

B.C.'s unprecedented weather disasters require bold investment in watershed security

Coree Tull



The installation of a silt screen in August, 2021. Justine Nelson/Handout

Coree Tull is chair of the B.C. Watershed Security Coalition.

The damage wrought by extreme weather across British Columbia in just the past year is gut-wrenching in its scope. But heading off the worst effects of fire, drought and flooding is still possible if we rebuild the natural protections of our watersheds. Putting in place a Watershed Security Fund, as promised by the provincial government, has never been more urgent.

Healthy watersheds provide natural defences against climate change-fuelled extreme weather. For example, wetlands act as natural sponges that absorb flood waters and slow down overland flow. They also provide refuge and critical habitat to fish and wildlife during times of drought. Natural stream banks help filter runoff, preventing pollution from reaching waterways, and provide shade to spawning salmon during heat waves. Mature forests hold back snow and rain, providing a natural solution during flood season; this stored water is then released when it's dry and needed most.

The benefits of strengthening these natural protections from extreme-weather events is reinforced by the massive response and recovery costs of recent damages.

In the fall, a series of atmospheric-river storms – a plume of moisture-laden air, hundreds of kilometres long, that delivers sustained, heavy rainfall – overwhelmed B.C.'s infrastructure. This left farms submerged, homes and businesses destroyed, salmon habitat washed away, and water undrinkable; by the time the floods receded, the cost of recovering from the damage topped \$9-billion.



The Clayoquot Sound Watershed Recovery Initiative, led by Redd Fish Restoration Society, is one of over 60 projects that was supported through provincial funding under the Healthy Watersheds Initiative. Lora Tryon /Handout

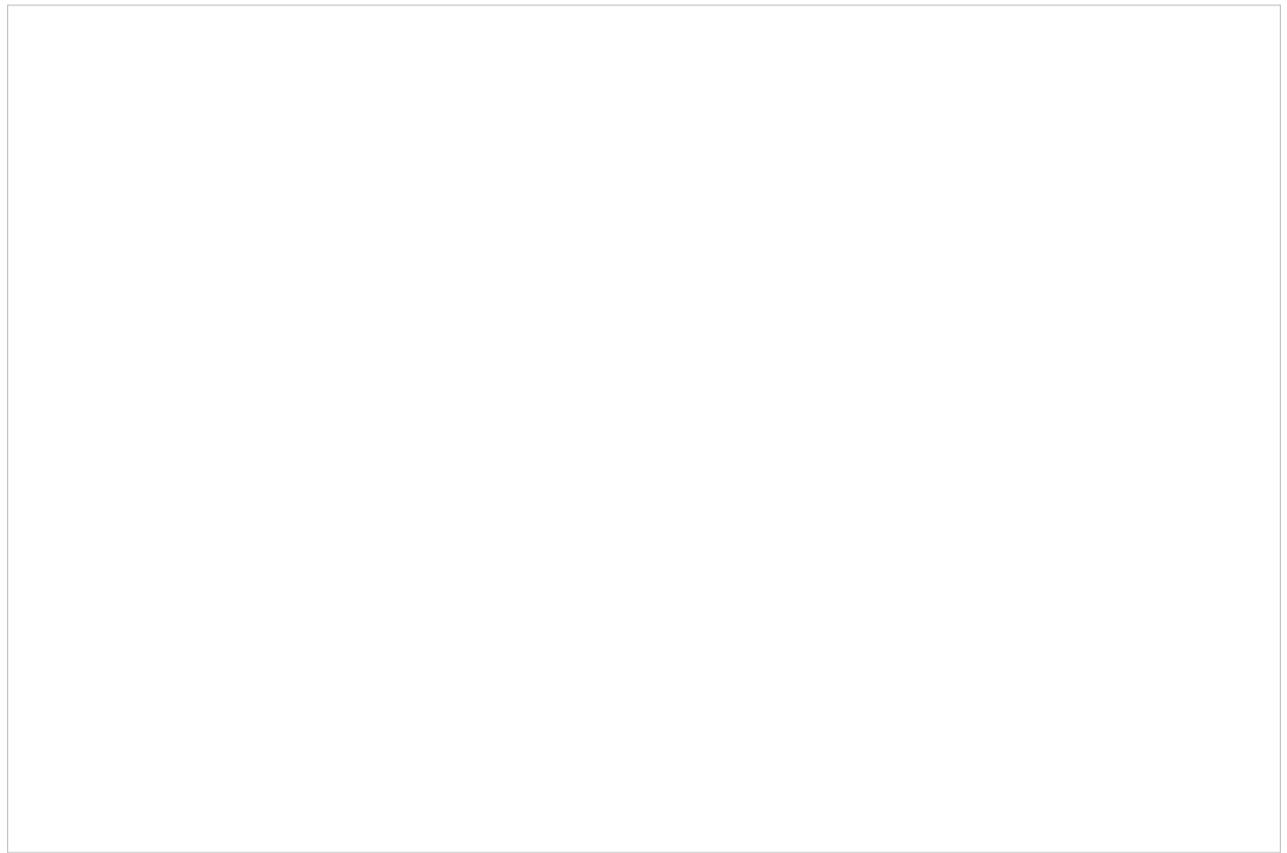
Also last year, more than 1,500 wildfires scorched nearly 870 square kilometres of forestland in B.C., racking up more than \$500-million in firefighting costs. Forests were dry as tinder as a result of drought and record-breaking heatwaves, compounded by decades of mismanagement. These costs are rising rapidly: In B.C. alone, firefighting costs for three of the past five years (2017, 2018 and 2021) were more than double the 10-year average, together exceeding \$1.7-billion.

