsoil and filled the skies with choking dust. Hunger and despair stalked the land for years.

In later decades, across North America, industrial logging operations were busy tearing up deep-rooted forest ecosystems to plant rows of harvestable trees. Now, as the climate heats up and multi-year droughts dry out those matchstick tree farms, fire is taking hold of the landscape, choking the skies with smoke, forcing thousands to flee, and severing the lifelines of communities.

More recently, the 2020s exposed critical weaknesses in our food system. Pandemic-related supply-chain failures, heat and drought-related crop failures, and price shocks have led to one in four Canadians struggling with food insecurity.

A new era of consequences is coming for us: the consequences of sacrificing entire ecosystems and watersheds for cheap lumber and pulp.

In these pages, our writers share stories about reaping the whirlwind.

Sentinel Educational Foundation

Reap the Whirlwind

Failing to learn the lessons of the land

by *Watershed Sentinel* staff

No one alive today can really describe the Dust Bowl years. For most of us, it's a historical footnote. In the 1970s, Canadian writer Barry Broadfoot met with prairie farmers and published their testimonies in *Ten Lost Years: 1929-1939*.

One farmer summed up the Dust Bowl this way: "Millions of acres just blowing away from all through the American midwest states and over towards the Dakotas and Minnesota, Wisconsin, up into Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta."

"I am absolutely certain the dust bowl could happen again," Professor Pamela Riney-Kehrberg of Iowa State University warned in May 2026. "The Great Plains haven't changed. The soil is still very thin and sandy. The wind still blows like crazy – all it takes is another drought," she told CBC Radio's *Ideas* program.

Mistreating the land

The similarities to our current crisis are alarming.

"You mistreat the land, take away its essential goodness and this will happen. It's been happening all down through history." a farmer told Broadfoot.

The decade leading up to the disaster gave no warning of what was to come. Wheat farming boomed, selling for up to $2.00 a bushel – a fortune back then. Greed drove the ploughs straight across the grasslands.

"Wheat was king, and everybody just forgot that we were mining the land," another prairie farmer said in *Ten Lost Years*.

Despite warnings from early colonizers, a few years of heavy rainfall convinced the Canadian government to throw open the plains for homesteading and farming. Settlers poured in.

"There was a lot of land-taking in the early 1900s, Americans and immigrants," a homesteader confided to Broadfoot, "and my Dad was as much a grabber as the next. Just grab, grab, grab."

Then came a prolonged hot and dry period. The water table dropped and the wells dried up. Too late, people realized that trying to farm these semi-arid plains – wild buffalo grazing lands – was hubris.

"The Palliser Triangle shouldn't have ever been broken to the plough. We know that now," a former wheat farmer said.

"Here's how it was," another farmer explained. "The wind blew all the time, from the four corners of the world." The loose soil was no match for the force of the wind. "Blowing the goddamned country right out from under our feet and nothing we could do about it."

For years, the rains didn't come. "A hot sucking wind. So this wind just blew and blew, and we had dust storms and times when we kept the lanterns lit all day."

"Where we all made the mistake was the idea that Canada, the prairies, would sell high-price wheat forever," recalled another wheat farmer. "When that fell to the bottom, when wheat was fifty cents, even less, everything went kerplunk. It turned out that what we were was a one-economy country, and that was wheat."

Repeating history

Conservation measures such as planting trees as windbreaks arrived late and took years to have an impact. By the 1970s, farmers were already chopping down the trees to make room for bigger and faster agricultural harvesting machines.

"Lessons learned in hard times aren't always remembered," Professor Riney-Kehrberg noted, "A lot of conservation lessons that were very very important in the 1930s, they get pushed aside in World War II because it becomes much more important to feed lots of people than it is to maintain conservation measures."

Tapping the Ogallala Aquifer gave a huge boost to prairie agriculture, but even this seemingly endless water source is being drained down to its bitter dregs.

Just as they did a century ago, too many cling to the belief that they can take all they want from the land, giving nothing back, and it will continue to nourish them forever.

Starving the Science

Feds cut agriculture research in favour of defense spending

by Sarah Marquis, with files from Cathy Holtslander

On January 20 at Davos, Prime Minister Carney said that a country that cannot feed itself has few options.

Just days later, Agriculture and Agri-food Canada announced that seven research facilities – at Lacombe, Indian Head, Scott, Portage la Prairie, Guelph, Quebec City, and Nappan – and the Organic and Regenerative Agriculture program will no longer receive funding.

These funding cuts amount to a self-inflicted brain drain, and a disincentive for young people interested in agricultural science fields. They throw away more than a century's worth of public investment in people, science, and infrastructure, while increasing risks to the food system and the people who work within it. The cuts are devastating on multiple fronts; however, the immense costs to agricultural climate science must be considered in their own right, as the closing of these facilities and programs will be consequential well into the future.

As farmers and farm workers feel the worsening financial, emotional, and existential stress of climate change, the loss of crucial research facilities and programs is all the more reprehensible. Drought in southwest Saskatchewan has left some areas severely depleted of moisture for the past eight years, leading to crop failure and financial losses. BC farmers, still rebuilding from catastrophic flooding four years ago, found themselves underwater once again late last year, as more than a month's worth of rain in two days caused evacuation orders, landslides and road closures. Record-breaking wildfire seasons across Canada have had serious impacts on crops, livestock, and agricultural communities. And guilt, panic and hopelessness are becoming familiar emotions as farmers face more extreme weather events and uncertain futures.

