



Flood Recovery, Resilience and Reconciliation in the Lower Fraser

REPORTING BACK: BUILD BACK BETTER, TOGETHER – JULY 14 2022 FORUM



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Photo: Tamsin Lyle

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Executive Summary

The November 2021 flooding events brought home hard realities in the Lower Fraser floodplain. As water spread across the landscape, forcing evacuations, closing highways for days, stranding salmon, inundating fields and causing hundreds of millions of dollars of damage, it became obvious that **the 'system' we have to manage our relationships with water in the Lower Fraser is broken**. Siloed decisionmaking, short-term priorities, red tape, inequities in capacity, disregard for salmon and other species, and the persistent, harmful legacies of colonialism—all the flaws were plain to see.

Communities are now under pressure to rapidly develop recovery plans and compete for federal and provincial funding, but they are stuck with outdated funding policies, varying levels of capacity and resources, and little to no opportunity for collaboration with neighbours, much less across the region. **Before we retrench existing problems, we need to reset and move forward in a better way** that builds respectful relationships, long term resilience for communities and other species, like salmon, and **advances reconciliation**.

Responding to this need, the Emergency Planning Secretariat, with technical support from the Build Back Better Together Collaborative, secured direction from federal and provincial ministers to **host a regional forum to find common ground to inform a strategic approach** to flood recovery and long-term resilience in the Lower Fraser. Leadership and staff from **16 First Nations and 14 local governments** in the region gathered territories in Abbotsford, BC on Coast Salish territories, on July 14, 2022, along with **BC Minister of Public Safety, Mike Farnworth, and Secretary-Treasurer of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, Kukpi7 Judy Wilson**, plus senior staff from a dozen federal and provincial agencies. 108 people were in the room, and 50 people attended online.

The Forum guests supported five principles as a foundation for flood recovery and resilience in the Lower Fraser, to “Build Back Better, Together” and provided valuable insights for further development of the approach:

1. **Understanding and reducing risk** and adapting to climate change in accordance with the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction;
2. **Advancing reconciliation**, with particular attention to Articles 18, 19, 29, 32 of UNDRIP;
3. Ensuring that **salmon and the coastal and freshwater ecosystems they depend on are thriving**;
4. **Everyone is part of the solution** – there are many siloes in planning, decision-making and actions on the ground in the lower Fraser, and a more holistic and collaborative approach to managing flood risks is needed;
5. **Sustainable economies and resilient communities for the long term** – we need a shared vision for the future and a plan to measure progress and ensure accountability.

Specific objectives identified by participants at the July 14 Forum include:

- **Proactive planning and risk reduction** – Responding to emergencies is not sufficient to meet the needs of the Lower Fraser region and protect our communities and ecosystems. *“We need timelines and milestones, without this there is no progress – we need a roadmap of where we are going.”*
- **Collaboration and regional-scale approaches** – Local leaders are prepared to invest not only in their communities, but in relationships with their neighbours and across the region. *“Water doesn’t respect municipal boundaries. All must work together so that all can flourish together.”*
- **Modernized funding mechanisms and programs to support resilience and reconciliation on the ground** – First Nations need to be involved in decisionmaking at the earliest stages. Resilience through multi-benefit and nature-based solutions must be supported. Funding needs to address legacy problems, not perpetuate them.

The Build Back Better, Together Collaborative committed to prepare this report documenting the vision and advice of Forum participants, along with a briefing note directed to provincial and federal government ministries, recommending actions, and **to convene the next forum in Fall 2022 to continue advancing this work together.**

Introduction: Coming Together

The November 2021 flooding events brought home hard realities in the Lower Fraser floodplain. As water spread across the landscape, forcing evacuations, closing highways for days, stranding salmon, inundating fields and causing hundreds of millions of dollars of damage, it became obvious that the 'system' we have to manage our relationships with water in the Lower Fraser is broken. Siloed decisionmaking, short-term priorities, red tape, inequities in capacity, disregard for salmon and other species, and the persistent, harmful legacies of colonialism—all the flaws were plain to see.

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WHO WAS AT THE FORUM?

- 16 First Nations
- Union of BC Indian Chiefs
- 14 Local Governments
- 7 Provincial Ministries
- 6 Federal Departments





Setting the Table for Dialogue

The Forum began with an opening and welcome from Semá:th Councillor Chris Silver, followed by remarks from Co-Chairs of the event, Tyrone McNeil (Emergency Planning Secretariat Chair and Sto:lo Tribal Chief), and Jason Lum (Chair of the Fraser Valley Regional District Board and Councillor for the City of Chilliwack).

