

BC Wildlife Federation Response to 'Together for Wildlife'

Below is a response to the British Columbia government's "Together for Wildlife" document. Overall, the BC Wildlife Federation (BCWF) is disappointed in the trajectory of this process, the lack of transparency, broken trust, and government's failure to commit to do what it said it would do. Currently, the BCWF sees no clear pathway from the 'Together for Wildlife' document to landscape level changes that will benefit wildlife and their habitats.

Before and after the last provincial election, the current government of British Columbia stated:

"British Columbia's biodiversity, fish and wildlife populations and the habitat which they depend are under threat due to lack of funding, government cuts to staff and ineffective policies (BC NDP, 2017, p.59)"

First, there have been neither meaningful actions, nor for the most part, any resulting positive changes in the status of wildlife populations or habitat over the 32 months since the last provincial election. To the contrary, habitat loss via unsustainable natural resource extraction and a lack of land use planning have continued to exacerbate wildlife declines across the province. Several wildlife populations across the province of British Columbia are now at record lows, and in further decline, and the provincial government has done nothing but document this decline.

While the number of threats to habitat and wildlife goes up, the provincial budget goes up, and yet the proportion of dollars for natural resource management goes down. The budget for the Fish and Wildlife Branch has declined from 0.64% of the provincial budget in 1954; government funding for the Fish and Wildlife Branch is now likely less than 0.04% of the provincial budget, a change of 93%. The BCWF is aware of ongoing budget cuts and hiring freezes within both the FLNRORD and the Ministry of Environment (MoE), changes which government has not made the public aware of. This provincial government may be spending proportionally fewer dollars of the provincial budget on taking care of land, water, air, fish and wildlife than any other government in British Columbia's history.

BC Government Commitment: "We will ensure dedicated funding for wildlife and habitat conservation, give wildlife and habitat a priority.... We will put all funds from hunting licenses and tags into a dedicated fund for wildlife and habitat conservation (BC NDP, 2017, p.60)"

There is currently no plan to dedicate the funds from hunting licenses. The word "dedicated" was not incorporated into the document until after the BCWF expressed extreme frustration in government's unwillingness to meet its own written commitment. In 2017, there were ~\$12M in hunting licenses and tags which have not been dedicated, more than the \$10M government has now stated it will increase the wildlife branch's budget, even while concurrently cutting its budget.

It is painfully obvious to the professional biologists within government and the stakeholders dedicated to conservation that this budgeted amount will not change the trajectory of wildlife populations.

BC Government Commitment: "We will base decisions on science while also hiring more conservation officers (BC NDP, 2017, p.60)"

Government has not based its decisions on science. These include closures in fire areas, while continuing unsustainable salvage logging; recent cuts to moose allowable harvest in the Cariboo; ongoing destruction of endangered and threatened caribou habitat and a number of species-specific management plans that government has done nothing about. Recommendations from expensive initiatives targeted at moose, such as the Gorley Report and the Moose Solutions Roundtable in the Cariboo, have not been implemented and do not seem to be the focus of 'Together for Wildlife,' even though widely supported by stakeholders and First Nations.

Funding and Priorities

The BCWF is aware government has already decided, in isolation of everyone involved in the process, how it intends on spending the \$10M commitment, and that the overwhelming majority is going into capacity, inventory and monitoring. Counting wildlife as it declines neither conserves nor restores wildlife populations.

Despite a government commitment to look at additional funding mechanisms, and support from every single environmental organization for additional funding mechanisms, any discussion to this effect has been wiped from the 'Together for Wildlife' document.

It is clear this exercise has become a capacity re-building exercise for government, which is needed, without any outcome that is meaningful for wildlife.

Wildlife and habitat management means: ecosystem restoration, controlled burns, managing invasive weeds, predators, prey, highway mortality, linear features, changing industry practices, acquiring habitat. These are what the dollars should be focused on and they should be the priority. It is also not the fish and habitat branch's responsibility to clean-up industries' messes.

Leveraging

Government indicates it will leverage additional funding with other government sources and the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation. Using additional funding opportunities within government is not leveraging; that is simply reallocating misappropriated budgets, many of which will decline given government's budgeting direction. The use of other government funding opportunities has been used for decades and has not translated into a stabilized or positive wildlife trajectory.

Given government focus on counting wildlife as it disappears, it is unlikely that resident hunters, the largest supporters of the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation, will be inclined to partner with government on much.

This internalized and exclusive approach will alienate non-government funding sources as conservationists will not invest in a government which is unable to demonstrate integrity, trust, or a long-term commitment to sustainability.

Legislative Review

Government has suggested it will review other legislation to see where wildlife fits in. Wildlife and habitat is already mentioned in legislation such as the *Forest and Range Practices Act*, yet habitat and wildlife values have declined to record low levels.

It is disappointing that industries such as logging, oil and gas and mining have legislation which provides certainty, and yet there is no legislation which ensures certainty for habitat and wildlife in British Columbia.