As farmers struggle, the facilities and programs on the chopping block have been contributing to indispensable climate mitigation and adaptation research. The National Farmers' Union underscored the scale of the loss in their brief to the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food (AGRI Committee):

"Loss of any public plant breeding capacity could not come at a worse time. Climate change is advancing relentlessly, rapidly changing growing conditions, changing the range and behaviour of pests, weeds, and diseases, affecting frost dates, moisture regimes, heat, snow cover, and relationships with non-agricultural biodiversity.[...]

"Tens of thousands of small research plots distributed across a wide range of soil types, disease and insect pressures, and climatic conditions are needed to test potential new varieties.... These real-world conditions are specific to the regional soils and climate, and cannot be reproduced in a

laboratory or greenhouse, or modelled with Artificial Intelligence."

Meanwhile, researchers at Lacombe Research and Development Centre have found ways to reduce the environmental impact of livestock production. Scientists at the Nappan Research Farm in Nova Scotia have found that feeding kelp supplements to heifers reduces their methane emissions, a potent contributor to greenhouse gases. The Organic and Regenerative Research Program at Swift Current – the only public program dedicated to the study of organic agriculture in Canada – is a front line for climate adaptation research, helping farmers manage increasing climate variability, soil degradation, and emerging pests and diseases.

Cutting research is false economy

Consider climate impact in agriculture through a financial lens. From 2018-2022, crop insurance payments in Canada quintupled from $890 million to $4.9 billion. In 2021, Saskatchewan's crop production fell by 47% and the provincial economy contracted by 0.3% due to drought.

Given the amount that the provincial and federal governments are spending on insurance compensation and business risk management program payments after climate-related extreme weather impacts on farms, public research into climate mitigation and climate adaptation should be protected, invested in, and expanded.

A major 2022 study in Saskatchewan on the benefits and costs of wheat varietal research and development found that:

- Taxpayer investments of $370.6 million between 1995 and 2020 resulted in a cumulative benefit to the Canadian economy of $11.8 billion.
- Every $1 of wheat investment from governments returned $31 to Canadians.

> The impacts from these decisions will have disastrous consequences for many years to come.

When producer contributions through joint funding efforts were factored in, the return rose to over $70.

With such returns at stake, what kind of money does the government hope to save by closing down these research facilities? In their report on the closures released April 21, the AGRI Committee revealed that AAFC's analysis shows an operating cost saving of just $23.3 million/year – roughly 50 cents per resident of Canada – and $8.7 million/year in deferred maintenance costs over 10 years. The study also reveals AAFC's analysis failed to account for the costs of closing the centres, including relocation, divestiture and decommissioning, and potential site remediation costs.

Attempts to find clarity have revealed a lack of transparency and a seeming approach of "cut first, think later." The week *after* the cuts were announced, a media outlet received an internal AAFC email in which management was asking researchers to help the ministry evaluate the impact the site closures will have on their research projects – indicating poorly-informed upper management decisions.

And during the AGRI Committee's initial meeting of its emergency study of the impact of the cuts in February and March, when Bloc member Sebastien LeMire asked Deputy Agriculture Minister Lawrence Hanson for an economic analysis, Hanson replied that AAFC had provided the analysis to the Parliamentary Budget Office and he assumed this was provided to the AGRI Committee as a matter of course. When the NFU asked if this had happened, PBO replied the information had not been provided to the committee because "AAFC indicated that they did not consent to the public disclosure of the information."

As Sophie Martel of the Centre d'expertise et de transfert en agriculture biologique et de proximité (QC) said in her testimony to the AGRI Committee, "Science isn't a luxury, it's an insurance policy." Halting agricultural research that has been on the cutting edge of emissions reductions research will cost the government billions, and will have long-lasting impacts on the climate and the food system.

Food security is national security

These cuts to public agriculture research fit into a larger pattern of the federal government's disregard for climate action. In mid-May, Carney signed an agreement with Alberta Premier Danielle Smith that could usher in a new oil pipeline. The majority of the proposals on the federal government's Nation-Building initiatives list are extractive projects, like mines and liquefied natural gas plants, that will harm the environment.

The feds are also determined to increase defence spending, a move that will intensify fossil fuel emissions both in Canada and abroad. The decision to redirect spending into carbon-intensive military

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⇦*Starving the Science continued*

infrastructure and out of programs, facilities, and research networks that have been helping farmers to both mitigate and adapt to climate change should concern not just agricultural organizations, but all of us. The impacts from these decisions will have disastrous consequences for many years to come.

In their report on the impacts of the closures, the AGRI Committee recommends "that the Government of Canada recognize the agriculture and agri-food industry as a strategic sector on par with energy in terms of national security, and food security as a national security issue."

Now is not the time to cut funding for research centres, farms, and programs that are on the frontlines of agricultural climate science. Now is the time to maintain, indeed expand, our capacity for public interest research on sustainable agriculture. Among the AGRI Committee's final recommendations is that "the Government of Canada pause and reverse the decision to close agricultural research centres."

The AAFC research network provides widespread public benefits that ripple outward to not only support the livelihoods of farmers, but to safeguard affordable food for Canadians, the stability of our ecosystems, and the intrinsic value of nature in Canada. Public science is a public benefit.

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This article, originally published on *www.nfu.ca*, has been edited to include updates provided by Cathy Holtslander, NFU's Director of Research and Policy.

For a comprehensive analysis, see the Report of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food: Science in Canadian Agriculture and the Closure of Research Centres at *www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/45-1/AGRI/report-4*

Take action at *www.nfu.ca/stop-the-aafc-cuts-today*

The Long Harper Era:
Privatization doesn't work, and yet here we are

In the 1980s, we had 1,100 AAFC research scientists across a vast network of national research centres. In 2012, the Harper government closed the Cereal Research Centre in Winnipeg, the Horticulture Research & Development Centre in Quebec, and the Plant Pathology Program in BC, and dismantled the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA). Harper's cuts eliminated tens of thousands of small research plots used to test potential new varieties. Today we only have around 350 AAFC scientists.

