

# Build BC back better

Efforts continue to secure sustainable funding for watershed governance in the Canadian province of British Columbia. Although the impact of Covid-19 has changed the landscape, there is still belief that investment in watershed security will enable BC to build back better. **Suzanne Pritchard** reports



Above: **Rosie Simms**

**FRESHWATER SECURITY IS BECOMING** an increasing concern for those living in the Canadian province of British Columbia. Severe droughts, floods and forest fires are undermining economic activity, livelihoods and salmon survival. Although First Nations, local government and community organisations are leading freshwater initiatives to help drive progress on watershed governance, their efforts are being stymied by a lack of resources and funding. Without reliable revenue streams there is concern that they will not succeed.

In an attempt to explore the evolution of work and ongoing efforts to secure sustainable funding for watershed governance, the POLIS Water Sustainability Project hosted its latest webinar in the Creating a Blue Dialogue series. On 25 May 2020, over 300 individuals registered to hear more about Investing in our Watersheds: Stimulus and Sustainable Funding for Water Security.

Laura Brandes is the Communications Director for the POLIS Water Sustainability Project. "Over the past ten years," she said, "our goal with this series has been to bring together a diverse cross-section of water champions from across the country, with different backgrounds and expertise, to discuss emerging and innovative topics in water policy, law and governance."

When looking at efforts to unlock sustainable funding for watershed governance in British Columbia, Rosie Simms, Research Lead and Project Manager at the POLIS Water Sustainability Project, said "it's a tough nut to crack".

"What we mean by sustainable funding is breaking the cycle of lurching from short-term one-off project funding, to instead identifying a mix of ongoing funding or mechanisms that continue to replenish on an ongoing and long-term basis," Simms explained.

"Sustainable funding is definitely not a quick fix or an easy challenge to overcome," she continued, "but there has been some promising headway in recent years on this topic."

## Sustainable

Since 2014 there has been an increased focus on the need for sustainable funding, when Simms said a research initiative "really dug into what it actually takes to make the shift towards making water governance work".

A Blueprint for Watershed Governance in British Columbia, written by Oliver Brandes and Jon O'Riordan from POLIS, offered a path forward for how the province could transform current approaches to decision-making to ensure a more sustainable and resilient future.

Simms explained that this research identified

sustainable, long-term funding as one of the key winning conditions that are critical to watershed governance approaches in BC and beyond. There was "more than enough evidence" to show that sustainable funding is a critical piece to unlock but can also be a potential barrier when working towards these approaches.

Zita Botelho was the Project Manager of the Sustainable Funding for Watershed Governance Initiative (SFWGI) which was created to improve collaborative watershed organisations' capacity to secure sustainable funding.

In order to look forward and unlock the potential of sustainable funding, she said there was a need to improve knowledge about new and existing funding mechanisms and delve deeper into initial resources, trying to understand if there were options out there that hadn't been pursued, as well as identifying the pros and cons to different mechanisms.

"We have learnt that when pursuing and unlocking local government funding mechanisms, success requires an alignment of certain conditions," Botelho said. "The key to success for potential funding mechanisms is researching, understanding and selecting realistically appropriate mechanisms."

Botelho identified various recommendations going forward, and include that:

- The provincial government has a role to play and should prioritise the development of a sustainable source of funding for watershed governance initiatives.
- The federal government needs to address current fiscal barriers facing indigenous governments, and indigenous demonstration projects should be undertaken in BC to investigate, test and scale-up sustainable mechanisms for indigenous nations.
- A concerted effort should be taken to support shared learning among local governments and watershed organisations on the opportunities to implement sustainable funding mechanisms to help scale up this work so that they can learn from each other.
- Additional partnerships and research should be pursued to deepen the understanding and feasibility of innovative financial instruments and tools that could support watershed governance, including partnerships with private, academic and green financial sectors to further investigate possible opportunities.

"In terms of local government mechanisms, we have learnt that there are clear limits and, in the current and post Covid-19 environment, we recognise that local governments are under great financial stress," Botelho acknowledged. "Previously to this crisis there were

challenges but I think that these are just going to be exacerbated significantly now."

## Watershed security fund

As watershed issues across BC are becoming more acute, communities are bearing the cost. What is needed, according to Simms, is "a stable and sustainable provincial funding source to have a chance of responding to pressures and to capitalise on bottom-up energy and momentum".

"This is where the Watershed Security Fund enters the picture," she said, explaining that since 2016 core water leaders in BC have been working hard to map out the vision for a watershed security fund to invest in community resilience and reconciliation.

The fund will invest in three key areas:

- **Partnerships** - Supporting indigenous nations to lead and partner on watershed initiatives. Investing in partnerships with local governments and community organisations to leverage existing momentum and capacity on watershed initiatives.
- **Places** - Supporting watershed-scale planning, monitoring and natural asset management in key regions of BC that connect land and water and build community, economic and watershed resilience.
- **People** - Prioritising the creation of good local jobs, supporting farmers to produce sustainable local food and strengthening community connection with watersheds.

