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WHAT WE HEARD

2 0 2 5 E V E N T S U M M A R Y

Event attendees included representatives from:

Yaqit ʔa·knuqʔi 'it First Nation
ʔaḡam First Nation
Akisq'nuk First Nation
Piikani First Nation
Shuswap Band
BC Union of Indian Chiefs,
BC Ministry for Water, Land, and Resource Stewardship
BC Southeast Initiatives Secretariat
Legislative Assembly of BC
City of Fernie
District of Elkford
District of Sparwood
Elk River Alliance
Living Lakes Canada
Wildsight,
CLEAR
Elk Valley Resources
Nupqu
Kakin
MacHydro
North Coal
ERM
Xylem
University of Lethbridge

A huge thank you goes to the event organisers, Yaqit ʔa·knuqʔi 'it First Nation, Living Lakes Canada, and the Elk River Alliance, on behalf of the Elk River Monitoring Collaborative. Additionally this event would not have been possible without support from the event funders.

EVENT FUNDERS





EXECUTIVE EVENT SUMMARY

CENTRAL QUESTION

What steps can we take to better work together to inform localised watershed decision-making?

Event Rationale

Qukin ʔamakʔis, the Elk River watershed, has been central to ʔakanuxunikʼ of Yaq̓it ʔa·knuq̓iʔit First Nation, and all Ktunaxa peoples, since time immemorial.

In the face of growing environmental stressors there is an urgent need for informed, collaborative decision-making to safeguard the future of this vital watershed. Without Water was a platform to foster a mutual understanding of ongoing water knowledge in the region, and to determine crucial future steps needed to protect the water in this region.

Event Summary

On Thursday, June 5th 2025, the Without Water Symposium took place on Yaq̓it ʔa·knuq̓iʔit First Nation territory (Grasmere, BC). The event brought together Indigenous leaders, scientists, government representatives, community members, and industry to address watershed values, knowledge, and decision making in Southeast BC. This held space for important conversations from myriad voices and this document outlines the themes, concepts, and solutions discussed.

An Event in Two Parts

Part I

Invite-only full-day event with broad ranging delegates all present to discuss the region's pressing water issues. Commencing with a flag bearing ceremony and welcome keynote from Councillor Kyle Shottanana, the day's intentions were set in being in ceremony with nature. Two panel sessions focused on the shared values of water, threats communities face in relation to water, and what information is used when looking at water-based management decisions. In the afternoon, attendees went on a wetland tour where ʔakanuxunik showcased firsthand how water scarcity is impacting both the land and community.

Part II

A public evening event over a shared meal, with a keynote speech from Grand Chief Stewart Phillip and open Q&A panel. This was an opportunity to field questions and facilitate a two-way dialogue between a broad cross-section of community members and a range of speakers from across the spectrum of the day's events.

SEVEN KEY THEMES

Without Water was a collaborative space for knowledge sharing, ideation, connection, and solution. Here, we explore the day's strongest themes and standout quotes from those present.

The following seven themes were informed through general meeting minutes from the event as well as a worksheet completed by attendees throughout the event.



“Everything around us has to do with water: from the plants, to the sky, and ?a-kxam'is q'api qapsin – all living things”



I. CONNECTION TO WATER

Participants spoke about how water is more than a resource to be managed.

It is invaluable, sacred, and life-giving.

Personal, cultural, and spiritual connection to water

Water was described as healing, cleansing, empowering, and sacred. It is deeply tied to ceremony, identity, and community.

Water as a living relative

Water is not a commodity but a living entity deserving respect, protection, and relationship.

Respect and empathy are foundational in water decision-making

Building water consciousness requires emotional connection as much as technical knowledge

“This might be the region’s most important conversation - on the safety, viability and health of our watersheds”



“We can’t protect what we don’t love. Water is both a privilege and a responsibility ”

II. VALUING WATER

Participants highlighted the challenging balance of respecting water as a vital life-force while working within structures that demand a resource have economic value.

Determining how we value water

Contested views on pricing water: While some argue for cost as a conservation tool (e.g., tiered water metering), others warn that commodifying water could lead to economic exploitation, restricting access and undermining water’s value as an inherent human right. The tragedy of the commons: Without accountability or cost, overuse and disrespect prevail.

