

May 27, 2024

Honourable Nathan Cullen  
B.C. Minister of Water, Lands, and Resource Stewardship  
[WLRS.Minister@gov.bc.ca](mailto:WLRS.Minister@gov.bc.ca)

**Re: Growing the Watershed Security Fund**

Dear Minister Cullen,

We commend your efforts to address the need for water and watershed protection and restoration through the creation of the B.C. Watershed Security Fund. However, we are concerned by the small size of the fund—at present, the fund is only likely to generate \$5 million/year at most, which is significantly undersized and insufficient to meet the aims of your B.C. Watershed Security Strategy. We are also concerned as to how the fund will be managed and how the resulting funding will be distributed.

B.C. watersheds are experiencing extreme challenges from climate change and the legacy of historical natural resource management decisions. B.C. water purveyors, local governments, First Nations, Irrigation Districts, and other community water systems are responsible for providing clean drinking water, water for agriculture, and maintaining environmental flows, but have no authority over natural resource development in watersheds—especially for forestry, range, and mining. B.C. communities also are in the path of wildfires, floods and debris flows related to the cumulative effects of historical natural resource management. The Watershed Security Fund was developed to help address issues such as these.

As it currently stands, the Watershed Security Fund is much too small to have a meaningful impact on water and watershed protection and restoration in B.C. Between 1994 and 2002, under Forest Renewal B.C., the province distributed an average of \$66 million/year (\$110 million/year in 2023 dollars) for watershed restoration projects alone. Since that time, the population of B.C. has grown rapidly, and our water and watershed challenges have become more intense. To provide the level of support B.C. watersheds had 22-30 years ago, the fund should be grown to \$2.5 billion/year, with the fund income distributed across the province.

Given the complexity of managing a fund that size, we are concerned about plans for its long-term management, located outside of government. We have an expectation that the government will be closely involved establishing the funding criteria, and the terms of reference for the fund advisory body. The current “Grants Working Group” has First Nations and non-profit representatives, but it does not have any local government members, or professional hydrologists. Local governments have extensive practical experience in source water protection and watershed restoration, and the grant decision making will be significantly less robust without their informed perspective. We

recommend having full transparency for how the permanent advisory body is established, and how decisions are made.

With respect to the distribution of funding, it will be most useful if money can be made available over multi-year timeframes. It is very difficult to do meaningful work in watersheds with project-based, limited-term grant funding. We ask that you consider a structure similar to how Gas Tax funds are distributed by the Union of BC Municipalities, with a mixture of transfer funds and grants that provide both reliability and flexibility for communities and groups undertaking watershed security work.

Thank you for considering these issues. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Yours truly,



Blair Ireland, Chair  
Okanagan Basin Water Board

CC:

- Okanagan MLAs: Harwinder Sandhu, Norm Letnick, Renee Merrifield, Ben Stewart, Dan Ashton, Roly Russell
- Okanagan Nation Alliance, Chiefs Executive Council
- Okanagan Local Government Chairs and Mayors
- Fin Donnelly, Parliamentary Secretary for Watershed Restoration
- James Mack, Assistant Deputy Minister, Water Land and Resource Stewardship

*The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) is a partnership of the three regional districts of the Okanagan Basin, serving an area with 11 municipalities, five First Nation bands, and more than 390,000 people. Our board includes mayors and other elected officials from Armstrong in the north to Osoyoos in the south, and additional board directors from the Okanagan Nation Alliance, the Water Supply Association of B.C., and the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council. Our mandate is to protect and enhance the quality of life in the Okanagan through sustainable water management. For more than 50 years the board's central responsibilities include reducing water pollution from all sources, and supporting long-term water supply for people, agriculture, and the environment.*