



Dialogue for Regional Action

Reporting Back Summary 2:
Building Collaboration in the Hope Slough Floodplain

November 19th, 2025



Executive Summary

On November 19, 2025, farmers and Cheam and Skwah First Nations met to move from discussion toward action on flood risk and restoration in the Hope Slough area. The workshop confirmed readiness to collaborate, surfaced barriers to implementation, and identified priority solutions to guide First Nations-led engagement and next steps.

The Gathering:

On November 19th, 2025, the Lower Fraser Floodplains Coalition (LFFC) hosted a workshop for farmers living near the Hope Slough, alongside Cheam and Skwah First Nations—the communities where the Hope Slough begins and ends.

The objectives for the event were co-developed with staff from Cheam and Skwah First Nations. The overarching goal was to bring more farmers into the process as partners in future restoration efforts. More specifically, the event aimed to:

- Build relationships between farmers and First Nation staff and community members
- Solidify general agreement on the shared approach to restoration, developed with First Nations
- Explore opportunities and barriers for on-farm implementation of potential solutions

The event was facilitated by Dave Zehnder, rancher and advocate for farmer-led conservation, with participation from LFFC members including the Emergency Planning Secretariat and Resilient Waters. While the workshop was initially intended for farmers along the Hope Slough, interest spread through farmer networks, resulting in participation from farms across Chilliwack and Agassiz, reflecting broader concern about shared water and floodplain issues. Forty-five people attended, including 24 farmers representing approximately 17 farms from the dairy, blueberry, nuts, and greenhouse industries, and 13 First Nations Representatives. Representation from Skwah First Nation included an Elder and members of Chief and Council. A small number of participants from nonprofits and cultural support programs were also present.

Summary of Presentations:

Dave Zehnder and Roxanna Kooistra (Cheam) opened with background on the project and a history of the Hope Slough. Zehnder spoke to the shared risks facing the area, including flooding, drought, and water pollution, and described a long-term vision of a revived Hope Slough that supports agricultural, cultural, and recreational uses. He also revisited three priority areas identified in August for on-farm work: improved ditch maintenance, constructed wetlands, and flood-friendly cropping.

Kooistra presented a historical overview of the Hope Slough from pre-contact to present day, illustrating how the landscape has changed. She highlighted Cheam and Skwah's partnership on the "Save the Skwahla - Shxwlistexw te Sqwá:la Shxweli" project, focused on restoring the life spirit of the Hope Slough. A key component of this work is waterway monitoring (temperature, turbidity, and pollution) to target the most effective restoration actions. She emphasized that both communities are committed to working with farmers to restore the slough, both on farmland and on reserve, and that Cheam First Nation is actively seeking partners for this work.

Steve Clegg from SAY Lands shared successful examples of riparian restoration completed in partnership with farmers, noting that SAY Lands covers the costs for on-farm projects. While his work is in another part of Chilliwack, he highlighted that similar partnership opportunities exist.

Before transitioning into breakout discussions, Zehnder and Anna-Lise Cooke (Skwah) outlined potential on-farm solutions in more detail, including best practices for ditch maintenance, options for cultivated wetlands, and the potential for flood-friendly cropping. Cooke also noted opportunities for farmers to generate carbon credits through restoration work. Following these presentations, participants moved into facilitated breakout sessions to explore opportunities and barriers in more depth.

Summary of Discussions:

Breakout discussions focused on ditch maintenance and constructed wetlands. Themes overlapped significantly across tables, allowing for a combined summary.

Farmers emphasized that their top priority is meaningful involvement in decision-making. They want a consistent forum with the City, clearer roles, and a water system that is maintained regularly and as a connected network, rather than through isolated, one-off work. Participants stressed the need to restore natural flow through Hope and Camp Sloughs, include farmers directly in maintenance activities, and support invasive species removal. Farmers noted that stormwater from the City, unmanaged ditches and sloughs, and declining riparian health (including from beaver activity) are contributing to worsening conditions.

Key barriers include insufficient funding, slow and restrictive permitting, liability concerns, water licensing challenges, and hesitancy to allow government access to private land. Climate change—deeper wells, drought-flood cycles, and water scarcity—further strain the system. Despite this, farmers identified clear opportunities: increasing cleaning frequency, returning removed sediment to fields, reconnecting Hope Slough to the Fraser, working directly with First Nations, and applying both hydrogeomorphological expertise and Indigenous knowledge. Farmers expressed willingness to contribute labour or funding if supported.

The long-term vision shared by participants is a resilient, shared-responsibility water system that supports healthy riparian areas and manages both drought and flooding. Farmers expect active participation from the City and Province, improved permitting processes, and fair enforcement. The overarching message is clear: farmers are ready to collaborate, but need governments to reduce barriers and help enable coordinated, system-wide water management.



Next Steps:

Participants expressed strong interest in continuing this work collaboratively. Following the workshop, Cheam and Skwah First Nations will determine next steps for engagement in ways that reflect their leadership and priorities. LFFC will support this process by documenting outcomes, coordinating information sharing, and working with partners to develop an implementation plan that reflects farmer input, identified barriers, and opportunities for action.



The Lower Fraser Floodplains Coalition is a group of BC-based organizations and experts with the shared goal of helping BC's upcoming flood recovery and management efforts achieve the best possible outcomes.

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