

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context for a Plan



The Somass River Estuary, at the south end of the Alberni Valley, lies at the mouth of the Somass River, the second largest river on Vancouver Island. Subject to alteration from agricultural, industrial, water management and development pressures, only a small portion of the original estuary remains relatively undisturbed. This low-lying terrain includes mudflats, salt marshes, meadow-type vegetation, shrubs and a few small trees. The intertidal, marine and river portions of the estuary together are of major importance for fisheries, waterfowl and botanical values.

Attempts to preserve the Somass Estuary date back at least as far as the 1970's. After a number of unsuccessful attempts, the Pacific Estuary Conservation Program (coordinated by Ducks Unlimited) purchased a 100-hectare parcel in the Somass Estuary in 2001. Efforts are underway to transfer another 100 hectares of non-navigable water south of Johnstone Island from Transport Canada to Environment Canada.

Once Ducks Unlimited completed their purchase, it became evident that a management plan was required for the Somass Estuary, and that the planning process should involve partners from all levels of government, including First Nations, the community and industry. Discussions were therefore initiated with key government and non-government interest groups, and the Somass Estuary Management Plan Steering Committee (SC) was formed. A planning process initiated in February 2003 included numerous SC meetings and two public meetings.

The study area boundary includes all intertidal and marine lands, and associated land within the estuary that is in public ownership. Other privately-owned areas with resources that are important to the functioning of the estuary are termed the Key Adjacent Properties. The plan also recognizes and addresses activities throughout the watershed that have significant impacts on the estuary.

Vision



The vision is to maintain and enhance the productivity and diversity of the natural resources in the estuary with consideration for social and economic returns and benefits to the community as a whole. The plan will provide a balanced approach to the future management and use of the Somass River estuary, recognizing that it is one of the greatest natural assets in the region.

Objectives



The following are the primary objectives of the SEMP:

1. Reduce and eventually stop the degradation of existing habitats, and in particular stop the loss and degradation of the high value habitat types.
2. Maintain and improve where possible the existing habitat base in the estuary to support viable and productive populations of fish, wildlife and plants, including invertebrates.
3. Maintain a diversity of productive habitats within the Somass River Estuary in order to sustain and improve the estuarine ecosystem.
4. Work cooperatively to expand the size of the area subject to management in order to protect the ecological integrity of the estuary, through land acquisitions, conservation covenants, stewardship agreements or management agreements on adjacent lands where possible.
5. Respect and promote awareness of the cultural and heritage values of the plan area.
6. Ensure that the water quantity from the Somass River and other watercourses can support and enhance fish and wildlife populations and habitat.
7. Work with others on management of all discharges in order to continue to improve the water quality in the estuary.
8. Work with other agencies to ensure that new development respects and protects the ecological integrity of the estuary in addition to supporting appropriate economic objectives.
9. Provide educational, recreational and interpretive opportunities for the public, including wildlife viewing, provided that the use is compatible with protection of the environmental values.
10. Provide opportunities for scientific inventory and research to establish baselines and to further our understanding of this ecological system.
11. Work with other agencies to support water-dependent industrial use while addressing the other objectives of this plan.
12. Promote monitoring of the health of the estuary over time to ensure that management strategies are having the desired beneficial effects.



Natural Resources and Human Activities



The plan provides an overview of the vegetation, birds, fish and wildlife in the estuary. Habitat types and features are mapped, described, and evaluated. The issues with respect to natural resources are identified, along with possible opportunities for addressing the issues.

The human activities portion of the plan provides an overview of First Nations and post contact history. Existing land and water uses and human impacts are described. The issues with respect to human activities are identified, along with possible opportunities for addressing these issues.

Management Strategies

The management strategies of the SEMP are provided under three separate headings:

- the designation plan, which identifies where certain uses should occur, with accompanying objectives and guidelines,
- management strategies related to specific topics, and
- management strategies related to specific locations.

The designation plan identifies proposed designation categories (see section 4.1 and Map 7) that include various levels and forms of conservation, agriculture, commercial, marine, industry, recreation and environmental restoration.

The following table provides a summary of the management strategies by topic and location, along with:

- their relative priority (high, moderate or low),
- proposed timing (short term = within 2 years, medium term = 2 to 5 years, long term = > 5 to 10 years), and
- lead agency proposed, subject to change by the SEMC. The lead agency will be responsible for coordinating and managing the activity. Where more than one agency is indicated, they could cooperate together to lead the project or select one agency as the lead. Lead agencies are expected to consult with other members of the SEMC as appropriate. The lead agency will not necessarily be responsible for funding.



