



Floodplains Dialogue: First Nations and Farmers in the Lower Fraser Valley

Shxwhá:y Village Community Centre • February 14, 2023





Floodplains Dialogue: First Nations and Farmers in the Lower Fraser

On February 14, 2023, there was a gathering of guests from First Nations (8 First Nations, including community members and some staff), eight farm associations, as well as representatives from the First Nations Summit and BC Ministry of Agriculture; *approximately 50 people in total*.

Opening and welcome from Chief Robert Gladstone, Shxwhá:y Village. Opening remarks by Tribal Chief and Emergency Planning Secretariat (EPS) Chair Tyrone MacNeil. Facilitated by Jay Hope, Principal, Xixne Consulting and Dave Zehnder (Rancher). Technical support from the Lower Fraser Floodplains Coalition (LFFC).

The Invitation to the Dialogue

Flooding is a shared challenge: both agricultural and reserve lands in the Fraser valley are at high risk of inundation, and often the short and long term needs of farmers and First Nations are not met. This gathering was an opportunity to sit down together, break bread, and share personal experiences with flooding. It was a way to begin the process of listening, finding common ground and a new path forward, together, to move from disaster response to proactive planning and resilience in the floodplain. It was a first meeting, but not intended to be the last.



Takeaways from the Dialogue

What are the big challenges?

- We don't have a regional plan. We weren't prepared for the events of November 2021, and we weren't prepared for post-disaster recovery either.
- Climate is changing and extreme weather events will occur more frequently, increasing the unpredictability of the future.
- Existing diking system wasn't designed to manage current and future flood events, and there's no simple 'upgrade' or 'quick fix' that is affordable and effective.
- Due to where many reserves were placed, Lower Fraser Nations are at high risk of impacts from floods.
- Many farms are located in the floodplain, and with less protection than urban areas they are disproportionately affected by flooding.
- Salmon are cultural and food security for the First Nations of the Lower Fraser and their need for healthy, connected waterways isn't being addressed.
- Farmers share in the risks and uncertainty about how to prepare for the future.
- We aren't working together as a region.

What are the big opportunities?

- Our region is politically, ecologically and economically important, provincially and federally, and can attract big investments if we have a regional plan.
- Implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples offers a new legal landscape, and pathways for constructive collaboration.

- Multi-benefit flood management options are available, and will be especially effective if they are deployed strategically across the region.
- We can work together.

Learning from our history:

- The diking system we have today was largely put in place from the late 1800s to the early 1950s, based on the idea that it is possible to strictly control how water flows in the Lower Fraser region.
- November 2021 events show the consequences of dike failures and ultimately the limitations of relying on dikes alone.
- It is challenging to engineer all of the dikes (600+km) to a standard that will guarantee future safety, when climate change impacts are uncertain.
- We can decide how much and what kinds of risk we are willing to live with if we know what the risks are.
- We have more options, besides reliance on dikes, to keep our communities safe so that we aren't exposed to catastrophic failures.

What are additional options, besides relying on dikes alone, to reduce risk in the floodplain?

- Farmland Advantage has worked with farmers to develop a different way of managing flood risks using a payment for ecosystem services model.
- Riparian planting of flood resistant species has multiple benefits—reducing consequences of flooding, restoring ecology, and reducing erosion—and it's possible to have policies that enable farmers to be compensated for these practices.
- Floodplains by Design (FbD) is a public /private program funded mainly by the State of Washington that supports nature-based floodplain management.
- FbD projects are collaborative and incorporate flood protection, environmental restoration and agricultural values.
- Many examples now exist that show value of proactive investment vs. costly remediation.
- Participants noted that there would need to be some work on implementing these approaches in the Agricultural Land Reserve, given the regulatory framework.





A First Nations perspective on the floodplain (Councillor Eddie Gardner, Skwah First Nation):

- First Nations in the Lower Fraser are salmon people, salmon is food security for them.
- Salmon are facing many challenges, including out in the ocean, and we need to make a good home for them in the side channels, tributaries and sloughs of the Lower Fraser.
- Places like the Hope Slough offer opportunities for First Nations and farmers to work together on restoration and flood attenuation.
- In times of climate change, we need each other more than ever before.

A farmer's perspective on the floodplain (Holger Schwichtenberg):

- Farmers also see the land as generational, see their role in food security and want to keep it going.
- The November 2021 events were terrible but community spirit was strong.
- Everyone probably thought that what happened would have been impossible, but now understand it's not "if," but "when" it happens again.
- There is farmland in Agassiz that has stayed dry through various floods—it was identified as good land by First Nations many years ago based on the vegetation (e.g., cedar trees).

Discussing 5 Principles for Building Back Better, Together:

- We can't put the economy over the environment—there is a biodiversity crisis, represented in the lower Fraser through the salmon, and we need find creative solutions.
- If we don't work together we're not going to get anywhere.
- Let's find "and" approaches, instead of "or" approaches—don't leave anyone behind.
- Where do food security and farmers, and the farming economy, fit into the 5 principles?
- Provincial and federal agencies don't coordinate their permitting, and this makes nature-based work difficult.
- If First Nations and farmers can work together this can help make a case for action from federal and provincial governments.
- A fair deal for First Nations and farmers must consider financial impacts of flooding and resilience measures.

Ideas for Action

- Work that busts the siloes
 - More engagement like this February 14 meeting—include more provincial government representatives.
 - Bring in land developers and land development aspect generally.
 - There are impacts from upstream activities (water is coming down slopes faster than before): Forestry needs to be at the table.
 - Field trips together to see solutions but also to build deeper understanding of different perspectives.
- More specific analysis and education about limitations of existing approaches.
- Plug into existing programs (e.g., environmental farm plans) and create new ones as needed.
- Dredging rivers and waterways needs to be discussed.
- Identify locations where nature-based approaches could be explored.
- Look not just at a flood strategy, but a water/watershed strategy.
- Remember that need to account for sub-regional issues and conditions, and understand those.
- Need a plan with timelines and objectives, starting with a one-year plan.

Next Steps

We are planning to host the next Farmer and First Nations session in the fall. We intend this session to include a field tour of First Nations place names and farms doing resilience work. After the tour, we will continue dialogue to come up with an action plan based on suggestions from this gathering.

We are hosting the Lower Fraser Floodplains Forum on June 9, 2023, bringing together all four orders of government as well as representatives from agricultural associations to build on the five principles for working together in the Lower Fraser. The objectives are to start to design a roadmap for a region-wide approach to flood resilience, to identify what's working well, and how new provincial initiatives can be tailored to support relationship building and good work specific to our region.

The Lower Fraser Floodplains Coalition is open to ideas, collaboration, and partnerships with agricultural associations and First Nations to move this work forward. Please reach out to Dan Straker if interested in working with us to improve floodplains resilience for farmers and First Nations and to participate in our ongoing initiatives.

Members of the Lower Fraser Floodplains Coalition:

