What We Heard – Engagement Summary

ACRD Agricultural Water Plan

June 2025

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Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District

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Land Acknowledgement

Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District serves the communities of the central and west coast of Vancouver Island located on the ḥahahuuƚi (traditional territories) of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nations of Ahousaht, Ditidaht, Hesquiaht, Hupačasath, Huu-ay-aht, Tla-o-qui-aht, Toquaht, c̓išaaʔatḥ (Tseshaht), Uchucklesaht, and Yuułuʔiłʔatḥ. Since time immemorial, Nuu-chah-nulth Peoples have walked gently in these places where we live, work, learn, and play. We are committed to building relationships based in honour and ʔiisaak (respect), and we offer our gratitude.

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ALBERNI-CLAYOQUOT REGIONAL DISTRICT

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Acronyms

ACRD	Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District
ADC	Agricultural Development Committee
AF	Ministry of Agriculture and Food
AFI	Alberni Farmers' Institute
AWP	Agricultural Water Plan
CAWS	Council for Agricultural Water Supply
FSEP	Food Security Emergency Plans
IAP2	International Association for Public Participation
QEP	Qualified Environmental Professionals
WLRS	Ministry of Water, Lands and Resource Stewardship

Figure 1. Water along the Log Train Trail.

1.0 Introduction

The Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District (ACRD) is committed to engaging residents and community members across the region in meaningful and robust ways. Through the regional Engagement Policy, the ACRD commits to creating a culture that values open, two-way communication between government and community, active listening, and sharing of accurate information.

The development an Agricultural Water Plan (AWP) for the Alberni Valley was based on comprehensive engagement with First Nations, agricultural leaders, livestock producers, hobby farmers, and agencies across the region. Engagement activities aided the consulting team in understanding the local context, including the size and scale of agriculture and livestock operations, current and future irrigation practices, and the rules and regulations surrounding agricultural water use. The engagement for this project occurred in parallel to that of the Alberni Valley Food Security Emergency Plan (FSEP), ensuring that engagement activities were streamlined and efficient.

1.1 Engagement Objectives

The consulting team follows high standards related to engagement, which includes the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) engagement goals and spectrum. The following IAP2 goals were used to guide public engagement activities associated with the project:

- **Inform**: To provide balanced and objective information to assist the community in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions in agriculture emergency preparedness, response and recovery and food security. This will include stakeholder meetings and open houses.
- **Consult**: To obtain feedback and input from the community on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions through the project process. This will include soliciting feedback from the community in early phases of drafting the plan and assessments.
- **Involve**: to work closely with the community throughout the planning process to ensure concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. This will include ground-truthing the materials.
- **Collaborate**: To work with stakeholders throughout the planning process on each aspect of the project to find common ground and identify preferred solutions and methods. Collaboration will also occur with the engagement efforts and activities being facilitated as part of the AWP, to reduce engagement fatigue across stakeholders and streamline engagement activities between projects.

2.0 Engagement Activities

Several methods of engagement were deployed to build understanding of issues, opportunities, and constraints regarding regional and agricultural water supply and demand. The following section details the chronological activities that were undertaken.

2.1 Meetings and Interviews

August 2024

- August 20th: The consulting team and ACRD staff presented to the Agricultural Development Committee (ADC) to introduce the AWP project and provide an overview of the project's objectives and process.

September 2024

- September 5th: The consulting team met with City of Port Alberni staff to discuss the project.
- September 5th: The consulting team attended the Alberni District Fall Fair. A booth was set up with information about the AWP and a brochure was distributed providing information about becoming involved in the process.
- September 5th: The consulting team and ACRD staff met and presented to the Tseshaht First Nation Council. The presentation introduced the agricultural water plan project to Chief and Council and provided information on the project's objectives and process. The Nation was invited to provide input and feedback on water usage throughout their traditional territory as the project unfolded.
- September 17th: The project was presented at the ACRD Emergency Network Meeting.