It would be a mistake to accept that endless privatization is the only path forward. Public research is knowledge-based, free of bias for profit, and extremely hard to replace. To clarify, these cuts:

- Ignore important production and unbiased knowledge-based issues because there's no way to reasonably replace or monetize that work (low return).
- Fuel the fire for profit motive mechanisms like expensive end-point royalties that funnel farmer dollars into hungry investor pockets.
- Introduce a vacuum to future gains through the loss of programs and researchers that require year-in-year-out experimental work. Private companies will not pick up that tab. The nation suffers.

The results are like cutting off a farmer's leg, offering them a shiny prosthetic one, and then charging them a subscription to use it.

—adapted from "Canadian government got it wrong on public plant breeding" by Dean Harder (*www.nfu.ca*, Feb 9, 2026) and "A country that cannot feed itself has few options: cutting agriculture research is false economy" by Cathy Holtslander (NFU Farmer Newsletter, April 2026).

Dying to Stay Alive

Drawing strength from an animate Earth

by Margaret Steele

The abandoned mining shaft cuts deeply into the embankment. Each spring, snowmelt seeps through fissures in the bedrock and drips into the excavation below, forming a pool of clear water more than three feet deep.

Protected from the sun, this moist cave-like place offers a cool refuge and a welcome source of water. Bears come here often, following their noses or some primordial instinct that humans have long forgotten. Cottonwood trees and a patch of wild currant bushes also find their way, weaving tiny roots through cracks in the rock to reach the water's edge.

I too am drawn to this watery grotto a few dozen steps from my home. I make my way early one April morning as a red squirrel chatters a warning of my presence. I'm met by clumps of moist moss clinging to the rock face, their vibrant new growth glowing fluorescent green in the morning light. The smell of moisture permeates everything and I'm reminded that where water is plentiful, there is an abundance of life.

Behind me, a kilometre away on the other side of the valley, the Granby River weaves her way south. The river is rising now as snowmelt from higher elevations begins to reach her banks from small creeks throughout the watershed. In another month, she will run with fury as the freshet reaches its peak, the rush of water spreading over low-lying fields and filling wetlands before joining the Kettle River at Grand Forks and then flowing on to the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean.

©Rafael Peier | Unsplash

We take this process for granted. The river, low in winter, rising during spring freshet, then dropping in summer to rise again with fall rains. The cycle repeats each year, but there are signs all is not well with the hydrology of this landscape.

During the past decade, the Kettle River watershed, which includes the Granby and West Kettle Rivers, has suffered periods of debilitating drought. The summer of 2023 was especially bad, with conditions reaching Drought Level Five for several weeks, carrying the warning that "adverse impacts to socio-economic or ecosystem values are almost certain." The cautious and cumbersome bureaucratic wording belies the severity of the situation.

But government isn't alone in its use of restrained language. In my neighbourhood, some of us are also cautious with our words. In the heat of summer, we reassure each other the grass isn't dead, it's only dormant. We tell ourselves the fields will green up when temperatures cool and the rains come. We "touch

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⇦*Dying to Stay Alive continued*

wood" that our wells will replenish during the snow melt. But instinctively, underneath our reassuring words, we sense the land is dying of thirst. Maybe we're afraid to say it out loud because we don't know what we can do about it.

Ecologist Greg Utzig is not afraid to say it out loud. His face is lined with concern as he begins his presentation to a packed community hall during the 2025 Watershed Forum in Grand Forks. His graphs paint a sobering picture of worsening drought and increased fire risk for this landscape. Slide after slide reveals a once-healthy watershed unravelling as climate change brings warmer spring temperatures and fewer summer rains.

Greg knows the climate science. He has studied the data and the projections. And he knows his message is grim. He may also know some of us want to hear a more hopeful message. Something like "and here are several things you can do." In my seat at the back of the room, I'm waiting for those words. But Greg doesn't say them. Perhaps he thinks it's too late.

Although I yearn for a message of hope, I know it can feel empty if it isn't connected to some form of engagement. "I hope it will rain soon." "I hope the river isn't too hot for the fish." "I hope we don't have another heat dome this summer." Passive statements like these feel less like hope and more like pleas of desperation to some unnamed force to please make things okay again. But, as Rebecca Solnit reminds us, hope is not the belief that everything will be fine. It is not "a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch." For Solnit, hope is an active force, "an axe you break down doors with in an emergency."

When I think of hope as an axe to break down doors, it becomes HOPE in capital letters, an embodied force, not just a wishful fantasy in my mind. I feel it in my arms and legs as my body surges with strength. There is a tenacity in this kind of hope and a determination to "do something." I need that surge of energy when I find myself slipping into despair.

And I can't deny the despair I often feel at the changes on the landscape. Temperatures this winter are warmer than normal. On Christmas Day 2025, rain drums on the roof of my house – a worrying sound when there should be six inches of snow on the roof and I should be shovelling a path to the woodshed.

But nothing is as it should be this winter. The snow shovel sits idle on the porch, and instead of snowplows scraping their blades along the road in January, I'm hearing chickadees sounding their spring mating call.

I can't deny the despair I often feel at the changes on the landscape.

By mid-January the hills across the valley are mostly bare, and only isolated patches of white remain in the fields. There is still snow in the higher mountains, although the snowpack reports become less reassuring as time passed. On February 1, the snowpack drops to 95% of normal, down from 132% on January 1st. By March 1st, it is 75%, and by April 1st, 65% of normal, raising early concerns about drought conditions.