Tribal Chief McNeil observed that the November 2021 atmospheric rivers and flooding events make it clear that a proactive and predictive regional plan of action is needed. The current practice of funding communities in a piecemeal fashion and to rebuild to the same standard is ineffective, and there is a need for a regional approach to resilience and climate adaptation. Further, The *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* has now been adopted by both the federal and provincial governments. Articles 18, 19, 29, and 32, in particular, describe how First Nations must be a part of decisionmaking affect-

ing their territories, and their rights to free, prior and informed consent. The goal of the Forum is to allow First Nations and local governments to come together to let the federal and provincial governments know what is needed in the Lower Fraser region—to set the table and develop a shared vision together, which can in turn fuel a regional plan for resilience. Federal and provincial governments can then adjust funding criteria and policy to support this collaboration, and we can build back better, together.

“The goal is to set the table and develop a shared vision together.”

Tyrone McNeil, Emergency Planning Secretariat Chair and Sto:lo Tribal Chief

FVRD Chair Jason Lum emphasized the impor-

tance and urgency of building relationships between local governments and First Nations, noting that there is common ground but not enough opportunities to explore it and work through challenges. Local governments need to be proactive about beginning this dialogue. This Forum should help send a signal to Ministers at the provincial and federal levels that when First Nations and local governments work together and get to agreement about particular projects, funding should be available without delay.

"We agree on many more things than we disagree, but we don't have enough opportunities to sit down...to build that foundation of a relationship so we can begin to discuss the difficult things."

Jason Lum, Fraser Valley Regional District Chair and Chilliwack Councillor

BC Minister Farnworth spoke on behalf of the

Province, stating his support for regional dialogue, planning and action to prepare for future flooding events and climate change. He emphasized the need to work together. He noted that approaches that include salmon and reconciliation align well with his government's priorities.

"We are in this together."

Mike Farnworth, BC Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General

The room then heard from First Nations and local government leaders who shared reflections on their experiences of flooding, current shortcomings in flood recovery and resilience planning (and action) in the Lower Fraser, and opportunities for collaboration and improvement. Speakers included Mayor Paul Horn, City of Mission, Councillor Eddie Gardner T'it'elem Spath, Skwah First Nation, Mayor Sylvia Pranger, District of Kent, and Steven Harris, Kwantlen First Nation.

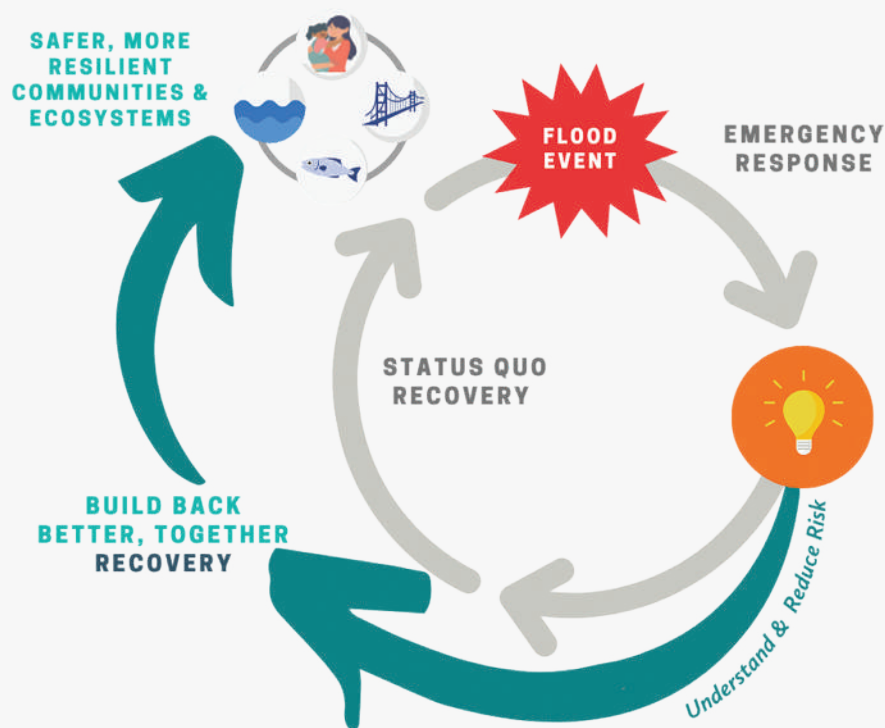




WHAT IS BUILD BACK BETTER, TOGETHER?