October 2024

- Twice in October, members of the consulting team met with staff from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (AF) to discuss using the Agricultural Water Demand Model to run various future agricultural buildout scenarios for the Alberni Valley. This was the start of a process that unfolded over several months and included GIS analysis by both ACRD and AF.

November 2024

- November 7th: The project team hosted a workshop with the Council for Agricultural Water Supply (CAWS). This workshop introduced the AWP project, reviewed existing work and discussed the future needs and options for water supply for agriculture in the Alberni Valley.
- November 9th: The project team hosted a workshop with the Alberni Farmers' Institute (AFI). This workshop introduced the AWP, reviewed existing work and discussed the future needs and options for water supply for agriculture in the Alberni Valley.
- November 15th: The consulting team and ACRD staff met and presented to the Hupačasath First Nation Council. The presentation introduced the agricultural water

plan project to Chief and Council and provided information on the project's objectives and process. The Nation was invited to provide input and feedback on water usage throughout their traditional territory as the project unfolded.

- November 20th: The project team presented the project to the Alberni Valley Food Security Society Board of Directors.

March 2025

- March 12th: The project team met with the administrator for Cherry Creek Waterworks to discuss the AWP within the context of regional water infrastructure.

April 2025

- April 10th and 11th: The project team attended many in-person meetings with representatives of the regional water system and with local farmers. This included:
    - Presenting the draft AWP at an AFI meeting. Feedback on the draft recommendations was discussed.
    - Tour of the Log Train Trail, which runs along the base of the Beaufort mountains, from which adjacent farmers access their agricultural water from springs and snowmelt.
    - Tour of the McKenzie Road Pump Station
    - Meeting with the administrator of Cherry Creek Waterworks to discuss the Improvement District's water infrastructure and how it is accessed and used by Cherry Creek Electoral Area farmers.
    - Self-guided tour of the Catalyst / Domtar pump station and water distribution system.
    - Farm tours to examine dugout and water storage infrastructure currently in place and how it can be improved to meet farmers' needs.
- April 28th: A member of the project team met with the Regional Hydrologist for the Vancouver Island Region of Ministry of Water, Lands and Resource Stewardship (WLRS) to discuss groundwater.

May 2025

- May 15th: The project team met with Domtar / Catalyst Paper to explore opportunities for collaboration about water infrastructure and supply and licensing.
- May 20th: The project team met on two occasions with staff at WLRS to discuss water licensing considerations for the agricultural water supply options.

June 2025

- June 5th: The project team met with City of Port Alberni staff to discuss water infrastructure for food processing and agriculture.
- June 9th: A member of the project team met with BC Assessment to discuss "Developing Farm Status" and water licensing.

2.2 Surveys

October 2024 – December 2024 (14 responses)

A survey was created for the agricultural community regarding the AWP. Hard copies of the survey were distributed at the November 9th AFI meeting and the November 7th CAWS meeting. A link to an online version of the survey was also distributed online to the farming and livestock community in the Alberni Valley. A total of 14 responses were collected.

Figure 2. Catalyst / Domtar water storage located near Sproat Lake.

3.0 Engagement Results

The results from all meetings, interviews and the survey are summarized into the two tables below. Table 1 outlines the general key themes, gaps/challenges and opportunities related to agricultural water heard from all engagement activities. Table 2 (page 12) provides a summary of feedback received specific to the six water supply options presented at engagement events. The discussions with First Nation communities will be reported out in the final report once the communities have had a chance to review and provide feedback.

Table 1 Key themes, gaps, challenges and opportunities uncovered during engagement.

