

2024 ANNUAL REPORT



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Reflections from our Co-Chairs



Who We Are

At the Cowichan Watershed Board, our strength lies in our foundational governance model. Since our inception, Cowichan Tribes and the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD) have come together as equal partners, with Co-Chairs jointly guiding our work. This partnership reflects more than just a governance structure—it embodies our shared commitment to reconciliation and our intention to work together with one heart and one mind for the health of the watershed.

The Cowichan watershed is more than a landscape—it is a living system, a vital shared resource, and a cornerstone of local identity and culture. It sustains the wellness of all beings who depend on it, now and into the future.

Recognition of Cowichan Tribes' Statement on Inherent Rights

Quw'utsun mustmuhw, ni' 'o' ni' tthush't'esulhkws 'itst 'u tun'atumuhw, 'i' 'o' hwunst'e. Nilh 'o' thu-'it syuw'entst, tun ni' 'u kw'thuhwun'amustimuhw 'iwutl'uts' 'i' 'u tun'atumuhwtst. Ni' yuxtse'tumtthu Quw'utsun 'u tthu-itumuhw, qa', kw'atl'kwatthuni' spupin' 'u tthutumuhw, ttho' mukw' stem ni' hakwni' 'u tthustl'ulnuptst. Kwuthushtun-ni' 'iwststni' yuxtse'tum 'u ttho' mukw' stem ni' ha'kwkwsstthuthi'skwshuli-s. O' nilhtthu Quw'utsun mustumuhw, nilemuxutunstum 'u tthuni' snuwuntewut 'u tthushtunaalhtun, tst. Uwutumtem-us 'i' ni' tsttsmem't 'aanlhkwskwun-etewut, hwayumtun'as'aalhtl'ulnup. Quw'utsun Mustimuhw, ha'kwushtst kw' stutul'na'mutxetsul's kw' shtuhimstthustl'ulnuptst. Mukw' stem 'o' slhilukw'tul 'i' nilhni' shkw'akw'umstthusulsuli'tst.

Cowichan Peoples have existing inherent rights. Cowichan as the original Peoples of this territory within which the Cowichan Watershed is included continue the right and responsibility to make informed decisions to manage and organize based on our history and continued connections. As told through time by our ancestors; the lands, waters, seas, minerals, air and all elements interconnected within the territories provided for and can provide a good sustainable life for Cowichan Peoples. Cowichan has never given away this right and continues to govern and make decisions to support the well-being and sustainability of our Peoples and territories.

Source: Cowichan Watershed Board Governance Manual, 2018

2024 in Review

In 2024, the Cowichan Watershed Board continued to demonstrate the strength of collaborative watershed governance. We welcomed new members, including our first representative from the Province of BC, and advanced long-standing priorities like rebuilding the Cowichan weir to support resilient river flows. Our work supported community engagement in the Xwulqw'selu (Koksilah) Watershed Planning process, salmon habitat monitoring, and the protection of riparian ecosystems and estuarine food systems through Indigenous-led initiatives. Real-time collaboration and monitoring helped prevent another fish kill in the Cowichan River, showcasing the value of coordinated local action.

Community-driven efforts like Project 84,000 and the expansion of the Xpey' (Cedar) restoration project deepened public connection to the watershed and advanced our core targets—from water quality and salmon health to wise water use and watershed education. Each success in 2024 reflected the collective commitment of our partners, volunteers, and supporters. For more highlights from the year, please [click here](#).

Reflecting on Challenges

While 2024 was filled with meaningful progress, it also brought clear reminders of the complex and ongoing challenges we face in stewarding the Cowichan-Koksilah watershed. The devastation of the 2023 fish kill underscored the vulnerability of our rivers and the urgency of collective action. A remarkable community response helped prevent a similar event this year but the crisis revealed systemic gaps—in monitoring, coordination, and resourcing—that we are continuing to work on this year and into the future.