The forum organizing team made a short technical presentation about “Build Back Better, Together,” proposed as a principled way forward for the Lower Fraser region, to inform funding criteria in the short term, and planning for the longer term.

The simple, but powerful idea behind “Build Back Better, Together,” is to learn from our experience with events like the floods of November 2021. Instead of rushing to build back exactly what we had before, we can use this window of opportunity to address vulnerabilities and inequities so that we are better prepared for the future. We can take advantage of significant investments in recovery, and work collaboratively to build safer, more resilient communities grounded in respectful relationships with each other and the ecosystems we depend on.



The idea of “Building Back Better” is from the international framework on disaster risk reduction, the “[Sendai Framework](#),” which has been adopted in principle by the federal and provincial governments. It means taking a pro-active approach to risk reduction – planning and adapting, not just responding, to events like the November 2021 floods.

At the Forum, five principles were proposed to guide the implementation of Build Back Better, Together (BBBT) in the Lower Fraser. These principles are intended to guide funding criteria in the short term, as well as the development of longer term, regional planning. All of the principles are interconnected:

1. Reducing risk and adapting to climate change: In the Lower Fraser this means taking a thoughtful, proactive approach to living in the floodplain: understanding the risks we face, including the impacts of a changing climate, and taking actions that address the root causes of our vulnerabilities so that we are better prepared for short and long term challenges;

2. Advancing reconciliation: To move forward we need to acknowledge the colonial legacy in the Lower Fraser, which has left First Nations communities excluded from decisionmaking about their territories, and physically displaced to reserve lands that are often highly vulnerable to flood hazards. Advancing reconciliation means First Nations are at decisionmaking tables for funding and planning affecting their territories, beginning at the earliest stages, and First Nations' own capacity to respond and plan in their communities is also supported. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in legislation by both the Province of BC and the Government of Canada, provides a framework for building new relationships between the federal, provincial and local governments and First Nations, starting from the foundation that title and rights are recognized and will be upheld, on a proactive basis. Articles 18, 19, 29 and 32 are particularly relevant for this work, describing how First Nations must be involved in decisionmaking about their territories, and their rights to free, prior and informed consent. Federal and provincial governments are responsible to ensure that funding and policy instruments for flood recovery meet these requirements. Dialogue and relationship building between First Nations and local governments are also an important foundation for this work in the landscape of the Lower Fraser;

3. Salmon, and the coastal and freshwater ecosystems where they live, are thriving: Salmon are a keystone species in the Lower Fraser, integral to the cultural security of Lower Fraser First Nations, and contribute significantly to the region's economy. Yet salmon and the ecosystems where they live and travel across

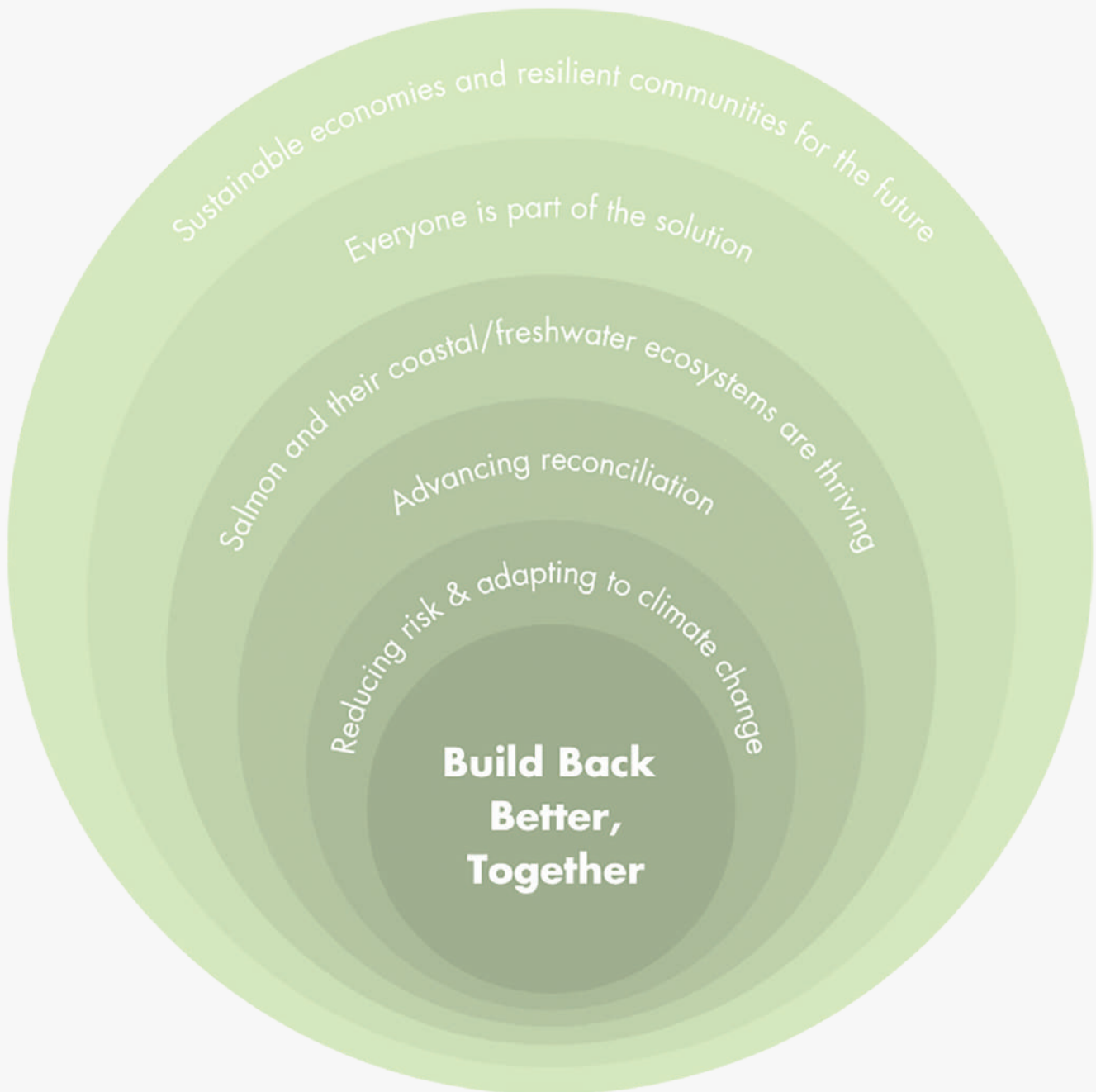
their life cycles in the floodplain have not been part of colonial flood management decisions in the Lower Fraser, with devastating effects including habitat loss and fragmentation, pollution, and barriers to connectivity that affect not just salmon but many other species as well. Funding and decisionmaking about our activities in the floodplain need to include salmon and the ecological health of Lower Fraser ecosystems as a priority. At a practical level this means fish-friendly infrastructure, improvements in riparian protection, and consideration of opportunities for setback dikes and dike realignment, as well as linkages to fish habitat protection and restoration planning, strategies and funding;

4. Everyone is part of the solution: At present there are many siloes in planning and decisionmaking in the Lower Fraser. Communities are divided by lines drawn on the map, and government agencies are also fragmented across ministries and departments. Key actors like infrastructure operators and farmers are not directly engaged. A more holistic and successful approach to managing flood risks is needed. In the short term, funding needs to support relationship building and collaborative approaches to projects. Programs like Farmland Advantage and Floodplains by Design (from the State of Washington) offer real-life examples of collaboration with multiple benefits. Existing and emerging examples of collaboration in the Lower Fraser, particularly among First Nations and local governments, need targeted and streamlined funding and approvals, instead of red tape.. Over the longer term relationship building and collaboration needs to be supported by redesigning funding programs and regulatory adjustment and alignment so that barriers are removed and we are all supported in working together as a region; and,

5. Sustainable economies and resilient communities for the future: In a changing climate, and a time of reconciliation, a longer term vision for the shared landscape of the Lower Fraser is needed, in order to develop a roadmap and milestones for the changes that are required. With short election cycles this longer term lens

is often lacking. Planning farther into the future allows us to broaden the scope of actions that are possible. It also helps us more realistically assess the resources that are needed, and compare options for action. And it is a way to connect with community members, to build trust and understanding about the challenges we face in the floodplain. Some communities have already un-

dertaken engagement processes with their members, and there is support for a vision where our children, grandchildren and so on can continue to live in this region, safely, respectfully and sustainably. A long term vision for the Lower Fraser floodplain, for 50, 100 years or longer, will guide shorter term objectives, and help us measure progress in getting there.