Closer to home, the hydrology is also changing on the small acreage where I live. For as long as I can remember, moisture has oozed out of the hillside near my house for several weeks each spring. I imagine it starting as droplets from melting snow uphill, trickling at first, then gathering volume and momentum until it reaches fissures in the ground where it sinks down to bedrock and then seeps out at the foot of the hill. From there it flows into a small vernal pond which fills up and overflows, soaking the surrounding landscape in ankle-deep water for several weeks.

But this spring, there is no seepage from the hill and no water in the vernal pond. The surrounding landscape is dry and my rubber boots collect dust in the basement.

I ask myself what all this means. Am I seeing a landscape "dying of thirst"? Or, as Terry Tempest Williams asks when observing the loss of water in Great Salt Lake, am I seeing a landscape "dying to stay alive"? Same landscape, two different perspectives. "Dying of thirst" implies a process already underway with the inevitable path to death. "Dying to stay alive" is a reminder of an animate, intelligent Earth with agency. Perhaps both perspectives are valid but, standing here, seeing the lack of moisture on the ground and imagining the implications for the coming summer, I'm painfully aware that how I choose to perceive this landscape will determine how I respond – passively from a state of despair, or actively, in the hope of renewal.

As the calendar turns from April to May and the days begin to heat up, I realize it isn't hope that gives me strength to face the hydrological changes I'm witnessing on this land. I think it is love. I recall Robin Wall Kimmerer speaking at an event many

years ago. “You love the Earth,” she said, “but what would you do if you knew the Earth loved you back?”

In that extraordinary question, Kimmerer reminds us we are in a relationship based on mutual, reciprocal love with an animate, intelligent being. While I can’t begin to grasp the full implications of living from that perspective, I do get a glimpse of the sense of responsibility I would feel. I wouldn’t let myself give in to feelings of despair. I would be more aware that my thoughts and actions matter. They matter to an animate landscape that is “dying to stay alive.”

Margaret Steele has written extensively on affordable housing issues. In recent years, her focus has shifted to writing about the land where she lives, in the Granby Valley north of Grand Forks, BC.

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Food for the Soul

Organic farm in an urban desert

by Jonah Jung

In a forest of condos in downtown Vancouver stands a farm built from a vacant lot. As the sun rises, a warm breeze sweeps across the fields, plants, and the farmers working on the site.

Anyone crossing the Cambie Bridge can look down at Sole Food Street Farms near Science World and False Creek, next to canoes in the water and joggers on the seawall.

Sole Food Street Farms has turned a bit of urban land into an agricultural landscape. Since it was founded in 2009, the farm has grown into one of the North America's largest urban farms, providing fresh, local produce to the public.

During my recent visit to the farm, I met Jennifer Guest-Viitala, known as Nova to her fellow farmers. She is one of more than 40 farmers at Sole Foods Street Farms.

The farm predominantly hires Downtown Eastside residents to receive agricultural training and raise food crops, a portion of which will be donated to community organizations and to Mount Pleasant Neighborhood House.

"The farm has always been helping the vulnerable population," says Nova. "Part of the farm model from the very beginning was to employ people from the Downtown Eastside with barriers to employment and helping them get past those barriers and move on to normal working."

When Nova first joined the farm, she had just retired from being an outreach worker who focused on harm reduction. After "letting go of a lot of hard drugs," Nova says farming gave her a new purpose.

In its early stages, she says, the farm was like a grassroots movement, building with what they could find: boxes, pallets, and black tarps. "But I got to watch a lot of trial and error and also learn about the different plants that grow as weeds" – including edible weeds such as purslane, mugwort, and lamb's quarters.

Fewer than a dozen farmers worked at the farm when Nova first started. In 2026, the crew size was over 40, the largest since Michael Ableman founded it in 2009.

Watching colleagues pursue their passions is amazing, Nova says. "It's definitely something very special, like over the last 16 years, I've been able to watch people join the farm, grow, change themselves from the inside out, and then move on into working. We've got friends that are now running their own farms," says Nova.

In a 2016 interview with the *Vancouver Sun*, Ableman says the "heroes" of the farm are the people of the Downtown Eastside who made Sole Food Street Farms happen. When the farm first started, Ableman says he had a lot of prejudices towards the vulnerable population near Hastings Street.

"But those same people that I judged turned out to have hearts and souls, incredible creativity, intelligence, and a desire to be functional in the world. They just need to be given the opportunity, and it is the most important lesson of the book," says Ableman, referring to his book *Street Farm: Growing Food, Jobs and Hope on the Urban Frontier.*

The farm moved from its first location at the Astoria Hotel on Hastings Street to its current site, 265 West First Avenue, adjacent to the city's temporary modular housing projects.

This year, the farmers started growing indigenous plants with the help of ethnobotanists, occupying 2.8 acres of land where farmers work from 9 am to 5 pm, says Mary Clare Zak, the farm's interim director.

Inside the greenhouses, lettuce, onions, kale, arugula, and mustard greens are growing in Sole Food Street Farms' patented black plastic boxes. The crops are grown without chemical fertilizers and are harvested by hand using organic farming methods, as the founders directed.

Ahead of rising temperatures, Zak says, better ventilation in the greenhouses is necessary. "The hotter it gets, the more mildew is created, and then that affects the plants and their health."

Those same people that I judged turned out to have hearts and souls, incredible creativity, intelligence, and a desire to be functional in the world.

The plants are like friends to another farmer at Sole Food Street Farms. Stephen Jiggins suffered through homelessness and unemployment for 40 months.

"I feel like I'm in the middle of my own world," says Jiggins. "I watch the ants and the bees and talk to the plants, give them names."

