

Building Back Better: Toward a resilient recovery for northwest B.C.



May 2020

With the B.C. government earmarking \$1.5 billion so far for economic recovery and the federal government committed to green infrastructure funding, we need to ensure this once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest capital benefits in the northwest isn't lost. Now is the time to build back better and make investments in Indigenous initiatives, green infrastructure, community economic development, and restoration projects for greater resilience and sustainability. As with other calls for Green Stimulus¹ and a Resilient Recovery², these investments should also be in line with Canada and B.C.'s climate goals, biodiversity targets and net-zero commitments.

Below are some suggestions of how we can create jobs and a shift toward a more resilient rural north. There are overlaps between categories, for example restoring salmon watersheds also supports Indigenous and regional food security and tourism.

1. Invest in Indigenous Initiatives and Infrastructure

First Nations have a number of infrastructure needs and proposals. They make up a large portion of the populations in northwest British Columbia. Funding Indigenous infrastructure and initiatives would benefit the region as a whole. Most First Nations have identified infrastructure priorities (including housing, building health centres and training institutes, and Internet and cell coverage), and community development initiatives (such as Indigenous guardians programs, wild meat and fish processing facilities, and renewable energy projects). The federal government did create funding commitments toward First Nations community infrastructure, and could invest further to create multiple benefits, including regional job creation for many shovel ready and worthy projects. The federal government is also committed to repairing and building climate change resilient infrastructure³.

The Government of B.C. passed the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*. Implementing the Act could include funds for governance capacity and land-use planning⁴ initiatives (in line with other government priorities, such as modernizing land-use plans with Indigenous governments as mandated for the Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resources, and Rural Development⁵).

Potential mechanisms for support:

Federally:

- First Nations community infrastructure⁶ funding as part of *Investing in Canada Plan* could be on a more accelerated timeline.
- Implement a second round of the Canada Nature Fund for Indigenous Protected and Conservation Areas as part of achieving biodiversity goals (30 by 2030).
- Further support Indigenous Guardians programs across the country and help build a National Guardians Network⁷.
- Enact the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into Canadian law.

Provincially:

¹ Pembina Institute: <https://www.pembina.org/reports/green-stimulus.pdf>

² Clean Energy Canada and the Canada CleanTech Alliance. <https://www.resilientrecovery.ca/resilient-recovery>

³ "McKenna tells municipal leaders 'climate lens' to be put on all infrastructure efforts." November 27, 2019. iPolitics. <https://ipolitics.ca/2019/11/27/mckenna-tell-municipal-leaders-climate-lens-to-be-put-on-all-infrastructure-efforts/>

⁴ Such as Gitanyow w̓ilp-based land-use plan that provides certainty and clear engagement for potential proponents. Many older land-use plans in the region did not recognize Indigenous rights and title and are in need of updating.

⁵ Minister's 2017 Mandate letter: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/government/ministries-organizations/premier-cabinet/mlas/minister-letter/donaldson-mandate.pdf>

⁶ First Nations Community Infrastructure funding: <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100010567/1521125219538>

⁷ Land Needs Guardians - <https://landneedsguardians.ca>

- Increase FLNRORD budget for land-use planning as well as for monitoring through Guardians and entities like the Babine Watershed Monitoring Trust.
- Frontload more funds as part of Building B.C. – Indigenous Housing Fund⁸.
- Mandate BC Hydro to accept new distributed renewable energy generation and storage. Ensure opportunities for renewable energy generation beyond getting remote communities off diesel.
- Support existing proposals for Indigenous Protected and Conservation Areas.
- Sign natural resource benefits sharing agreements.
- For both levels, ensure that hereditary governance systems can access territory-based funding opportunities.

2. Resilient Rural Development

Reliance on natural resource economies has created a long history of boom and bust cycles in northwest BC. The decline in the timber sector prior to the pandemic exposed the need for further diversification and sustainability of timber and non-timber forest values. Northern economies are in need of diversification that ensures environmental, social, cultural and economic well-being⁹.

COVID-19 has exposed the importance of small businesses as well as vulnerabilities and opportunities around food security. Further investment in sustainable community economic development would assist the region to have a more resilient rural economy.