After the description of the proposed five principles for Build Back Better, Together, the collaborative 'work' of the Forum then began. The invited guests, gathered in smaller groups around 10 tables, engaged in dialogue about the principles, discussing what these principles could mean for their communities and the region, and what might be missing.

In the afternoon, staff from EMBC and ISC gave an overview of existing arrangements for federal and provincial disaster recovery funding. Kat Morgan (Associate Director for The Nature Conservancy) also introduced the Floodplains by Design program from the State of Washington as an inspiring example of collaboration and nature-based approaches to risk reduction.

Guests of the gathering then resumed dialogue at the tables, sharing ideas about practical solutions and changes to funding policies and programs needed to advance BBBT in their communities and across the region.

The final part of the Forum included the graphic artist, Michelle Buchholz, sharing her summary of the day's work, and remarks from Kukpi7 Judy Wilson, Secretary-Treasurer of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs the Co-chairs. Semá:th Councillor Chris Silver formally closed the gathering.



Themes from the Forum: Morning and Afternoon Dialogues

Following the morning presentations, guests at the BBBT Forum engaged in dialogue about flood recovery and resilience in the Lower Fraser region. They discussed “Build Back Better, Together” in the context of their work, and their communities. This dialogue, gathered from ten tables at the forum, is described below.

WORKING TOGETHER: DIALOGUE ON THE PRINCIPLES OF BBBT

Overall the five principles for BBBT resonated with forum guests, and they shared many ideas about what the principles could mean for their communities and the Lower Fraser as a region. The interconnectedness of the principles was also discussed, e.g., “salmon is a foundation of our being and should be factored into all 5 principles.” “The five principles must be accepted together.”

At the same time it was observed that people in the region had had similar conversations in the past, in some cases over decades, without seeing anything translated to useful actions. In particular there was uncertainty about the level of commitment of the federal and provincial governments to listening, doing things differently, and making the necessary funding available. It was suggested that “teeth” are needed for the five principles. Building resilient relationships was also a common theme, and it was not clear to guests whether this was included in the principles.

There was some tension about the overarching frame of “Build Back Better, Together.” In particular there were questions about the meanings of “Build Back” and “Better.” For example, it was noted that “Building Back” can justify the status quo, and be a constraint to improving resilience. In some cases “Building Back” in any form will not ensure future resilience if planned relocation is what is needed. Similarly, there were questions about “Better,” and what it would mean, in practice—better for whom, or what? Would it mean moving away from what we have now, away from gray infrastructure? It would be important to strongly ground Build Back Better, Together with the five principles.

Overall the principles resonated around the tables, but there was a strong and broadly shared sentiment about the need to move from talk to action, including measurable outcomes and greater accountability for federal and provincial governments in supporting recovery and long term resilience.



Discussion about the Five Principles

Key themes heard from participants at the ten tables in relation to each principle are gathered together below.

1. Understanding and reducing risk, and preparing for climate change. Although not everyone was familiar with the Sendai Framework, there was alignment with a Sendai-based approach. The region needs proactive planning, a “roadmap”; we shouldn’t just be responding to disasters. We need to focus on understanding risk, and planning for the longer term. The need for a plan, with tangible, measurable targets, and appropriate short-term actions was a clear and recurring theme around all the tables.

Currently we are taking short-term actions without looking at longer term consequences. There was a strong desire for accountability around improving resilience—having goals and meeting them, and learning from past mistakes. There was also agreement that this type of plan needed to be developed at a larger scale, that it should be regional (“water doesn’t respect municipal boundaries”) and watershed-based. It was also noted that provincial ministries needed to be aligned with a regional plan, so that their decision making would be consistent and supportive. There also needs to be reliable, multi-year funding.

“We need timelines and milestones, without this there is no progress—we need a roadmap of where we are going.”

2. Advancing reconciliation. One way of beginning is acknowledging the colonial legacy that got us here. Not acknowledging that colonial lens leads to funding to maintain current measures, and entrenchment of the status quo. First Nations communities are neglected, and not recognized in the broader economy. It is hard to trust, from a First Nations perspective, when previous commitments have rarely been upheld. Not all flood mitigation systems are functional for First

Nations communities, and must assist these communities. Planning and response (and funding) should include Indigenous lenses, and oral histories, and ensure that different ways of knowing are valued. Spiritual values and attention to what sustains life should be part of planning for the region. Cultural awareness is important. More communication between First Nations and federal, provincial and local governments is needed. Direct communication and “breaking bread” is important. Addressing First Nations capacity needs is a critical part of moving forward. Everyone needs to be good neighbours and better human beings.