He says he joined the farm after seeing a poster on the wall of the RayCam Cooperative Centre on East Hastings St.

"I felt very unemployable at that time. I had little self-confidence, if any, very low self-esteem," says Jiggins. Sole Food Street Farm changed that.

"I have self-respect again, I have self-esteem again, have something to get up for in the morning," says Jiggins. "Through the 10 years I've been here, I've met the most incredible cast of people – caring, thoughtful, mindful."

The experience helped him navigate an environment full of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, mental illness and addiction.

Jiggins aims to preserve the farm and make sure it carries on after he eventually retires. However, the possibility of having to move and start from scratch is always present.

The farm's biggest struggle is lack of land tenure and security, says Zak, who is currently preparing to relocate Sole Food Street Farms. The land is secure for another two years, but there are redevelopment plans for the area, she says.

"I've got about eight different ideas on the go right nowm" Zak says. "It's whether any of those pan out, is the question. It's hard to find land in a city like Vancouver."

Despite the hazy future ahead of her, every morning, Nova gets her kids ready for school and then puts on her roller skates to commute to the farm.

On arriving, she writes her name down on the whiteboard next to the daily task list. Putting on sturdy rubber boots, she strides across the farm, toward the place that changed her life.

Joonha "Jonah" Jung is a multimedia journalist reporting on international issues, community affairs, cultural issues, and human interest stories. His work has appeared in CityNews Vancouver, *Korean Quarterly*, Tri-Cities Dispatch, New Canadian Media, and Fraser Valley Today.

Fire and Flood

Consequences of clearcutting a watershed

by Ben Wickham

I've been fortunate enough to hike the West Coast Trail twice; both times starting on the northern end, stepping off the gravel road near Bamfield and heading south into the long rhythm of tide and forest. From the moment you leave the parking lot, the trail reorganizes your attention.

Time stretches out to infinity. Weather becomes incredibly intimate. Every crossing, ladder, and headland must be negotiated on its own terms. That journey is only possible because of a single road – the winding route from Port Alberni to Bamfield, the only year-round land access to a small community perched at the edge of the Pacific.

Bamfield isn't just remote; it's dependent. Food, fuel, mail, construction materials, and emergency services arrive along that road. When it closes, options narrow quickly. What looks like isolation on a map is, in reality, a fragile connection; one thin line threaded across steep slopes, logging roads, and river crossings, holding a community in place.

On August 11, 2025, that connection broke.

The Mount Underwood wildfire erupted south of Port Alberni during a stretch of hot, dry weather that still feels unfamiliar on Vancouver Island. Smoke settled into the valley and lingered, muting the sun and turning mornings into a dull, coppered dream. Ash drifted down in places far from the flames themselves. The fire spread rapidly, behaving less like the small, ground-hugging fires historically associated with the Island and more like the fast-moving, wind-driven fires now common in the Interior; fires like White Rock Lake, or the nearby Cameron Bluffs fire, where behaviour outpaced expectations.

> The vulnerability that underpins life in coastal communities was suddenly exposed.

Power lines went down, cutting electricity to Bamfield for nearly two weeks. Refrigeration failed. Communications were strained. Generators filled the quiet space. For a time, daily life narrowed to essentials. Then the road was knocked out.

Fire stripped vegetation from steep terrain above Bamfield Main Road, destabilizing slopes that had already been weakened by decades of disturbance. The ground buckled and then collapsed, spilling out onto the asphalt. Rock and soil slid downslope and slammed the door shut. The connection to Bamfield was closed.

Infrastructure emergency

What began as a wildfire response became an infrastructure emergency. Bamfield was no longer riding out a power outage; it was physically cut off. The closure would last into October, more than two months after the fire was first discovered. During that time, supplies arrived by boat when weather allowed. Plans were revised daily. The vulnerability that underpins life in coastal communities was suddenly exposed, like the raw earth revealed when the hillside gave way.

All this takes place on the unceded territories of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nations, where forest stewardship long predates the modern logging economy. Traditional management included selective harvesting and cultural burning to reduce fuel loads and maintain ecological balance. Those practices were lost when the land was taken.

Fires of this size and intensity were not historically common on Vancouver Island, with the exception of several major burns in the early twentieth century. Those were tied to logging practices of the time: clearcutting large tracts, removing the most valuable species, and leaving dense mats of slash behind to dry. Fire, when it arrived, moved quickly through these altered landscapes.

Still, the Mount Underwood fire did not feel like a relic of the past. It felt like the future arriving. It behaved like the fires

Thunderhill Lake Complex fire, June 2025

Bush Creek fire, Adams Lake, BC

that now define summers elsewhere in the province – fires that escalate rapidly, defy early expectations, and interact with infrastructure in unpredictable ways. It is increasingly difficult to treat such events as anomalies. They are signals, early arrivals in a landscape that is changing faster than its systems were designed to absorb.

Impacts of logging

Port Alberni sits at the centre of that changing landscape. Like many towns on Vancouver Island and across British Columbia, it was built on forestry. The surrounding valleys have been logged for generations, shaping not only the local economy but also the terrain itself. Roads carve deep into watersheds. Slopes are cut, replanted, and cut again. Municipal tax bases, employment, and identity have long been tied to what comes in off the hillsides. These forests are no longer simply ecological systems. They are working landscapes, and that distinction shaped what happened next.

The Mount Underwood fire burned largely on privately managed forestland owned by Mosaic Forest Management, one of the largest forestry companies on Vancouver Island. The area has been actively logged for decades and consists of a collection of second-growth plantations, recent cutblocks, roads, and remaining patches of older forest.