Recommendations for the fund's scope and structure include:

- The creation of an external and independent fund.
- Sustainable and ongoing funding availability.
- A structured model for a co-governance approach with government representation from indigenous and non-indigenous watershed experts and knowledge holders.
- Targeted annual expenditure that could be scaled up over three years to be set at C\$40 million per

year to ensure a meaningful and province wide impact

"We really see this fund as both an opportunity to connect and integrate commitments the government have put forward and priorities identified by communities," Simms said.

Throughout 2019 the fund made "exciting progress" and was moving forwards with "growing momentum". It was endorsed by BC water leaders with support from BC First Nations and First Nations Fisheries Council. Then Covid-19 hit in March 2020 and "unleashed some real changes on the landscape in BC".

"We're in a momentum of pivot now," Simms reflected. "We are looking at a change of strategy without a change in vision."

## Covid-19

"There is a need to provide funding for watershed work, however the world has changed and the context has changed with Covid-19," Tim Morris, Project Director at the BC Freshwater Legacy Initiative agreed. "The question the government is grappling with now, as they begin to plan and figure out what economic recovery looks like, is 'what opportunities do we have to take this step forward?' I think we have the opportunity here to make the case for investing in watershed security and showing how it can play a critical contribution to building BC back better," he said.

Morris explained that there is a whole host of employment opportunities, both skilled and semi-skilled, linked to watershed activities. They include clearing invasive species, protecting water sources, monitoring water quality and improving fish passage. Direct employment opportunities exist in:

- Technical fields.
- Construction.
- Wildlife biology.
- Engineering. 🔄

Below: **The Silverdale Creek in British Columbia, Canada**





Above: **Watershed restoration work could help to Build BC back better**

While indirect employment opportunities can also be found in:

- Local nurseries.
- Rock and gravel companies.
- Heaving equipment.
- Hardware stores and other local businesses.

Such a watershed stimulus will not only help industry and business sectors that are struggling post-covid but it will also provide employment opportunities that can facilitate social distancing considerations. Furthermore, the widespread benefits of investing in watershed work include:

- Clean water.

- Food security.
- Climate resilience.
- Reconciliation in action.
- Community capacity.
- Thriving salmon runs.
- Increased tourism and recreational opportunities.

Morris cited the example of watershed restoration that became a new job growth sector in Oregon, US back in 2012. Restoration work was creating jobs while improving river habitat. A study of grants by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board showed that per US\$1 million of investment, restoration activities created more than twice the number of jobs as comparable investments in coal; and more than three times the number of jobs as comparable investments in natural oil and gas. The majority of jobs created were in the rural communities hardest hit by the 2008 economic downturn, while 80% of the dollars generated stayed in the local economy.

“Once you have these institutions in place, they can become economic engines that then attract additional funding opportunities and generate new projects and employment,” Morris said. “If we can move to systems like this then we will have sustainable economic and environmental opportunities over the long run.”

Morris also spoke about the New Zealand government and how part of their economic recovery response to the Covid-19 crisis is focused on saving the environment while creating jobs.

In May 2020, New Zealand Environment Minister David Parker announced that over the next five years more than NZ\$430 million will be injected into regional environmental projects, creating over 4000 jobs. Aimed at improving New Zealand’s waterways in partnership with local governments and farmers, it is anticipated that the programme will deliver huge

benefits to local businesses, accelerate regional economic recovery and advance national and regional environmental priorities. Work will include restoring mini wetlands, stabilising river banks, removing sediment and providing for fish passage. Supporting employment across New Zealand, the funding will allow businesses considering redundancies and downscaling to deploy their staff on environmentally focused activities in their home region, until they are rehiring and workers can return to their previous roles.

“One government that is a little ahead with its plans because of its success in controlling the Covid-19 pandemic, is New Zealand,” Morris said. “This example highlights from an employment perspective the kind of benefits watershed work can have, and this model can be easily and appropriately replicated in British Columbia.”

Speaking about post-covid emergency responses in more details, Morris added: “One caveat with this kind of stimulus is that by design it is not the same as sustainable funding. The problem is more like, in terms of analogy, using a defibrillator to try to get someone’s heart pumping again. You can’t guarantee that the heart will remain strong over the long term.”

“So healthy watersheds still need long-term sustainable funding,” he continued, “to build and maintain community capacity to keep watersheds healthy and secure. There is great promise in emerging watershed models but they need sustainable funding to ensure they don’t become one-offs or end after a couple of years.”

### Long-term vision

Rosie Simms agreed: “We need to keep in mind the long-term vision and not just think about the quick fix.

In my mind, it is really about setting up to avoid future costs from climate change so, if we do invest now, we avoid significant costs later down the line from drought and flooding.

“Water issues are here to stay and will only get more challenging,” she said. “We can make the most of the Covid stimulus opportunity provided and move forward on the issues we have been talking about for a long time.”

“What the Covid crisis has revealed is that the strength of our institutions and their resilience are not as strong as we had thought. Our vulnerability to various crises is greater than we believed it was. But now,” Morris concluded, “we have the opportunity to move forwards in a different direction and build BC back better by making different choices.” ●

### References

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Above: **The outbreak of Covid-19 unleashed real changes on the BC landscape and elsewhere worldwide**

Below: **A severe drought exposes riverbed on the Fraser River in Southern British Columbia. Freshwater security is becoming an increasing concern for those living there**