The province should adopt natural resource legislation which either covers all uses under one piece of legislation, or individual users under their own legislation. Suggesting government will try to amend other legislation to give habitat and wildlife a placeholder supports only the status quo. This is a straw man argument, which is designed to prolong any possible change until after the next election.

Structure

The current provincial structure for fish, wildlife and habitat management is built to fail. Several functions related to the sustainability of our natural resources are split between the Ministry of Environment (MoE) and the Forests, Lands, Natural Resource and Rural Development Ministry (FLNRORD).

The fish and wildlife branch is buried with the Ministry of FLNRORD, with budget and staffing levels that are rounding errors within the Ministry. Fish and wildlife branch directors and headquarters staff have been cut off from regional operations and have no line-of-sight to regional staff.

Senior leadership positions in Victoria are and have been comprised nearly entirely of foresters and other natural resource professionals, leaving wildlife and habitat professionals largely a minority group in the discussion.

At the regional level the same occurs. Fish and wildlife branch regional staff budgets and direction come from supervisors (Director of Resource Management; Regional Executive Director; Area Assistant Deputy Minister) who are almost always foresters, and next to never fish and wildlife professionals. This inevitably leads to funding and priorities which are focused on everything other than wildlife and habitat.

First Nations

The BCWF is disappointed the provincial government continues to isolate First Nations and non-First Nations. This approach was readily apparent in the Northeast when the Provincial and Federal Governments decided to act on caribou recovery in isolation of effected communities and the public. The government should be taking an inclusive approach to build relationships and have people who care about wildlife work together.

Recommendations

- That the budget for the Wildlife and Habitat Branch become a priority and is increased.
- That all license fees associated with hunting be dedicated to wildlife and habitat management.
- That all who make money off natural resource extraction, or have an interest in wildlife and habitat, contribute to a dedicated funding mechanism. This must include all sectors such as forestry, mining, wildlife viewing, commercial recreation services, hunters and anglers, etc.
- That the funding mechanism is independent from government. People are more supportive of paying taxes when they know exactly where the funding is spent and when they have a voice. This also encourages other conservation organizations, philanthropists and corporate citizens to contribute on an ongoing basis.
- That clear, transparent and achievable **legislated** objectives for habitat and wildlife are created and that wildlife and habitat has equal status to other land-use legislation.
- That the dedicated funding be focused on evidence-based landscape-level actions that treat causes and produce effects.
- That the Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council is replaced by a roundtable which includes First Nations, and of which government is but one voice. The roundtable would be a decision-making body, not an advisory council, to ensure legitimacy, trust and integrity is carried forward over the long-term.
- That the roundtable meets as soon as possible to collaborate on how the 'Together for Wildlife' funding is spent with emphasis on conserving and restoring habitat and wildlife according to already established wildlife and habitat objectives.
- That the current government structure is overhauled, and agencies related to fish, wildlife and habitat are housed within a Ministry that has line-of-sight between headquarters and regions, and where sustainability of our fish, wildlife and habitat resources is the main priority.

Conclusion

This government said it would give wildlife and habitat a priority, dedicate funding for conservation, restore capacity, create effective policies and ensure that all people who rely on wildlife pay into conservation (BC NDP, 2017, p.60). Government has failed to do what it stated it would, both before and since the last provincial election.

In the government's "NDP Wildlife Position Improving Wildlife Management" document, it states: "*We need to plan for seven generations and not on a four-year political cycle.*" There is nothing in this document that meets any of government's written commitments prior to the next provincial election and it is readily apparent that managing on a four-year political cycle is exactly what the government intends on doing. Anything which could be of value to restoring wildlife and habitat at a meaningful scale are targeted after the next provincial election, and even then, it is only a plan to plan.

The government's self-identified principles in the 'Together for Wildlife' document include: Trust, collaboration, respect, responsiveness, recognition, transparency, accountability, evidence-based decisions, balance, innovation, and interconnectedness — the BC Wildlife Federation fully supports these principles. The BCWF is not convinced that government's integrity is consistent with these principles given their draft 'Together for Wildlife' document.

The current document is a status quo approach, which continues to make government an entity that says wildlife and habitat is a priority, while cutting budgets and managing wildlife populations to zero. It is clear government's self-interested power maintaining approach has taken over the process, and that habitat and wildlife are only a passing thought in a budgeting and decision-making process which is singularly focused on urban BC.

The BC Wildlife Federation expected government to keep its word during the 'Improving Wildlife Management and Habitat Conservation' initiative and dedicated countless hours attending meetings and webinars in support of the process only to see key, well supported recommendations and actions missing from the final draft document — many other stakeholder groups did the same. The resulting document and the lack of a clear pathway to improvement does not meet the expectation of our membership. As the oldest and largest conservation organization in British Columbia, we expect government to do what it said it would do. Those platform commitments can be found on p.59 and p.60 of the 2017 BC NDP Platform (<https://action.bcndp.ca/page/-/bcndp/docs/BC-NDP-Platform-2017.pdf>) and via the NDP Wildlife Position document (attached).