Other challenges were more symbolic, yet telling: water conservation signs in the Koksilah watershed were quickly removed or disappeared, highlighting that building a shared culture of stewardship remains a work in progress. Likewise, efforts to rebuild the Cowichan weir, while advancing, continue to face legal, jurisdictional, and financial complexities that require ongoing coordination and perseverance. As pressures from climate change, land use, and development increase, the need for inclusive, adaptive, and well-supported governance has never been more apparent. These challenges only reinforce our commitment to work with one heart and one mind for the health of the watershed and all who depend on it.

Progress toward Targets

Target Strategy Review

Objectives 2024-2026

Coordinate target working groups to a) share information and b) collaborate towards processes and projects to meet the CWB Watershed Targets.

Begin to define a Whole of the Watershed Target, Indicators, and Working Group, to address broad watershed issues not captured by the other targets, and integrating Quw'utsun teachings.

Activities

- 💧 Finalized the review and update of our Targets & Indicators, to the greatest extent at this time.
- 💧 Initiated a review of the CWB Targets Strategy and Working Group model to respond to evolution of and growth of watershed activity, responsibilities, and capacity, as well as the goal of ensuring that our targets add up to whole-of-watershed well-being.
- 💧 Created a map-based tool to make the best available water quality data for the Cowichan watershed more accessible. [Map of Water Quality Monitoring Locations in the Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds](#)

Target Strategy Review

The 7 Targets for Watershed Health that were established upon the Board's founding are still highly valued and relevant as aspirational goals to keep all the watershed organizations and agencies and authorities paddling together towards the healthier whole of watershed situation envisioned in the Cowichan Basin Water Management Plan (2007). However, the Board invested time this year in reviewing the targets strategy overall, recognizing how much has changed in 15 years.

We finished 2024 with an acknowledgement of the significant growth in capacity, authority, and funding available to the CWB and its partners to be doing the work identified through the Target Working Groups. And an acknowledgement that this evolution means it's time to review, re-configure, and re-commit with the vastly improved knowledge and resources we now have available. We are going into 2025 asking ourselves new questions about how to pursue whole of watershed health for the Quw-utsun-Xwulqw'selu watershed:

- How can our Targets be expanded or adjusted to = Watershed-Wide Well-being?
- How can we keep what still works well about Working Groups, and change what doesn't?

- What process can we define to seek/integrate Indigenous Knowledge throughout our Targets model, and to review and update Targets periodically?

For more detail on this reflection and process, please see: [CWB Targets Strategy Review - Nov 2024 Presentation to CWB Meeting - Cowichan Watershed Board](#)

Sustainable Flows i) Replace the Cowichan Lake Weir; Secure Conservation Water License.

2024 marked significant progress toward rebuilding the weir at Lake Cowichan. This new weir will help maintain strong flows in the Cowichan River, which is crucial for everyone and everything the River sustains. It is a key component of the broader Cowichan River Resiliency Project, led by Cowichan Tribes.

Key milestones this year included: a major funding announcement and commitment from the Premier at Lake Cowichan on World Water Day (March 22), the Technical Working Group, a collaborative team addressing challenges and unknowns, with senior staff from Cowichan Tribes, the CVRD, the Province, and Domtar/Catalyst Crofton, coordinated by the CWB, a parallel Government-to-Government table tackling legal and jurisdictional questions as they arise; and fundraising efforts to address inflationary costs.

Rebuilding the weir has been the CWB's top priority for nearly a decade and represents the efforts of hundreds of people working toward this goal for much longer.

Objectives 2024-2026

A conservation water license is awarded.

Weir reconstruction begins, adding 70 centimeters of height to improve water storage capacity.

A collaborative management agreement has been established (e.g. Joint Works Agreement) to manage critical water flow infrastructure and in-season decision making.

Activities 2024

- Feb -- \$14M awarded to Cowichan Tribes by the Province.
- March – Premier Eby and Minister Cullen mark World Water Day at Lake Cowichan. Minister Cullen commits to new and novel approaches to helping communities address climate change. The Premier calls replacing the weir with a higher model to store more water ‘a no brainer.’
- April-ongoing – Cowichan Tribes, Province, and weir partners active in a G2G table and a Technical Working Group focused on the detailed work needed to submit a Conservation Water License. CWB takes a lead in collaboration between partners, project management, communications and events, and bi-weekly meeting facilitation.