Management Strategies by Topic

Key to Priority Abbreviations	
H	High
M	Moderate
L	Low
Key to Timing Abbreviations	
S	Short Term (< 2 years)
M	Medium Term (2 – 5 yrs)
L	Long Term (>5 – 10 yrs)

Key to Lead Agency Abbreviations	
ACRD	Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District
ASA	Alberni Sportsman's Association
AVEA	Alberni Valley Enhancement Association
AVN	Alberni Valley Naturalists
DU	Ducks Unlimited Canada
CWS	Canadian Wildlife Service
City	City of Port Alberni
DFO	Department of Fisheries and Oceans
HFN	Hupacasath First Nation
MWLAP	Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection
Norske	NorskeCanada
PAPA	Port Alberni Port Authority
TFN	Tseshah First Nation
Weyer	Weyerhaeuser

Recommendation		Priority	Timing	Lead Agency
Fish and Wildlife				
F1.	Develop a detailed habitat restoration and enhancement plan focused on fish and wildlife habitats, and including potential projects and their priority and phasing based on environmental benefits, and costs of planning and construction (see section 4.2).	H	L	DU, DFO, AVEA
F2.	Support initiatives to study, protect and enhance fisheries resources, particularly sturgeon use and chum spawning.	M	S	DFO, AVEA
F3.	Initiate surveys on small mammal and butterfly use of the estuary to establish a baseline for future monitoring.	M	S	MWLAP, AVN
Vegetation				
V1.	Prepare an invasive plant species management plan, including potential projects and their priority and phasing based on environmental benefits, and costs of planning and construction (see section 4.2).	H	S	DU, AVN, AVEA
V2.	Protect Oregon Ash.	H	M	City, RD
V3.	Initiate surveys of blue- and red-listed plant species occurrence and distribution.	L	M	MWLAP, AVN
V4.	If tidal marsh habitat is extended per F2, monitor and enhance vegetation.	L	L	DU
Culture and Heritage				
C1.	Support archaeological assessments as required.	H	M	HFN, TFN
C2.	Determine what measures are required to protect archaeological sites.	H	M	HFN, TFN
C3.	Identify and assist in supporting First Nations' needs related to estuary management.	M	S	HFN, TFN
C4.	Support cultural and heritage tourism opportunities in the estuary that are in harmony with the conservation values	H	S	City, HFN
Industry				
I1.	Remove log debris in environmentally sensitive areas if environmentally valuable and feasible, with testing first.	L	M	PAPA, DU

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H High
M Moderate
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Key to Timing Abbreviations

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Recommendation		Priority	Timing	Lead Agency
I2.	Adopt best management practices for log handling, storage and salvage.	H	S	PAPA, Norske, Weyer
I3.	Continue to monitor the health of the harbour bottom, and mitigate the effects of the historical deposits (fibre mat) if necessary.	L	L	Norske
I4.	Review environmental protection measures on upland commercial and industrial property and manage to prevent impacts.	H	S	RD
I5.	Assume management and operation of the dam and weir.	L	M	DFO
I6.	Work with the responsible agencies to investigate and mitigate the impacts of leachates from the landfill on fish and plants.	L	M	DFO, City, RD
Other Land Uses				
L1.	Halt the reduction of riparian habitat and restore if possible. Explore Development Permit as a tool.	H	S	City
L2.	Develop education programs for the public regarding impacts on riparian habitat.	H	S	City
L3.	Implement best management practices for stormwater management.	M	S	City
L4.	Develop infrastructure maintenance practices with ecological benefits.	M	S	City, RD
Recreation and Access				
R1.	Designate environmentally sensitive areas where public recreation is not encouraged.	H	S	DU
R2.	Develop a public recreational system with support facilities and amenities.	H	S	RD, City
R3.	Publicize hunting regulations at key access points, and identify City boundaries.	H	S	MWLAP, RD, City
R4.	Enforce hunting regulations, potentially through a Compliance/Enforcement agreement among key agencies.	H	S	MWLAP, RCMP, City, CWS
R5.	Identify and publicize a new official name for lands to be managed within this plan.	M	S	RD, City
R6.	Develop, publicize and enforce a dog management plan.	H	S	RD, City
R7.	Work to obtain off-road pedestrian links to	M	M	City