Western Forest Products took over the logging rights in 2005 from Weyerhaeuser, formerly MacMillan Bloedel, which started logging the valley in 1955.

That history mattered when the fire arrived. Removing forest cover increases erosion, raises water temperatures, and alters how water moves across the land. It also heightens the risk of slope failure.

During the Mount Underwood fire, those risks converged. Fire stripped vegetation from steep terrain already heavily marked by forestry roads and cutblocks. When rain followed, it did not soak slowly into the forest floor; it ran. Slopes failed and slid down to the highway. The fragile road connection collapsed.

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⇦ *Watershed logging continued*

The rain should have been a relief. It became a second emergency layered atop the first like the shifting layers of the soil perched above the road itself.

The slide and its impacts didn't stop at the highway. Sediment moved downstream into creeks and estuaries. For fish populations already under pressure, these changes carry serious consequences. Salmon, which depend on cool, clean spawning habitat, are particularly vulnerable.

When watersheds are destabilized, the impacts ripple outward into ecosystems, into fisheries, and into the food systems that coastal communities rely on. As controversial as it is, logging is still ongoing in the Nahmint Valley watershed, which supplies Port Alberni with much of its drinking water.

In places like Bamfield, a closed road is not merely an inconvenience. It changes how medical care is assessed, how food is stored, how long help takes to arrive. It exposes how thin the margin is between connection and isolation.

As fires grow larger and landscapes change, it's worth asking how secure those connections really are, and what resilience looks like in places built at the edge of both geography and economy. Sometimes, the distance between community and isolation isn't measured in drive times or policy debates.

Sometimes it's just a three-metre-wide track.

Ben Wickham is a writer from Nanaimo, BC with a background in education and public service.

Complaint:

Mosaic logging left "abundant, easily ignitable fuel"

New research from the Evergreen Alliance brings the root causes of the explosive Mount Underwood fire into sharp focus. The fire, which is suspected to be human-caused, erupted just south of Port Alberni on August 11, 2025, and swiftly consumed over 3,600 hectares of young, heavily-managed forests. The fierce and fast-moving nature of this fire was unprecedented on Vancouver Island. It took only 70 hours to become the biggest wildfire in the island's history.

In March 2026, the Evergreen Alliance released a time-lapse video showing years of Mosaic logging in the area burned by the Mount Underwood fire. Satellite photos of the area from 1998 to 2022 highlight the progression of clearcuts through the watershed over time. Evergreen Alliance analysis found that more than two-thirds of the primary forests in the fire's footprint had been logged and replaced by young plantations.[1]

With this analysis in hand, the Evergreen Alliance filed a complaint with the Forest Practices Board, demanding an investigation into Mosaic's alleged failure to follow BC Wildfire Regulations. The complaint notes that official explanations for the fire's severity – such as high temperatures and wind – don't match the actual conditions at the time.[2]

Instead, the complaint details evidence of "considerable logging debris left on the ground" and "abundant, easily ignitable fuel" found in the dense plantations of young trees. "Mosaic Forest Management has created fuel hazard conditions on its private property that could lead to a major conflagration on Vancouver Island," the complaint says.

1. *www.evergreenalliance.ca/notices-of-complaint-to-forest-practices-board/2*
2. *www.evergreenalliance.ca/notices-of-complaint-to-forest-practices-board/1*

Desert in the Ocean

Starving whales stranding themselves on the Pacific coast

by Hazel Volk

In spring of 2026, North America's Pacific coast was ground zero for another climate change-related tragedy.

More than three dozen gray whales, too weak to survive their 8,000-kilometre annual journey to Alaska, were found stranded on beaches in BC and Washington this spring. By May, the number of deaths equalled the entire death toll for 2025, and the numbers are still growing.

Each summer, gray whales feed in Arctic waters by scooping up and filtering tiny creatures from the seafloor. Eating up to about a ton a day of amphipods, small shrimp, worm-like animals, crab larvae, and tiny fish hidden in the sediment, this brief feeding season is usually enough for them to build thick layers of blubber to sustain them for the rest of the year. But this year, as they migrated back from the south, where they breed and nurse their calves in warm, sheltered waters, many seemed to lack the reserves to survive even the beginning of their journey.

What changed last summer in their Arctic food supply? The tiny crustaceans that gray whales depend on rely, in turn, on organic material sinking from the surface of the sea, such as algae clinging to the bottom of the ice. Because of the ice melting, the entire Arctic ecosystem is changing, with cascading effects on many species. Tiny organisms disappear from the ocean floor and whales lose their main food source.

Since 2019, researchers have documented gray whales increasingly abandoning their migration and feeding mid-journey, especially along the San Francisco Bay area and the Washington coast. In April, a hungry juvenile gray whale was found dead after swimming 30 kilometres up the Willapa River in Washington State. Other groups have been spotted lingering around Puget Sound.

This change in feeding patterns puts whales at risk from maritime traffic. While there are no reports of collisions in BC, gray whale ship strikes are more common along the US coast, where cargo ships travel along migration corridors.

This is not the first time sudden changes were observed. Between 2019 and 2023, gray whales experienced what biologists called an "unusual mortality event" that killed over half their population. Their numbers dropped from 27,000 to about 13,000 whales. The population appeared to rebound slightly in 2023, perhaps because fewer whales were competing for prey. But vanishing food availability will likely intensify as ecosystems continue to be disrupted by human activities.

Around the world, more species are shifting behaviours, trying to adapt to rapidly changing conditions. If humans have learned to adapt through controlling and reshaping the world around us, other species depend on the stability of their environment and rhythms. With few alternatives when those ancestral patterns break, the impact is immediate and catastrophic.