“All must work together so that all can flourish together.”

“First Nations need to be part of decisions from the beginning.”

3. Salmon, and the coastal and freshwater ecosystems where they live, are thriving. Salmon is a foundation of being, and should be factored into all five BBBT principles. Salmon protection needs to be looked at holistically. Connectivity affects fish habitat, but with current practices we also lose important habitat variations that provide spawning, resting pools, and other things we don’t understand. Protection of all life systems is needed. We could also include other traditional foods. The relationship of salmon and flooding should be considered. From a local government perspective, the value of salmon needs to be factored in before development through natural asset management and inventories. Sometimes green, nature-based, fish friendly approaches face resistance because they are seen as experimental. We need an improved understanding of the importance of salmon and making sure there is a way of life for everything.

“Salmon is our economy.”

“Salmon is a foundation of being and should be factored into all five BBT principles.”

4. Everyone is part of the solution.

Discussion about this principle focussed on “Together” – roles and responsibilities, and the ways that everyone should work together. There was very strong support for working together at the local and regional scales, across First Nations and local governments, and maintaining connectedness post-recovery, or even better, building and maintaining strong relationships before disaster events strike. There was a strong feeling that working together needs to be a long term commitment, and there should be time and space (with funding) for First Nations and local governments to build relationships, including more gatherings like the Forum.

“Together” should also include youth voices, and non-human beings, like salmon, as well. Working together doesn’t mean the same solutions apply to every community. It is critical that the provincial and federal governments and their agencies fully commit to being at the table, across agencies, to ensure that solutions are funded and that implementation doesn’t get stuck in red tape. There is a strong feeling that the provincial and federal governments are not in touch with the realities and needs of the region. International cooperation is also important in some places. Private land issues, farmers and transportation corridors

all need to be factored in, including responsible agencies.

“We need to meet and build relationships prior to crises.”

“Ask communities what they need!”

5. Sustainable economies and livelihoods.

There was less direct discussion about this principle, but general consensus that the region would not be sustainable and resilient in the long term without strategic planning and adequate funding for implementing actions. There was talk of a “full suite of objectives” that included both conventional/colonial economic objectives as well as ecosystem health and First Nations priorities including cultural/economic security. Working together in the region can help with managing trade-offs, and lessening competition.

“Change our perspectives on investment and stewardship to 25, 100, 400 years.”

“Take a regional approach to funding, with a formula to ensure equity across differently resourced communities.”





KEY TAKEAWAYS: BBBT AND FIVE PRINCIPLES

- There was overall support for a Build Back Better Together approach to funding and planning for the Lower Fraser region, if this approach is clearly anchored in the five principles;
- The need to build resilient relationships across governments and communities is very important, with First Nations included at decision-making tables;
- There is a need for a “roadmap” for the region that includes a pro-active approach to reducing risk, measurable outcomes, and greater accountability for federal and provincial governments in supporting recovery and resilience;
- Protecting the way of life of salmon and other species is essential;
- There are differences in the values held by First Nations and other governments, but a shared common ground for action can be discussed and agreed upon.

WORKING TOGETHER: DIALOGUE ON IMPLEMENTING BBBT IN FLOOD RECOVERY

Participants were invited to share their ideas for how a BBBT approach could be implemented in current flood recovery efforts, with a focus on funding allocations and programs. There was a clear desire around the tables to have funding programs more closely aligned with Lower Fraser needs and realities, and to meaningfully address capacity issues, particularly in First Nations communities. This requires deeper listening and more direct engagement from federal and provincial policymakers. Biases and historical disparities in funding needed to be openly identified and addressed. Indigenous knowledge of history and the land is important in planning for resilience. The need for better communications across all governments, and better transparency from provincial and federal governments regarding funding and recovery policies was also consistently emphasized. Continued dialogue, developing relationships and actions centred on reconciliation, and bringing in additional actors including railways and farmers will be important.