Drought, fires and floods go hand-in-glove. Drought leads to fire, and fires burn the land. Land denuded of life is then subject to erosion,

debris flows and slides, which in turn worsen floods.

So we welcome a recent announcement by B.C. Premier John Horgan that outlined \$30-million in funding for watershed security. This investment, which follows \$27-million in 2021 under COVID-19 economic recovery, is a good first step toward the establishment of a permanent Watershed Security Fund. Half of the \$30-million will fund watershed projects led or co-led by First Nations. The other half will fund conservation organizations that are restoring wetlands, improving salmon habitat and enhancing community resilience.

But this is still a one-off and less than half of what is needed. It is essential that the B.C. government build on these initial investments by creating a long-term Watershed Security Fund in the next provincial budget. To match the scale of the threat, the BC Watershed Security Coalition has identified that at least \$75-million in funding per year is needed.



The field crew with Skeena Wild Conservation Trust conducting surveys as part of the Riparian Restoration Work on Willow Creek. Skeena Wild Conservation Trust

The benefits of such a bold and pro-active investment far outweigh the costs. It is certainly preferable to expensive disaster-response efforts: B.C. has spent nearly \$11-billion recovering from the effects of extreme weather in just the past few years. And British Columbians already understand the benefits of shoring up our watersheds. According to an [October poll](#) by the Real Estate Foundation of BC and the University of Victoria's POLIS Water Sustainability Project, 78 per cent support major investments in watershed security to protect fresh water in the province.

This is why we need a Watershed Security Fund that is independent, sustainable and at a scale that can make a difference while withstanding political cycles. And such a fund must be delivered in

partnership with Indigenous Nations to support real progress on reconciliation.

Once established, the fund should invest in three key areas. First, rebuilding our natural defences: Wetlands, stream banks, forests and coastal marshes provide critical services at a fraction of the cost of built infrastructure. Second, strengthening watershed governance through Crown and Indigenous partnerships that work with local communities to set priorities and make better decisions for their watersheds. Third, bolstering collaborative watershed monitoring through Indigenous knowledge and Western science, so we know if actions are making a difference.

Watersheds underpin our economy, health and well-being by providing clean drinking water, thriving salmon runs, water for growing food and natural protections against climate disasters.

If we take care of our watersheds, they will take care of us.

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