



Reference: 41315

June 28, 2024

VIA EMAIL: nancylwilkin@gmail.com; harryn@nisgaanation.ca

Simoogit Hleek (Chief Harry Nyce Sr.), Co-Chair
Nancy Wilkin, Co-Chair
Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council

Dear Simoogit Hleek (Chief Harry Nyce Sr.) and Nancy Wilkin:

Thank you for your letter of April 2, 2024, regarding funding priorities of the Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council (MWAC). I welcome the Council's continued advice and thoughtful attention to pressing wildlife and stewardship challenges and opportunities in the Province. I am sorry I was unable to attend your face-to-face meeting earlier this month, and I apologize for the delayed response.

Despite unprecedented funding levels committed to conservation in British Columbia, there is much work to be done. I also recognize that the current funding commitments do not resolve a need to explore a model for sufficient, dedicated funding for the long-term stewardship of wildlife and habitat (i.e., Action 13 of Together for Wildlife). We continue to review options for funding models and, at the same time, incorporate your recommendations for priority areas for funding to our annual planning cycle. The MWAC's funding priorities brings extra focus to some specific areas.

Additionally, the option of increasing fees and fines and redirecting these funds to wildlife and habitat is still under consideration, as mentioned in my letter of April 23, 2024.

Priority #1: Securing key parcels of private lands with notable wildlife habitat

The Province has committed to protecting and conserving 30 percent of land and water. To support achieving this target, the Province: (1) committed \$150 Million to the BC Parks Foundation (which was matched by the Foundation for a total of \$300 million); (2) is working through modernized Land Use, Forest Landscape, and species-specific (e.g., caribou) planning processes to identify potential protection areas; and (3) is revitalizing the Conservation Lands Program for protecting specific habitats for fish and wildlife.

For private land conservation specifically, the Conservation Lands Program is prioritizing work with First Nations, and other conservation partners, to use new funding mechanisms to secure high-value private land parcels. Partnership for private land acquisition is particularly important given the high cost of land acquisition.

Similarly, the Tripartite Framework Agreement for Nature Conservation also secured commitments for federal funding, some of which may be used for private land acquisition when those lands also protect old forest with high carbon storage potential, or habitat for species at risk.

An additional \$50 million commitment specifically for private land acquisition is not feasible at this time. However, as we progress toward the 30 percent target and complete assessments for priority habitats, I am committed to assessing the sufficiency of existing funding and will consider contributions to an expanded private land conservation network in the future.

Priority # 2 Rehabilitating resources roads, and lands subject to severe wildfire, in order to recover and protect productive wildlife habitat

The Ministry of Water, Lands and Resource Stewardship (WLRS) is committed to working closely with the Ministry of Forests (FOR) and the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Low Carbon Innovation on road rehabilitation and landscape recovery.

Increasingly, deactivation and rehabilitation of resource roads is part of broader conservation or land management strategies aimed at achieving specific environmental or socio-economic goals. These goals may be identified through planning processes (see above), or local-level assessments. In 2023/24, the Province spent \$4.5 million on deactivating and remediating Forest Service Roads alone.

We are also investing in road rehabilitation to increase carbon sequestration, in partnership with Canada through the federal 2 Billion Trees Program. We will track these investments when they benefit wildlife and species at risk specifically, through reporting under the Tripartite Framework Agreement on Nature Conservation.

Access may also be a concern and is managed through control points or motor vehicle closures. Updated maps of the Motor Vehicle Prohibitions under the *Wildlife Act* are available in geo-referenced and printable formats on the gov.bc.ca website:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/sports-culture/recreation/motor-vehicle-prohibitions>.

Specific to severe wildfire, Wildfire Land-Based Recovery is a new program to the BC Wildfire Service, added in 2023. It is the fourth pillar of emergency management. Wildfire Land-Based Recovery is a phase of emergency management to restore land impacted by wildfire and wildfire suppression activities.

I am happy to share the Ministry of Forests Service Plan is now tracking wildfire rehabilitation plans in areas affected by wildfire suppression activities, including fireguards, modified roads, trails, and handguards. Rehabilitation objectives include restoring natural drainage patterns, stabilizing soils, minimizing surface erosion, and promoting revegetation while preventing invasive species from inhabiting affected areas. WLRS and FOR teams work together to ensure that biodiversity and wildlife habitats are priority considerations.

Wildfire is a significant threat driven by climate change. Together, we can do more to maintain and enhance resiliency. I appreciate MWAC's recommendations, broader than just the fire suppression elements and in the context of how these activities contribute to healthy

ecosystems. I also thank the MWAC for the advice provided to the Premier's Expert Task Force in this regard.

Priority #3 Addressing road and rail impacts on wildlife and passenger safety

I am pleased to report the progress made on Together for Wildlife Action 19, regarding reduction of wildlife mortality on highways and railways. Most notable is the signing of a three-year B.C. – Parks Canada contribution agreement beginning in 2023/24 to support work led by the Province on wildlife movement corridors, including road and rail crossings. This agreement commits \$5.3M from the federal Ecological Corridors program to B.C.

In 2023/24, this agreement supported existing projects, including installation and evaluation of road crossings, in partnership with Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure. It also allowed us to initiate a project to collect and evaluate detailed information on rail mortality of ungulates in areas of high collisions. Other projects include collaborative ecological corridor planning in the Kootenays with First Nation and government partners, and mapping of important areas of habitat connectivity in the North Cascades.

We also support the British Columbia Conservation Foundation, in conjunction with partners, to plan a collaborative forum in 2024/25. This forum will bring together First Nations, government agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and academics for a discussion of stewardship and management of wildlife crossings and corridors in southern regions of the province. This forum is expected to identify priority actions that we can take together, to improve our management practices for wildlife corridors and crossings.

This work is complemented through our membership to the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and collaboration across western North America on opportunities that cross First Nation, Tribal, State, Provincial and Federal jurisdiction.

Summary

Again, thank you for communicating the 2024/25 Funding Priorities for the MWAC. For each of the above noted priorities, we will ensure specific performance measures, that align with Service Plan and/or Tripartite Framework Agreement on Nature Conservation reporting, are included in next year's Together for Wildlife implementation report. We are committed to clearly communicating both the total investment made toward these priorities, as well as their benefits to wildlife and habitat.

Sincerely,



Nathan Cullen
Minister