

Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services
c/o Parliamentary Committees Office
Room 224, Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4 Canada

Monday, 27 September 2021

To the Members of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services:

In a year of responding and adapting to tough challenges, there are success stories to celebrate and replicate. Part of the \$1-billion StrongerBC economic recovery package, the Healthy Watersheds Initiative (HWI), is a \$27-million investment in 61 community-driven watershed restoration projects at 219 work sites across the province. It's an investment Hon. George Heyman, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, has described as "successful beyond our wildest dreams."

I'm writing today to recommend the Province invest \$50 million to support the Healthy Watersheds Initiative for two additional years, providing an important bridge for jobs, relationships, habitat protection, and program design as the Watershed Security Strategy and Fund are finalized.

In just eight months, the Healthy Watersheds Initiative has shown that investing in watersheds is a triple win that creates jobs and boosts local economies, protects drinking water and restores critical salmon habitat, and strengthens relationships with First Nations and Indigenous partners:

- **Jobs, training, and local economies.** With funding from HWI, project proponents have supported 697 jobs (and counting) and trained workers in Indigenous and western techniques for fish and water sampling, water monitoring, field safety, land management, and more. These are good jobs that are providing paid employment and work experience to young workers and recent graduates, women, and Indigenous people – demographic groups most impacted by COVID-19. Because watershed work is place-based by nature, dollars invested in watershed work stay within the community as project proponents hire and procure locally.
- **Reconciliation, relationships, and UNDRIP.** Healthy watersheds and ecosystems are critical to the exercise of Indigenous rights to hunting, fishing, gathering, ceremony, and land stewardship. Recognizing that, HWI was designed to support the implementation of B.C.'s *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*. Importantly, nearly a third (31%) of HWI projects are managed by a First Nation or Indigenous-led organization and three-quarters (73%) of project teams are confirming or strengthening existing relationships with a First Nation.



- **Ecosystem restoration, salmon habitat, and climate action.** HWI projects are restoring the freshwater ecosystems we all rely on. In turn, healthy rivers, lakes, and wetlands absorb stormwater and reduce flood risks, buffer communities from droughts and wildfires, and provide habitat for salmon, fish, and other species at risk. Through monitoring, mapping, and traditional knowledge keeping, HWI project teams are collecting the data communities need to plan for climate adaptation and mitigation.

Last year, the Province pledged to develop a Watershed Security Fund and Strategy, a much-needed long-term support for fresh water. An extension to the Healthy Watersheds Initiative is the bridge we need between the successes we've seen in 2021 and the ambition we want by 2023.

Together, we've seen what \$27 million a year in support for watersheds can do. On behalf of our partners and project teams, I'm writing to strongly recommend a two-year, \$50-million extension to the Healthy Watersheds Initiative in order to retain experienced workers, continue building and strengthening relationships with Indigenous communities and partners, and maintain momentum on projects that are restoring salmon habitat and protecting fresh water.

The Real Estate Foundation of BC, Watersheds BC, our Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle, and our partners in the watershed community have spent the last year building the operational infrastructure, relationships, and knowledge needed to support watershed restoration and conservation projects.

There is much to be gained by making another commitment, and much to be lost by waiting until 2023.

Our partnership with the Province of B.C. and, in particular, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, has been invaluable in building the progress we've seen so far. We're ready to continue working with the Province and the freshwater community to invest in healthy watersheds and demonstrate the many benefits that can be unlocked through a long-term Watershed Security Strategy and Fund.

Sincerely,

Mark Gifford
CEO, Real Estate Foundation of BC

Attached:

HWI one-pager | [An investment in watersheds, reconciliation, and local economies](#) | 22 September 2021

HWI interim report | [Our water, our future: Interim report on job creation, watershed restoration, reconciliation, and climate action](#) | 30 August 2021