Key Themes	Gaps/Challenges	Opportunities
Water Supply and Storage	• Farmers face challenges accessing consistent water supplies, especially during droughts. • Dugouts are not always a viable storage option, and licensing regulations are complex. • Small farms may benefit from underground water storage but this may not be financially viable. • Cisterns are often a more affordable option but use is limited due to a lack of space and the overall volume of water required to irrigate crops. Better suited to gardens. • Forestry activities in the upland areas (particularly in the Beaufort Range) are seen to have impacts on water availability (excessive / fast runoff after rainfall events) and quality (sedimentation). • Climate change is expected to increase demand for irrigation in summer months, requiring long-term solutions. • Groundwater data is scarce and aquifer health isn't monitored, making it difficult to explore this as an option for irrigation.	• Producers feel that larger-scale water storage infrastructure, such as collection of water draining from the Beaufort Range into reservoirs, could be developed. • Encourage dugout construction. • Partnering with First Nations could help access grants for infrastructure. • Continue support for conservation practices, drip irrigation, and tailored water budgets to help optimize water use. • Support irrigation and water management workshops. • Investigate the feasibility of using treated wastewater from the City of Port Alberni for irrigation.

Infrastructure	• Some proposed alternative irrigation water sources may not be as feasible due to cost of upgrades needed and environmental concerns. • While water is critical, farmers are equally concerned about access to cold storage, butchers, abattoirs, and feed storage. • The lack of water infrastructure reduces overall resilience and limits small and mid-sized producers. Some farmland is underutilized due to a lack of water supply and infrastructure for irrigation. • Producers with irrigation infrastructure are unsure if their current water supply will keep up during peak demand and under stressed water conditions in the future.	• Ensure farmers have "shovel-ready" plans to access funding when available. • Fire prevention could be used as an alternative rationale for water storage infrastructure, with fire-mapping supporting funding applications or exemptions. • Prioritize cold storage, processing facilities, and abattoirs alongside water supply improvements.
Regulations, Permits, and Licensing	• There is a lack of clear guidance for building and licensing infrastructure such as tanks and dugouts. • Permitting requirements for irrigation projects can delay projects by over two years. • There is confusion over whether liability falls on the Qualified Environmental Professionals (QEP) or the farmer when designing and building dugouts. • Only farms with farm tax status qualify for water infrastructure funding through the EFP-BMP program administered by IAF, creating a chicken-or-egg dilemma for new farmers who need water access to grow but can't access funding until established.	• Advocate to WLRS to streamline the permitting process and clarifying liability would reduce delays. • Host workshops on farm water storage and licensing (e.g., led by AFI). • Permits for dugouts are only required if surface water interacts with groundwater, which can fast-track some cases, but the burden of proof falls on the producer and there are no clear design guidelines the province will accept to allow immediate construction. • Work with AF to develop a resource guide for building and licensing dugouts to simplify the process. Advocate to AF and IAF about opening up eligibility requirements for EFP/BMP for new

		entrants who have not yet achieved farm tax status but have Developing Farm Status.
Producer Engagement, Advocacy and Knowledge Sharing	• Agriculture needs consistent representation in watershed planning discussions to ensure the sector is considered. • Education on water management (e.g. dugout workshops) is needed for producers. • The public lacks understanding of local food production and agricultural water priorities.	• Include agricultural representation in watershed planning. • Increasing AFI's capacity to represent farmers and centralizing advocacy to strengthen the sector's voice. • Hosting workshops on water management and licensing, creating resource guides, and increasing public education campaigns could support both farmer knowledge and community buy-in for agriculture-focused planning.

Table 2 Overview of water supply options and gaps/challenges and feasibility considerations heard during engagement.