©NOAA Fisheries

These stranded whales are a horrifying example of what happens when a food system breaks. Some creatures adapt; some don't. Their deaths stand as a warning of what may lie ahead for us and our own food systems as we chase after ever-dwindling reserves in a hotter, more hostile climate.

The Web of Life

A volunteer network restoring urban watersheds

by Brittany Savoie

A grassroots volunteer group in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia is working tirelessly to restore the urban forests and watersheds of the region. Since 2019, the Web of Life Society has removed an astonishing 100,000 pounds of garbage from natural areas.

The organization was created after its founder, Carl Ronka, noticed a monumental trash problem in the region. Hiding throughout seemingly intact forests, there are mounds of garbage, such as household items, construction waste, and abandoned homeless encampments. While illegal, dumping is still being used as a way of getting rid of unwanted items rather than bringing them to proper waste management facilities. There are also places where historical dump sites still remain from over 50 years ago.

Wanting to tackle this problem, Ronka started cleaning up his local forests, creeks and trails, and making piles where municipalities could easily haul the trash away. However, he recognized that the scale of the issue was much larger than what he could handle on his own. He decided to create the Web of Life Society and start documenting his cleanups on social media. As people became aware of his work, slowly but surely, they showed up to lend a hand.

Today, over a thousand volunteers, young and old, have joined community cleanups and restoration events. These take place throughout the Lower Mainland, with areas of focus along the Coquitlam River and in green spaces in Burnaby.

Depending on their abilities, people pick up garbage found along trails, sift through the soil for items like styrofoam pieces and batteries, and haul out old mattresses, car tires and metal barrels from the forest. To get help with organizing, share knowledge, and reach more people, the Web of Life has been planning cleanups in collaboration with other local ecological and volunteer organizations.

Looking for garbage hot spots

Ronka and volunteers are always scouting for new spots to clean up, in both wilderness and urban ecosystems. Through satellite imagery and surveying on foot, hundreds of locations have been identified and mapped for future work. This methodology not only helps with identifying hot spots for garbage, it provides the opportunity to gather data on ecosystem health, observe the spread of invasive species and keep an eye on the community. For example, while surveying, they have sometimes encountered unhoused individuals, so there is an opportunity to check up on them and o□er to connect them with partner programs.

The Web of Life is an ongoing project as trash is continuously being added to forested areas. It is overwhelming, but it is important to not give up. "If we make more progress than there are setbacks over a period of time, things always improve," says Ronka. "In a year, if there are a couple of new abandoned encampments or dump sites in one city, we've likely cleaned up ten which were hidden and forgotten. Therefore, we can see the region getting more and more pristine over the years."

Thanks to the hard work of volunteers, bears can now walk in many areas without finding garbage to chew on. Salmon-bearing rivers and streams have one less source of chemicals and microplastics, which are released as the garbage breaks down. However, the benefits are not just for the wildlife and ecosystems. Cleanups provide the opportunity for people to spend time in and care for the places which provide so much for their well-being. This is especially important for folk who live in the city and may experience barriers to spending time in nature.

"I think we are meant to be gardeners of our ecosystems, both urban and wild."

"I think we are meant to be gardeners of our ecosystems, both urban and wild. We are not meant to be separated," Ronka says.

Cleanups also bring people together, allowing newcomers and long-time residents alike to meet their neighbours, learn from each other, and engage with people who share a love for the environment.

The story of the Web of Life is a reminder that as individuals, we can inspire those around us to take action, and by working together with our community, we can make meaningful change.

For more information or to volunteer: *https://www.weboflifesociety.ca*

Brittany Savoie is an environmental steward and advocate from Port Moody, BC. She has volunteered for the Web of Life Society since 2022.

Battered Coastline

Piles of drift logs are a growing threat to the foreshore

©DeVos Max

by Dave Flawse

On a winter day, Tom Reimchen leaned into a buffeting wind at the tip of Clover Point, south of Victoria's downtown. The southeasterly storm shoved plumes of whitewash crackling against the beach's bedrock.

Hundreds of drift logs, some a metre wide at the butt, packed the seafoam, rolling and tumbling end over end and smashing into the shore with dull resonant thuds. Reimchen noticed, not for the first time, how white circles of broken-off barnacles peppered the gleaming black rock.

As an intertidal ecologist, Reimchen was well aware of studies that looked at the ecological impacts of drift logs on sensitive habitats like estuaries. But what about rocky shores like this one?

To answer this question, Reimchen began a study of drift logs and their effects on rocky shore intertidal communities at sites across BC's coast. The results would reveal a widespread abundance of drift logs and expose for the first time their effects on intertidal life, from tiny plankton to shorebirds.

It would also uncover our lack of historical knowledge and how it lets us accept degraded ecosystems as normal. "Most of the damage that occurred in the intertidal already occurred before most people alive today were even born," Reimchen says.

How abundant are drift logs?

After the storm, Reimchen sat in the glow of his computer. The UVic adjunct professor brought up Google Earth and zoomed in on a beach where a wide strip of pale logs lined the high tide mark.

"Google Earth images have gotten substantially better in the last 20 years," Reimchen says. Anyone can virtually visit remote, hard-to-access beaches to count the logs there. He made this a key component of his study when he and two students counted thousands of logs on 202 beaches on Vancouver Island, Haida Gwaii, and the Chatham Islands.

Around 60% of these logs had sawcut ends (evidence of logging), while less than 20 percent were natural with attached roots. The remainder were ambiguous, without obvious roots or cuts.

The count complete, they compared the results with archival images featuring beaches, taken before 1925 and the development of the chainsaw. Images of beachside First Nation villages proved indispensable, and the idea expanded to works of art. "Emily Carr, this incredible painter, she didn't have an axe to grind about this. If there were logs there, she painted the logs," Reimchen says.