Funding

A more accurate understanding/acknowledgement of the funding needed for the region to be resilient is necessary. Funding for communities needs to be ongoing, predictable, accessible, and provided in a timely manner. Funding needs to visibly address historical disparities, not perpetuate them or promote competition. There also needs to be funding for proactive/adaptive measures, and a funding process that helps First Nations and local governments develop pro-active plans. The needs and realities of communities should be at the centre of funding objectives and program design. Indigenous communities need a bigger seat at the table; currently decision-making power is biased towards the conventional/colonial economic sector. Support for preparing funding applications is needed, especially for First Nations governments. Long term thinking needs to shape investments in the region: stewardship for 25, 100, 400 years. There needs to be transparency about where funding is going.

Capacity

Equity in capacity is a foundational step; in particular First Nations capacity needs improvement. First Nations emergency housing and reception centres are needed, as well as technical capacity. There needs to be a long-term commitment to improve capacity. We need to be honest about where capacity is needed, and build it up. This also applies to some smaller local governments.

Dialogue

There have been many technical studies about flooding, but not enough dialogue among leadership. More dialogue is welcome, if it leads to action and appropriate funding. It is good to have First Nations and local governments coming together, and it would be even better if more provincial and federal representatives attended so they could learn about regional needs and priorities.

Communications

Less jargon and more clarity in government communications should be the goal, especially about funding. The Province is not communicating well on how to advance projects; feedback is only what is wrong, not how to fix it. More site visits from provincial government officials are needed to understand local realities, and have two-way communication. Siloes in communication across and within governments need to be addressed. The UBCM meetings in October can be a way to publicize a new way of working and planning.

Summary of suggested actions

Integrate BBBT into programs and policy

- Look at floodplain recovery, not flood recovery.
- Articulate policies and actions based on five principles.
- Secure provincial and federal mandates for BBBT

Developing processes that centre on reconciliation

- Advising municipalities of their role in guiding the process for including First Nations
- Historical learning sessions of Indigenous knowledge
- More incorporation of Indigenous cultures, how climate change is colonial
- Building back better, together implies better for **all**. Together is **all** (animals, plants, fish, etc.)

Invest in coordination and collaboration

- Have a point person or organization to carry on five principle work
- Establish roundtable for planning and direction to achieve BBBT objectives

- Have coordination within Province (coordinating body or person)
- Someone to work with local governments and Nations on developing applications that will support multiple jurisdictions/territories
- Funding programs to include non-physical, non-structural measures like community engagement for long term changes

Take a more integrated approach

- Implement a Floodplains by Design-type program in BC
- Revise ALR to respect floodplains/fisheries
- Get away from just building bigger dikes
- Include climate change adaptation in DFA
- Cumulative study of Lower Fraser – what habitat is left

Support ongoing dialogue

- More forums like this one – quarterly
- Dialogue session between farmers and First Nations
- Robust reporting-out, so we know we are being heard



KEY TAKEAWAYS: DIALOGUE IMPLEMENTING BBT IN FLOOD RECOVERY

- Dialogue is important and has been missing – we need to continue to gather to advance this work
- Ideas need to be grounded in the needs and realities of communities and Nations on the ground, translate into action, and be more coordinated across the region
- There is a need for greater federal and provincial government understanding, alignment and clear communication
- The colonial legacy underpinning the current situation must be recognized, placing reconciliation at the centre of efforts
- Underfunding and capacity needs for First Nations and small local governments need to be addressed
- Funding needs to take a long-term perspective to be addressed





Next Steps

The Build Back Better Together Collaborative and Emergency Planning Secretariat committed to the following actions to build on the ideas and energy of the forum:

1. Preparing this report and sharing with participants along with all local governments and First Nations in the Lower Fraser region along with provincial and federal government agencies;
2. Preparing a briefing note directed to provincial and federal government ministries, outlining the outcomes of the forum and recommendations for action; and
3. Convening the next forum in Fall 2022 to continue advancing this work together.





BBBT Collaborative Members

We are a collaborative group of BC-based organizations and experts with the shared goal of helping BC's upcoming flood recovery and management efforts achieve the best possible outcomes. We offer support from a diverse range of interests, experience and networks, including Indigenous groups, conservationists, farmers, environmental legal specialists, researchers and natural resource professionals. We hope to see BC move towards a more holistic, collaborative approach to flood management that benefits people and other species, like salmon.

Includes: Emergency Planning Secretariat (Indigenous-led); UBC Coastal Adaptation Lab, School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture; West Coast Environmental Law; Ebbwater Consulting; Sto:lo Tribal Council; Watershed Watch Salmon Society; Resilient Waters Project; Farmland Advantage; and Kerr Wood Leidal.



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