Water Supply Options	Gaps/Challenges	Feasibility Considerations
1. Reactivation of the McKenzie Road Pump Station (Non-Potable)	• High costs of renovation or rebuilding, labor requirements, and water licensing complexities; existing piping would need upgrades to handle larger water volumes. • Water treatment upgrades would be needed to bring water quality into compliance with Island Health, even if using it for irrigation, if using the same distribution system as potable water.	• Need to assess where the highest concentration of unirrigated ALR land is to justify the investment. • Would need the water to be piped to storage facilities (such as the tall green tanks on Beaver Creek Road) because it would not be feasible for farmers to drive to the pump station with water trucks to access water there. • The pump is located in an area between private properties and can be difficult to access.
2. Creation of an Irrigation District (Alberni Valley-wide)	• Would require significant infrastructure investment and licensing would likely be complicated. • Governance challenges; would require a dedicated governance board; provincial government is not keen on new irrigation districts. • Uncertainty about long-term responsibility and funding required for establishment and maintenance. • May need to involve Mosaic and Ministry of Forests as at least a portion of the water is coming from areas of the mountains that have been part of forestry activities.	• Would need to determine how best to collect the runoff water from the Beaufort mountain ranges along the Log Train Trail. This could include ditching for conveyance and/or collection ponds for storage. • Likely insufficient water runoff from the Beaufort range to provide sufficient water during high use periods (summer) without water storage. • Not a strong business case for this option due to high costs of establishment vs returns.
3. Development of a New ACRD Agricultural/ Emergency Water Supply Service	• Previous experience (e.g. Cherry Creek Improvement District) suggests independent water services struggle with high borrowing costs.	• Water could also be used for wildfire mitigation, opening grant funding opportunities. • Questions about whether ACRD would provide reduced rate to farmers for water use.

	• Service establishment would likely require a referendum; long-term sustainability is a concern. • Public perception of additional fees collected by the ACRD for farming may be challenge.	• Would need to determine which agricultural areas of the ACRD would be the target of the service. • Would require oversight by the ACRD or a Committee.
4. Redesignation of the Stamp River Water License for Emergency Use for agriculture during droughts and/or wildfires	• Environmental & First Nations Considerations, local water committee is advocating for minimum 15cm/s flows Sin Somass/Stamp River watershed for fish and salmon habitat year-round. • Even for emergency use, delivery systems would need investment.	• ACRD already holds unused water under an existing license, which could be repurposed for agriculture or emergencies. Greater feasibility if water is allowed to be used anytime, not just during droughts. • Potential to explore 'water users community' water licence for agricultural water use.
5. Regional Water Storage for Emergency Use During Droughts	• This would be a larger infrastructure project with significant investment needs and would likely need to be governed by the ACRD or a proxy committee. • In addition to licensing, there may be a need to purchase or lease land close to the water source to construct storage. • Challenges around flow levels from some sources and infrastructure like power supply and establishing new pumps and piping.	• Site Selection: Options include Elsie Lake (hydro dam), Great Central Lake, or using water licenses held by Domtar to move water to storage near agricultural lands. • Often easier from a licensing perspective to expand to an area without a current license then to add allocation to existing license. • Unused water from Domtar's licence would need to be transferred to ACRD (partial transfer appurtenance) and new piping required if water is not treated. Further conversations with Domtar staff would be required.
6. Farm-Based Water Use & Conservation (Dugouts, Storage)	• Regulatory, licensing and compliance complexity and challenges exist but are not insurmountable. • Farmers require guidance on how to navigate the permitting process. • Dugouts and cisterns may work for small areas of irrigation but not larger forage operations.	• Low-Cost, High-Impact Option: Seen as the most immediate and feasible solution. However, the ACRD would have the least amount of control over implementation as it would be up to individual producers.

	• High costs associated with hiring QEPs to assess dugout feasibility and design them.	• Possibility of working with WLRS to determine feasibility of diverting ephemeral streams into on-farm dugouts. • Possibility to obtain a water licence with Developing Farm Status. • Some farms have successfully accessed grants for water storage. • Less feasible for irrigating forage crops, compared to vegetables or livestock watering, due to size of dugout that would be required. • Most applicable to areas that don't have access to surface water or potential for wells.

4.0 Next Steps

Throughout the Summer of 2025 the assessment of the water supply options will continue and additional engagement will occur as needed for a deeper analysis of the options. The final Plan will be drafted by Fall 2025 and presented to agricultural communities and First Nations for opportunity to provide feedback.

Figure 3. Dugout in the Alberni Valley.