



New Normal Cowichan

Backgrounder

Welcome to the 'new normal'

Drought and flooding are the 'new normal' in the Cowichan region, and are putting our water supply under extreme stress. Gone are the days when we could expect some significant rainfall in the drier months leading up to summer and trust that our aquifers and lakes would be adequately supplied with water. The summer dry season has extended on both ends and we can no longer count on a predictable snowpack and reliable rain to keep our watersheds healthy.

In other words, the amount of water entering and exiting our region is not going to change; instead what is changing is how and when water arrives. The reality is that we can no longer rely on water to be here when we need it. Living the new normal means using only as much water as we need and getting better at storing water so we have enough to support our ecosystem and economy.

The main causes are climate change, development impacts and increased demand for water. Climate change has dramatically changed how the volume of water flows in to our ecological system. Changing climate conditions mean less snow when we need it, less protection for the snow when we do get it, and unpredictable rainfall that runs off too fast. We can no longer count on a predictable snow pack and reliable rain to recharge our water supply.

Modifications to our natural landscape for everything from logging and development means changes to how our watersheds work and, at times, increased run-off and less replenishment of surface and deep groundwater supplies. Greater demand for water to support industry, commerce, agriculture and communities places increased strain on supply.

The impacts of summer and winter droughts are broad and critical: fish populations and the integrity of our valuable ecosystem are threatened, public health issues are on the rise, our economic strengths in forestry, pulp and paper, tourism and fishing are jeopardized, and the risk of damage to people and property due to forest fires is much higher. Winter flooding presents similar challenges, including public health and safety issues, river and slope destabilization, and ecological and property damage.



These are very real problems with serious implications, but the good news is that there are practical, effective solutions. The first step is to change our thinking around water. The new normal is water scarcity, not water abundance, and all actions must flow from this reality. We also need to prepare ourselves for tough conditions and decisions in order to protect our water supply.

At the personal level, each of us can do our part by being ‘water smart’ – establishing a culture of water conservation. The less water we consume the more that stays in the system to support our region’s complex web of ecology and economy. With a little bit of effort you can help can keep our water supply and quality of life intact. There are small things you can do to help our region better manage water, including protecting critical habitat and limited resources on your property, and becoming more aware of your watershed.

The CVRD is leading the response at the regional level, working in partnership with our communities. Together we are developing a long-term, strategic water preparedness plan to make sure our water supply is protected. We are laying the groundwork for larger solutions such as increasing our capacity to store water during wet periods to make sure there is enough to get us through the dry periods, building flood management systems to minimize damage, and working with key sectors such as agriculture to ensure they have the tools and resources to support us in the future.

Together we can adapt to the new reality of our limited water supply and continue to enjoy all the benefits of living here. Visit NewNormalCowichan.ca to find out how Cowichan’s ‘new normal’ will affect you, and also to access water management tools and information and sign up for news updates.