Local and regional decision-makers are able to find solutions that work best for their communities. At the same time, some regional coordination and cooperation can also help build success. There exists community and regional planning documents, some land-use plans (many are outdated), economic development strategy documents (municipal, regional districts and First Nations governments), and Community Energy and Emissions Plans. These provide guidance and priorities for investments that can be made now.

Examples:

Poultry-Centered Regenerative Agriculture project is a partnership between members of the Gitksan Nation and Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition to create a chicken farm on Gitanmaax reserve that serves multiple purposes – creates local jobs, looks at a circular model to build soil for other food systems, and improves regional food security growing 4,500 chickens per year per unit.

Bulkley-Nechako Regional District waste management – Various regions are experiencing faster landfill capacity given decreases in cardboard recycling in the region. However, many landfills have resources that could be recovered for repurposing, composting or recycling. One idea is to use cardboard with compost for biochar.

Potential mechanisms for support:

Federally:

⁸ Building BC: Indigenous Housing Fund - <https://www.bchousing.org/projects-partners/funding-opportunities/Building-BC-IHF>

⁹ This idea of a quadruple bottom line is part of the Northern BC Economic Development Vision and Strategy Project led by UNBC's Community Development Initiative's Greg Halseth. While from 2004, many of the recommendations this report are still valid and have yet to be implemented: <http://web.unbc.ca/geography/faculty/greg/research/edvs/pdf/FinalReport.pdf>

- Applying a sustainability and community economic development strategy lens to funds through the Western Economic Diversification Fund. Community Futures Development Corporations could be implementation partners for capacity building and seed funding.
- Develop tools, capacity and seed funding opportunities for circular economy initiatives. Natural Resources Canada or Ministry of Environment and Climate Change could work through the Circular Economy Leadership Coalition¹⁰ to invest in opportunities and initiatives across the country.
- Top up the Federal Gas Tax Fund whose infrastructure could be used to move funds to municipal and regional district infrastructure projects geared toward more community resilience, active transportation, transit options and recovery post-COVID.

Provincially:

- BC should revive the Rural Dividend Fund with a strategic approach to CED and community resilience. With \$20-100,000 grants, it could also embed principles, including a sustainability focus, Indigenous sovereignty and local well-being.
- For both levels of government, continue to invest in broadband and cellular connectivity to improve regional economic opportunities (while also addressing safety issues and social connections)¹¹.
- For all levels, ensuring local/regional procurement policies – the priority should be to use local/regional contractors and resources even if not the lowest bid (for infrastructure projects and economic development initiatives).
- Create tax incentives or interest-free loans for social ventures and B-corporations that meet high levels of transparency and accountability while creating environmental and social benefits. A fund could also be created and administered through Credit Unions.
- Follow through on \$10/day daycare.
- Develop policies that support agriculture productivity and regional production, and collaborate with Regional Districts and Indigenous governments in coordinating local producers, helping build capacity, creating space for community gardens, and supporting Farmers' markets.
- BC just announced an investment of \$75 million through the 2020 Northern Capital and Planning Grant for infrastructure needs, but also a Northern Healthy Communities Fund to be administered through a grant process through the Northern Development Initiative¹². This funding was set aside before COVID-19 as part of preparing for major development projects in the region. This funding will provide a needed boost to municipalities, regional districts, health and social service providers.
- Finalize a regional resource benefits funding agreement for BC's northwest¹³.

¹⁰ The Circular Economy Leadership Coalition: <http://www.circulareconomyleaders.ca>. Provincially, the Emerging Economy Task Force Final Report (March 2020) recognizes the need to invest in opportunities around the circular economy and could also help enable initiatives: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/employment-business-and-economic-development/economic-development/emerging-economy-task-force/eetf-final_report-20200511.pdf

¹¹ Such as through the Connecting British Columbia program: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/connectivity-in-bc/connectivity-funding-programs>

¹² <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020MAH0026-000850>

¹³ The northwest British Columbia Resource Benefits Alliance is a coalition of municipal and regional district governments seeking a funding agreement in order to support economic development by building sustainable, livable communities: <https://www.nwresourcebenefits.ca>

3. Restoration economy

A legacy of some past and current policies and practices, as well as natural disturbances, is a number of abandoned mine sites, stream degradation, resource roads, and burnt landscapes. Restoring degraded lands can provide multiple benefits, including carbon sequestration, erosion control, wildlife habitat, and improved water quality and public health. In addition, jobs created by restoration activities are located mostly in rural areas, in communities hard hit by the economic slow down. Restoration work is labour-intensive and stimulates demand for the products and services of local businesses such as plant nurseries, heavy equipment companies and rock and gravel companies.