For more information please visit: <https://cowichanlakeweir.ca>

Sustainable Flows ii) Xwulqw'selu (Koksilah) Watershed Planning (XWP)

Objectives 2024-2026

The Xwulqw'selu Watershed Plan (and WSP) are created and legally recognized through the joint authority of Cowichan Tribes and the Province.

Established model for WSP implementation that uses a whole-of-watershed, Indigenous co-governance framework.

Activities

- Provided advisory and communications support to the XWP process, including supporting meetings and workshops for the roughly 30 dedicated volunteers serving on either the Collaborative Community Advisory Table or the Cowichan Guidance Group. The two groups gathered at Bright Angel Park in 2024 to share ideas, listen, learn, and envision a better future together.
- Provided administrative support to Cowichan Tribes in their role as Responsible Person for the XWP.
- Participated in linked initiatives that support the XWP (e.g. Xwulqw'selu Connections, Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable, Koksilah Working Group).
- Participated in collaborative in-season drought management and communications as needed through the Koksilah Low Flow Working Group while the XWP is being developed.

For more information please visit: <https://www.koksilahwater.ca/watershed>

Fish Sustainability

- With the financial support of the Pacific Salmon Foundation, and an incredible level of collaboration, we were able to avoid another fish kill in the Cowichan River this summer. Beginning March 2024, the Cowichan community collectively came together with Provincial and Federal specialists to develop a robust monitoring plan. According to expert Dr. Ken Ashley, the Cowichan River was the best monitored river in BC this summer. After the second workshop on response strategy, we had weekly communication with all major decision-makers in the watershed for quick response to the monitoring results — pulling the needed levers to keep the water as healthy and fish-friendly as possible. We finished the year with a workshop that allowed us to debrief, reflect and plan for 2025. Keep your eyes open for a CWB Guidebook that can help other communities in crisis.

Riparian Health

- Food, shelter and water are considered the basic needs of life; and for everything that lives in the river, those first two needs point to healthy riparian habitats. We move into 2025 with a deeper partnership with Quw'utsun' Cultural Connections Society and their Xpey' (Cedar) project. This project is taking actions to mitigate the loss of Xpey' (Cedar),

a cultural keystone species, that is threatened by climate change and land development. In addition, we are launching an exciting pilot project on Kelvin Creek where we will complete a GIS map to identify and prioritize areas for restoration.

Watershed Connections

- Hosted 5 [Speaker Nights](https://cowichanwatershedboard.ca/content/cwb-viu-speakers-series/) in collaboration with VIU Cowichan <https://cowichanwatershedboard.ca/content/cwb-viu-speakers-series/>
- Hosted the annual [Lower Cowichan River Cleanup](#)
- Supported the CLRSS [Celebrating Water Festival](#)
- Participated in and provided funding for Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable's [Quw'utsun Sta'lo' Skweyul](#)
- Produced the third video in the Why Fish Need Water series – Why Fish Need People. This video shines a spotlight on some of the many people who are acting on the teaching that “when we look after the watershed, the watershed looks after us.” [Watch the video here.](#)
- Participated in the [Xwulqw'selu Connections](#) project, including their remarkable Project 84,000 tribute to the lives of fish lost due to 2023 drought and water quality conditions in the Cowichan River
- Through [social media](#), ENews, and announcements at our meetings, promoted the work of our partners in the watershed that help residents connect with nature through citizen science, restoration and recreation.

Wise Water Use

- As part of the Watershed Board's involvement in the Koksilah Low Flow Working Group, and with the help of a network of residents, we created and distributed signs to remind residents to conserve water when the Koksilah flows dropped low this summer. Unfortunately, most of the signs disappeared within a few weeks, signaling that we have more work to do to create a culture of conservation, where everyone does their part.
- Participated in the Koksilah Low Flow Working Group and Xwulqw'selu Watershed Planning process, both of which include a focus on water conservation measures with partners and community.