People don’t understand water’s value

A major barrier is cultural. Many assume water is endless or theirs by right. Historic water regulations continue to embed this mentality.



“People want to use as much water as they want and don’t believe it should cost them to do it”



III. CONCERNS & CHALLENGES

Participants reflected the need for urgency as we recognise the crisis of unsustainable water use.

Disappearing and contaminated water sources

Droughts, selenium contamination, loss of wetlands/lakes, over-extraction, declining aquifers, and climate-induced flow changes are all widespread concerns for participants. Many had witnessed these first hand and authentically shared their experiences.

Climate change as a compounding factor

The unpredictability and intensification of climate events are accelerating water scarcity and degradation. “Stationarity is dead” is a repeated standout mantra from many participants.

“Tomorrow shouldn’t pay for today’s decisions”



IV. ACTING AMID UNCERTAINTY

Participants recognised the need for movement on water-related issues despite not always having a 'full picture'.

Being proactive over reactive

Many express concern that we are years behind in progressive water management and are therefore now in a reactionary mode. Yet, water management decisions must still be made even amid uncertainty with what information is currently available.

Integrated monitoring and reporting

Proposals include annual water health report cards, user-friendly dashboards, and local water tables responsible for decision-making



“Decision-makers often don’t have everyone’s perspectives in mind while making decisions”



V. HISTORIC PROCESSES CAUSE STAGNATION

It was recognised those with the power to make decisions also often lack the power or resources to act.

Leadership is stretched thin

Local leaders are overwhelmed and at capacity. While they understand the importance of water as a resource and that decisions are required around it, things aren't changing.

Funding is fragmented and short-term

Ephemeral grants don't support sustained, long-term water work. Investment in community partnerships is needed.

Historic water rights system no longer fit for purpose

“First in Time, First in Right” water licensing doesn't reflect current water governance needs in increasing times of scarcity.

“We need to break down silos, collaborate, and incorporate diverse needs”

VI. WE NEED COLLABORATIVE & HOLISTIC SOLUTIONS

One of the day’s main messages from participants was the importance of coming together to find solutions and removing siloed thinking.

Need for integrated decision-making

Silos between sectors, ministries, and knowledge systems hinder effective water governance. Knowledge is currently siloed and not free moving between people. Indigenous communities, governments, NGOs, industry, and scientists must work together as equals.

Weaving Indigenous knowledge with Western science

Both are necessary to understand and act meaningfully. Indigenous law, ceremony, and generational knowledge are critical and should be entwined with western science. The two don’t need to compete.

Storytelling and lived experience

Personal narratives are powerful tools for building empathy, understanding, and decision-making.



“We don’t protect water by accident. We protect it by showing up again and again.”

VII. GOVERNANCE, POWER, AND INCLUSION IN DECISION MAKING

Participants were united in their view that watershed decision-making needs to be done by those who are most impacted by the decision’s outcomes.

Local governance and self-determination

Decision-making should be handed to local communities and Indigenous Nations. They intricately understand local needs and how best to achieve it.

Lack of authority and capacity

Communities often lack the power or resources to act.

Legal innovation

Ideas like legal personhood for water bodies, Indigenous water law recognition, and rights for nature are emerging solutions.





A COLLECTIVE CALL TO ACTION

At Without Water, participants spoke about collaboration, integration, and storytelling, while emphasising that collective action must be taken now. There was agreement regarding the urgency required to address local water challenges together, without siloing or diffusing efforts, and building upon the momentum generated from the symposium. It was understood that efforts are required now to ensure current and future generations are not without water.

Recommended Actions

Honour water as an inherently sacred and living entity . Incorporate Indigenous worldviews into better water decision-making while considering applied mechanisms such as “rights for nature” or “legal personhood”.

Support local and Indigenous water governance with sustained resources. Establish solutions for our current water quantity and quality challenges via local water tables that incorporate current and predicted climate impacts.

Intentional silo busting to increase efficiency. Transparent integration of information and knowledge sharing for decision-making. Leverage the power of collective action for community adaptation in the Elk Valley, serving as a template for other communities throughout BC.



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