

## Water licensing restrictions deterring new Vancouver Island farms



[Robert Barron](#)

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*Water-licence restrictions in the Koksilah watershed discouraging new farms from setting up. | Citizen file photo*

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Water-licensing restrictions imposed by the province in Cowichan's Koksilah River watershed are making it difficult for new farming operations to set up there.

In a July 10 presentation to the Cowichan Valley Regional District, a delegation from Young Agrarians, a group whose main focus is to facilitate long-term lease agreements between landowners and new farmers ready to

start farms through a land-matching program, said only one land match was made in the CVRD in a one-year period between April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024, which is significantly down from previous years.

Since the Young Agrarians's B.C. Land Matching Program launched on Vancouver Island in 2018, 22 matches covering more than 80 acres have been made in the Cowichan Valley, representing 30 per cent of all the matches made on Vancouver Island, so the program has been considered as very successful in this area.

But Darcy Smith, the Young Agrarians' program manager for the B.C. land-matching program, told the committee that one of the main reasons for the drop-off is the blanket restriction on the issuance of new water licences within the Koksilah watershed, where a significant portion of the region's agricultural lands are located. This is exacerbated with a long time frame — between two and four years — for processing.

"The moratorium on new water licensing in the Koksilah watershed is extremely challenging," she said. "As well, in all the watersheds across Vancouver Island and B.C., the process to apply for a new water licence, even when they are available, is in a lot of cases a huge barrier.

"So, even without the licensing moratorium in the Koksilah watershed, a lack of an existing water licence on a farm can still constitute a big barrier to land matching. That's why we're really looking for land opportunities that have existing water licences. We're hoping to achieve more than one land match a year [in the Cowichan Valley], but we're not sure that is possible [under current circumstances]."

During the severe drought that struck the region last summer, the province temporarily restricted water use for industry and forage crops in the Koksilah watershed in an effort to protect fish populations.

The Koksilah River has seen persistent low stream flows in recent years that are threatening the survival of steelhead trout populations, and the order from the province impacted more than 100 surface and groundwater licence holders in the watershed who had to stop using water for forage crops.

Due to the ongoing water issues, Cowichan Tribes and the province signed B.C.'s first water sustainability plan for the watershed last year, which is intended to find solutions.

The CVRD has had an agreement with the Young Agrarians since 2021 to provide the organization with \$10,000 a year to help pay for a land-matcher position, but one of the conditions of the funding was that at

least three land matches must be made per year.

The delegation asked if the CVRD could change the terms to between one and three land matches a year for the next three years as a result of the increasing challenges, which also include inflation, climate change and the housing shortage.

Sarah Dent, executive director and co-founder of the Young Agrarians, said the organization is still putting in the same number of staffing hours to land matching in the Cowichan Valley, even though it is having fewer successes.



“We continue to put the time and work into this region and work through the challenges,” she said. “Hopefully, we’ll have more [land matches] in the pipeline this year.”

The committee voted to recommend the board keep the funding in place.



***About the Author:* Robert Barron**

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