Estuarine Health

- Provided coordination support to the Cowichan Estuary Nature Center and the Cowichan Tribes marine team to collaborate on the future direction of this highly valued educational asset. The November Speaker Night brought these groups together to co-host a Brackish Biodiversity estuary education night.
- Recognizing the vital role estuaries play in watershed and aquatic health, as well as their connection to local food systems, the CWB was happy to support the Nature Trust / Ducks Unlimited Estuary Restoration Project. A portion of land that has served as valued farmland for many years—but is crucial for sustainable estuarine function—is being repurposed for Indigenous agriculture. For generations, the Quw'utsun Peoples cultivated, gathered, and fished in the estuary, but access has been limited for the past

century. This project aims to restore access to salmon and other native foods—the original local foods of this area—supporting a future that honors both cultural traditions and ecological balance.

Water Quality

- See above for the significant water quality work initiated in 2024 in response to the 2023 Fish Kill, and the resulting guidebook.
- CWB was also pleased to host two youth interns working on water quality research and reports:
 - Liam Janke, UVic Sustainability Scholar, 2024 who drafted a report, Assessing the Impacts of Nonpoint Source Pollution in the Cowichan River.
<https://cowichanwatershedboard.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Submission-to-CWB-Final.pdf>
 - Phaedra Douglass who created an easy to use map-based library of the best available information sources about water quality in the watershed.
<https://cowichanwatershedboard.ca/document/water-quality-monitoring-location-in-the-cowichan-and-koksilah-watersheds/>
- We also completed the MOE recommended 5-year Attainment Sampling in the upper watershed in partnership with Cowichan Lake and River Stewardship Society.

Building Partnerships

Objectives 2024-2026

Relationships and functional decision-making capacity of, and between, the CWB Partners for the benefit of the watershed are strong.

The Cowichan Watershed CWB is recognized by its foundational Partners (Cowichan Tribes and CVRD), water policy leaders and senior governments as a successful model for supporting local watershed governance that incorporates Indigenous co-leadership and authority in the watershed.

The CWB's Governance Manual is updated by consensus, and adopted by both Cowichan Tribes Chief and Council and CVRD Council as the foundation of their partnership.

Watershed authority holders have a trusted and respectful space where they come together and work together for the benefit of the Cowichan Watershed.

Nutsamat kws yaay'us tth qa'

We come together as a whole
to work together to be stronger
as partners for the watershed.

Activities

- Monthly - convened regular monthly CWB meetings.
- Monthly - facilitated Co-Chair meetings and/or briefings and other communications of the Co-Chairs with each other, external stakeholders, and other levels of government.

- Monthly - Incorporated Hul'qumi'num' into CWB meetings and events, and supported staff to take language lessons from an Elder.
- July - Organized a bus tour to the river and the weir for CWB members, Cowichan Tribes council, CVRD Board, and senior staff from both partners.
- Through partnership projects, improved inter-staff meetings with Cowichan Tribes Lulumexun / CVRD Environment managers.

Watershed Knowledge and Understanding

Core Communications

An important role of the CWB is to build public understanding of, and connection with, the watershed, as well as fostering links and partnerships between the many organizations actively working to restore its health and resilience. This is done through CWB meetings and the working groups, an e-news list, websites and social media, articles in the local newspaper, public education projects. See the [website](#) or [Facebook page](#).

Objectives 2024-2026

The CWB is helping CVRD and Cowichan Tribes achieve watershed communications and community education goals.

CWB is seen as a trusted source of excellent information and perspectives regarding the health of the Cowichan Watershed. Media seek out CWB for perspective on their stories.

Website content is up to date and reflects the priority work and perspectives of the CWB and is user friendly. Content is easy to search, and an excellent resource for anyone interested in the Cowichan Watershed.

CWB phone, email and mail are monitored and responded to in a timely and professional manner.

Updated CWB graphics and logo better reflect our Indigenous partnership.

Our social media pages are engaging, educational and accurate.

