

For Immediate Release
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The Cowichan Lake weir goes into operation Monday April 21st, 2008.

LAKE COWICHAN: Catalyst Paper Crofton Division, which operates the Cowichan weir, met with representatives of the water management committee of the Cowichan Stewardship Round Table (CSRT) this past week to determine the weir's start up date this spring.

Catalyst Paper operates the weir under direction of the Ministry of Environment (MoE) in accordance with established regulations and license terms to maintain stream flows for fish, First Nations, water licence holders and recreational users. When lake levels drop in spring the weir's control gates are gradually closed to retain spring runoff.

Despite a good snow pack there has been very little rain this spring meaning the current level is 38 cm below the weir's normal full supply level. Weir operating guidelines advise not allowing the lake level to drop below the crest by mid April in a year with an average snow pack and to consider starting up the weir when the lake level is 17 cm below the crest.

The water management committee based its decision to begin operation this coming Monday on a number of factors including the lake level, snow pack information, weather forecasts and Cowichan River flow requirements at this time of year. Committee Chair, Michelle Vessey (Catalyst Paper Crofton Division Manager, Environment and Technical Development), said an April 21st startup is a conservative approach given the above average snow pack situation. "However, it will ensure that we capture the snowmelt and don't get into a situation where low spring rainfall would cause us to be below full storage level come the beginning of summer."

The weir will reduce the lake's outflow from the current 33 cubic meters per second (cms) to 25 cms over two to three days. The committee's recommendation has been approved by John Baldwin, Deputy Water Manager, MoE, Vancouver Island Region.

Vessey said there is no reason for lakefront property owners to be concerned. "If we get a deluge of rain we will spill (water from the weir) to keep the lake level at the crest; operation of the weir will not cause a risk of local flooding."

Starting Monday weir operators will also be on site at the boat lock 24/7, ensuring boat passage in and out of the lake is not hindered.

Jack Peake, the mayor of the Town of Lake Cowichan supports the action. "It's anticipated a slow melt will mean less water in the lake this spring. The move is necessary in order to maintain a reasonable flow to support the ecology, recreational activities and to meet the demands of residential users."

The water management committee was struck in 2003 during a severe drought on the Cowichan. Its membership includes all key sectors from senior government agencies, First Nations, local government, non-government organizations and private citizens. The committee has continued to meet, as required, to review in-season water supply conditions and recommend specific management actions to the provincial Water Stewardship Division for approval.



The CSRT supports implementation of the Cowichan Basin Water Management Plan (CBWMP) as a preeminent step needed to conserve Cowichan salmon, steelhead and trout resources.

The timing of this year's weir startup also considered juvenile salmon and steelhead migration from the river to the ocean, a concern raised by the BC Wildlife Federation.

Newly elected BCWF Vancouver Island Region President, Ted Brookman, has sat on the committee since its inception several years ago. "We (BCWF) fully support this forum where everyone in the community from agriculture to eco-tourism is represented." He added, "We can play a role in addressing climate change and the CBWMP is a proactive measure in addressing conservation issues."

Vessey commends the diligence of the committee and its effort to establish a strategic operating plan. "We need a Cowichan Basin Water Management Plan (CBWMP) and water management committee to ensure a broad spectrum of the community is represented and that a long term water management approach is implemented. We encourage public participation to assist with in-season recommendations to MoE."

A major partner of the CSRT, Living Rivers – Georgia Basin/Vancouver Island (LR-GB/VI) is supporting implementation of the comprehensive water management plan as a critical response to climate change threats to the Cowichan's water/fish resources. Craig Wightman (Senior Biologist, LR-GB/VI) said the provincially funded Living Rivers Program has committed 70-thousand dollars to actions supportive of improved Cowichan water management in 2008. "Living Rivers is also attempting to facilitate important breakthroughs in the resource management field, with an emphasis on adaptation to climate change. Pilot water governance models (at the regional or community level), as recommended by the CBWMP, are consistent with this strategic objective."

The CBWMP was developed over three years based on significant public input and scientific analysis. It is intended to guide water managers to ensure there is sufficient water for human and ecological needs in the face of a growing population and climate change. Ultimately, it is hoped that a multi-stakeholder Cowichan Basin Water Advisory Council will receive authority from the Province to make local water management decisions without the requirement for more senior government intervention and approvals. The Cowichan Basin is widely considered to be a leading candidate for pilot water governance delegation from the Province, given water issues are at the forefront of the public agenda.

Endorsement and implementation of the CBWMP's 89 recommendations will be the subject of a government to government "Water Summit" later this spring involving the Cowichan Valley Regional District Board directors and officials from MoE, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Catalyst Paper Corp. and Cowichan Tribes. The Cowichan Valley Regional District has no management authority for water but has provided substantial funding and administrative support for the Cowichan Basin water planning process in recent years.

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