The results from this phase of the study showed that the number of logs at 26 sites increased on average by over 500%, with some beaches seeing a 3,550% increase. Even remote beaches had more logs, "which showed major movement of logs away from their sources," Reimchen states in the study.

But where are these logs coming from?

Industrial escapees

Industrial-sourced logs are "a battering ram on the coast," says Mitchell Anderson, general manager of Western Log Sort and Salvage Co-operative. "It is a waste of wood and is degrading the environment as well." According to their website, the group, incorporated in 2004, is "a producer co-operative of marine log salvors (also known as beachcombers) and a licensed buyer of marine salvaged logs." Beachcombers play a valuable role, Anderson says. "If there weren't any around, people would definitely notice their absence."

Around 60% of these logs had sawcut ends – evidence of logging.

BC is one of the only areas in the world where logs are towed in large rafts up and down the coast. "Back in the day," Anderson recalls, "they were towing what's called flat booms. There was quite a bit of wood that was lost out of those." Now logs are towed in bundles of 10-20 logs, which reduces escapees and makes log recovery simpler.

But single logs do still escape. These fugitives are whisked along by tidal currents to eventually hit a beach, joining other lost logs.

The humble (yet mighty) barnacle

At Clover Point in early summer 2024, Reimchen and the two students counted barnacles, travelling towards the low-tide mark. The bedrock surface was cracked and pitted, creating an opportunity for barnacles to hide "a bit protected within these little crevices," Reimchen says. The dime-sized circles left by broken barnacles dotted gaps greater than one metre, which smaller logs could access..

Barnacles are foundation species, like trees in a forest. Compared to a flat rock surface, Reimchen explains, one covered in barnacles offers small creatures, like worms and crustaceans, protection from the wind and sun. Their presence "sets in motion ecological opportunities for birds, for fishes, for crabs, et cetera."

Shifting baselines

To us, drift logs seem perfectly normal. A beach with little or no driftwood might even seem strange. Beachgoers from 100 years ago, however, would be taken aback by all this sawcut wood. They'd likely remark on the lack of barnacles, too. This phenomenon is known as "shifting baseline syndrome."

First coined in 1995 by UBC professor Daniel Pauly, the idea highlights the "creeping disappearance" of species and "inappropriate reference points" when considering animal populations. And the cure lies in removing the problem.

When Reimchen storm watches at Clover Point now, he's fully aware of how drift logs affect intertidal life. He knows marine life is living in a degraded state. What would the ecosystem look like without the logs? Will we ever know?

"How do you tell something that is clearly important, so geographically wide," asks Reimchen, "and make that relevant, when it's sort of always been this way from the perspective of people alive today?"

Dave Flawse tells stories at the intersection of history and science. Follow his writing at *www.vancouverislandhistory.com*.

Wild Times Government Baloney

by Joe Foy

My grandfather came from a coal mining family out Nanaimo way, and my grandmother from a fishing family in East Vancouver. Baloney was good and cheap — perfect for a working person's lunch.

Little wonder then that my 1960s childhood in the bushlands of Surrey was full of baloney sandwich fun. I became an expert at layering on top of the wondrous mystery meat slices of tomato, cheese, pickles and anything else I could find lurking in the fridge.

As a kid I was somewhat confused that my elders often used my favourite lunch food as an insult. "That's a pile of baloney" they would say as a somewhat polite way of signaling that they didn't exactly believe what was being said or written at the time.

I tell you this to explain why I was eating a baloney sandwich for lunch at the end of a bushed-in logging road at our camp near Fire Lake the other day.

Geoff Senichenko, the Wilderness Committee's mapping expert, and I were up at Fire Lake for a few days to check out reports of an active BC Timber Sales logging operation in federally designated spotted owl old-growth forest habitat. This area is located just north of Harrison Lake in Xa'xtsa Nation territory.

Geoff's maps are produced by placing digital information layers from provincial and federal agencies over a base map – similar to my layered baloney sandwich, but Geoff's layers, unlike my pickle and cheese layers, are see-through.

So when I looked at the maps I could see a lot of layers that indicated that Fire Lake old-growth forests should be protected from logging by BC and Canada – but obviously they are not.

For example, at the west end of Fire Lake is a large Recreation Reserve. Established in 1953 by the government of BC, it's covered in beautiful old-growth forest. A wonderful legacy to pass on to my grandkids' generation – except it's now in a BC Timber Sales cutblock.

Fire Lake forests are within federally-designated critical habitat for the highly-endangered spotted owl. If spotted owl habitat like this is not protected, there is no hope of seeing this beautiful creature in a future Canada, except in pictures.

Yet another layer shows provincially designated old-growth priority deferral areas covering much of the forest at Fire Lake. Despite all of these government-approved protection layers, many hectares of the old growth at Fire Lake have been recently cut down, and more is living on borrowed time. The federal government has been standing around with its hands in its pockets, unwilling to stop this species extinction horror show.

What do you call provincial and federal claims that logging in BC is ethical and regulated by some of the strongest environmental laws in the world?

I say that BC and Canada are spouting a big steaming pile of baloney.

Write, phone, or text your elected reps and tell them to stop the logging of spotted owl old-growth forest habitat at Fire Lake now: *www.wildernesscommittee.org/take-action/bc-must-stop-logging-spotted-owl-critical-habitat*

Joe Foy is the protected areas campaigner for the Wilderness Committee.

Thank You!

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and Wayne Bradley, Dawn Christian, Heather Kennedy-MacNeill, Don Malcolm

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