In the northwest, there are several opportunities for salmon habitat restoration, wildlife habitat restoration and protection, nature-based solutions for flood control, tree planting disturbed areas including some wildfire impacted areas and old resource roads, and clean-up of abandoned mine sites.

Examples:

Upper Bulkley habitat restoration for sockeye recovery. Planning has been underway with multiple partnerships and outreach (First Nations, federal DFO, community based groups, farmers, etc), and funds are needed to move forward that would be multi-year and labour intensive (including planting riparians zones on agriculture lands).

Cleaning up abandoned mines – Federal funds were given to BC to clean up oil and gas wells. BC did not require reclamation fees until the 1970s for mines and still lacks full bonds for current operating mines¹⁴. That puts the expense of their cleanup on taxpayers. One of the key recommendations in the Mount Polley expert panel report that the government committed to implementing, is reducing BC's risks for more tailings failures by retiring/decommissioning half of BC's inventory of 123 tailings storage facilities¹⁵. BC could invest in clean-up and tailings inventory reduction while reforming its mining law around reclamation bonding¹⁶, and creating an Orphan Site Reclamation Fund to reduce liabilities and ensure the polluter pays.

Potential mechanisms for support:

Federally:

- The new *Fisheries Act* included the need for rebuilding plans for stocks in the critical zone. Regulations are still pending but \$107 million was allocated and could be released for improving fish habitat for those in or nearing the critical zone, such as Morice sockeye or Bear River Chinook.
- Increase the BC Salmon Restoration and Innovation Fund (BCSRIF) over next five years, including additional funding for the Canadian Wildlife Federation to coordinate the Fish Passage project with partners (current goal is to remove 65 barriers in BC in 5 years using mostly local contractors and public sector staff).
- Revive the federal Low Carbon Economy Fund to support provincial initiatives toward climate solutions and job creation.

¹⁴ Closure, Reclamation and Abandoned Mines. ELC report. May 2019. <https://reformbcmining.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/BCMLR-Closure-Reclamation-Abandoned-Mines.pdf>

¹⁵ Independent Expert Engineering Investigation and Review Panel Report on Mount Polley Tailings Storage Facility Breach. Appendix I: BC Tailings Dam Failure Frequency and Portfolio Risk. January 30, 2015.

https://www.mountpolleyreviewpanel.ca/sites/default/files/report/AppendixI_BCTDFFrequencyandPortfolioRisk.pdf

¹⁶ The Chief Inspector of Mines 2018 Annual Report shows that with the current discretionary system, there is over \$1.2 billion liability for mines operating and in care and maintenance (this does not include abandoned or orphaned mines). https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/mineral-exploration-mining/documents/health-and-safety/ci-annual-reports/2018_ci_annual_rpt.pdf

Provincially:

- Restore some of the Forest Renewal program (through additional stumpage fees). A number of valuable programs benefitted all British Columbians, including the watershed and ecosystem restoration programmes, as well as recreation and biodiversity programs.
- The program for unemployed forestry workers in BC in 2009 was successful in creating jobs and recreation opportunities throughout the region, including creating the backcountry ski hill at Hankin and trails in the Hazeltons. This model, or that of the Conservation Corps from the United States, could fund much need recreation and tourism priorities (with many regional districts having worked with the province on priorities and plans around these).
- The province allocated \$1.3 billion over four years for CleanBC, more of which could be spent on the front end given the need for job creation. This region would particularly benefit from building retrofits and reforestation initiatives (for carbon sinks).
- Create policies and support nature-based solutions for climate adaptation strategies, including green design for flood control that also helps restore salmon habitat.
- Set up a Watershed Security Fund for related projects throughout the province. This fund could be an outlet for some of these water-related projects (remediation, monitoring, LUP, flood control).
- Support the Abandoned Mines Branch at the Ministry of Energy and Mines to follow through on the Mount Polley expert panel recommendation to halve the current tailings inventory, provide rural jobs, and clean-up sites, while introducing a policy requiring full-reclamation bond up front for all mines to ensure the polluter pays in BC.

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