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Recommendation	Priority	Timing	Lead Agency
connect Clutesi Haven Marina and adjacent park, Harbour Quay, and Maritime Museum.			
R8. Develop an interpretive and education plan for the estuary.	M	S	RD, City
R9. Consider an additional trail in the future east along the Somass River from the proposed boat haulout to a viewing tower.	L	L	DU
R10. In consultation with the landowner, consider an additional trail in the future along the north edge of the wooded bluff.	L	L	Weyer

Management Strategies by Location

Recommendation	Priority	Timing	Lead Agency
Somass River			
Minimize dredging, and sedimentation associated with dredging.	H	S	PAPA
Review the timing windows for dredging to minimize impacts on fish.	H	S	DFO
If Clutesi Marina were ever decommissioned, explore other options for reestablishment of the marina in order to restore habitat.	L	L	City
Ducks Unlimited Lands			
Create additional side channels for juvenile fish rearing. Plant riparian shrub vegetation.	M	M	DFO
Remove large log accumulations if environmentally feasible and valuable, with testing first.	M	M	DU, PAPA
Plant and support the establishment of a group of Douglas-fir trees near the existing tree.	M	S	DU, AVN
Manage the upland field to maintain some old field/upland meadow habitat. Provide interpretive signage on the role of agriculture in wildlife management. Clearly delineate the haying area in the field.	H	S	DU
Effluent Lagoons			
Ensure the reeds around the lagoons are not disturbed during bird breeding season (mid March to mid August).	H	S	Norske, City

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Recommendation	Priority	Timing	Lead Agency
If the effluent lagoons were ever decommissioned in the future, explore other options for reestablishment of effluent and sewage treatment.	L	L	City
Explore opportunities for improving habitat around the existing lagoons.	M	M	City
Take measures to remove the plastic from the sewage lagoon.	H	M	City
Develop management strategies that negate the need for increasing the extent of the lagoons in the future.	L	L	City
Mudflats, Intertidal and Near Tidal Area			
Restore vegetation on degraded mudflat areas in phases per recommendation F3, with monitoring to evaluate the success of each restoration effort.	M	L	DFO
Marine Area			
Review all regulatory guidelines to determine if adequate considerations are being given to the environmental conservation and protection.	M	M	DFO
Continue the Port Alberni Paper Mill Environmental Effects Monitoring program.	H	S	Norske
Riparian Area			
Work with agencies to protect the riparian vegetation.	H	S	City
Develop public education information regarding the sensitivity of the resources in these areas and the importance of staying on trails.	M	S	City
Poplar Plantation (Key Adjacent Properties)			
Work with the existing owner of the poplar plantation in the Key Adjacent Properties and secure or manage the land to restore the area to an improved ecological condition after poplar harvest.	H	M	DU Norske
If the above is accomplished, implement the relevant management strategies (by topic) in this area.	M	L	DU
Forested Patches (Key Adjacent Properties)			
Work with the existing owner of the upland and riparian forested areas in the Key Adjacent Properties and secure or manage the land to protect its existing fish, wildlife and vegetation values.	H	M	DU Weyer
If the above is accomplished, implement the relevant management strategies (by topic) in this area.	M	L	DU

Monitoring Plan



The monitoring plan provides a framework and guidelines for a comprehensive and integrated biophysical monitoring program. The overall goal of the monitoring program is to assess the long-term health and integrity of the Somass Estuary, and the success of habitat restoration and enhancement initiatives. The program will collect and build upon monitoring efforts that are ongoing.

Goals, actions and potential partnerships are provided to guide monitoring of river flow, water quality, vegetation, fish, wildlife, recreation use, and impacts from industrial use.

Implementation Plan

The SEMP will be implemented by the same agencies and interest groups involved in the preparation of the plan; they will form the Somass Estuary Management Committee (SEMC). Implementation of the SEMP will not require any new jurisdictions or bylaws. To ensure that the plan is implemented, the SEMC members will endorse the plan and work cooperatively together to implement the provisions of the plan in accordance with each member's existing jurisdiction.

The SEMP is “without prejudice” to the rights of First Nations.

The role of the SEMC will include the following responsibilities:

- Forge partnerships and develop Memoranda of Understanding,
- Agree to promote and abide by consensus-based decision-making,
- Oversee the monitoring component of the SEMP,
- Share information about proposed projects within the plan area,
- Seek out and secure funding for capital projects and operations, and establish budgets,
- Commit to cooperative management of funding for SEMP implementation,
- Evaluate and update the plan on an ongoing basis, and
- Ensure that the plans and policies within their jurisdiction remain consistent with the SEMP, e.g. OCPs, Port Authority's Port Master Plan.