CWB Working Groups are well supported with communications tools.

Activities

- 💧 Maintain communications services for the CWB including responding to emails, writing, editing, report preparation, and official correspondence.
- 💧 Maintain an image library.
- 💧 Respond quickly to all media inquiries to arrange interviews with the Co-Chairs, their designate, or alternatively, with a knowledgeable and engaging local spokesperson.

- 💧 Update and improve website, including adding Projects pages and pages for different parts of the watershed (Koksilah, Somenos, Lake, estuary), and Heritage River section with links to partners.
- 💧 Update CWB logo/branding.
- 💧 Use social media to build understanding of the need for change, confidence in the proposed solutions, and an open door for respectful dialogue.

Community Involvement Projects

The Watershed Board supports and creates activities to build connections between people, organizations, cultures, knowledge, and the watershed. Efforts are made to deepen appreciation for the reciprocal relationships we all have with watersheds, and to learn where attention is needed through open and respectful dialogue. The Board also understands that a little fun can go a long way to achieving these goals.



The Speakers Series features engaging speakers sharing their knowledge and expertise on topics relevant to the well-being and sustainability of the Cowichan watershed within Quw'utsun territory. It has been running since 2014! The series is hosted with the support of VIU Cowichan, the Real Estate Foundation of BC, and our generous guest speakers.

Objectives 2024-2026

CWB's priority projects, including the ongoing transition to Indigenous collaborative governance, are supported with clear and engaging communications.

There is a broad understanding of the need for change and confidence in the proposed solutions.

The culture of caring, and a respect for using sound science and knowledge to support decisions is sustained.

Open community dialogue is facilitated, including embracing local knowledge, energy and dedication through face-to-face community activities and events.

Activities

- 💧 Engage local people in our key priorities, specifically the Weir Replacement and Xwulqw'selu Watershed Planning. Learn from and integrate local knowledge and experience in our work.
- 💧 Host a Speaker Series; engaging, entertaining speakers on topics of interest to the public, by people with strong expertise on the topic, and relevant to the Cowichan

watershed, organized in collaboration with Working Groups and CWB members to highlight their priorities.

- 💧 Create safe spaces for open community dialogue through face-to-face community activities such as our new “Talk to Us” Tent where we listen to community questions, interests, confusion, etc.
- 💧 Support communications to share the results of CWB technical projects.
- 💧 Animate the Big Dancing Fish - Sth’aqwi; celebrate people working to protect salmon. Develop a brochure and website updates to communicate the new CWB Targets when confirmed.
- 💧 Host Annual Lower River Cleanup
- 💧 Continue the “Why Fish Need Water” video series.
- 💧 Participate in Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable meetings, and where helpful, directly with member organizations.

Watershed Knowledge, Information, and Data (WIKD)

Easy and equitable access to Knowledge of the watershed is an important part of empowering good watershed governance.

Objectives 2024-2026

Decision-makers and stewardship organizations have good and equal access to all available watershed related data and knowledge.

Updated water quality sampling data is easily accessible for the Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds.

Science and knowledge of the watershed, including scientific data and Indigenous ways of knowing is empowering watershed stewardship and sustainability.

Activities

- 💧 Completed the 5 in 30 Water Quality Attainment sampling of Upper Cowichan River and Lake, in partnership with Cowichan Lake and River Stewards and BC Ministry of Environment.
- 💧 Supported interns to make all CWB’s Water Quality data more accessible via links and maps on the website.
<https://cowichanwatershedboard.ca/document/water-quality-monitoring-location-in-the-cowichan-and-koksilah-watersheds/>

Organizational Resilience

The organizational health and stability of the Cowichan Watershed Board provides the foundation for the important work we do.

Governance and Administration

Objectives 2024-2026

The CWB has a strong financial base to allow us to be resilient and responsive to the needs of the watershed. We ensure responsible fiscal oversight through the work of the co-governed Cowichan Watershed Society.

CWB activities and way of working align with both the Annual Impact Plan and the CWB Governance Manual.

Activities

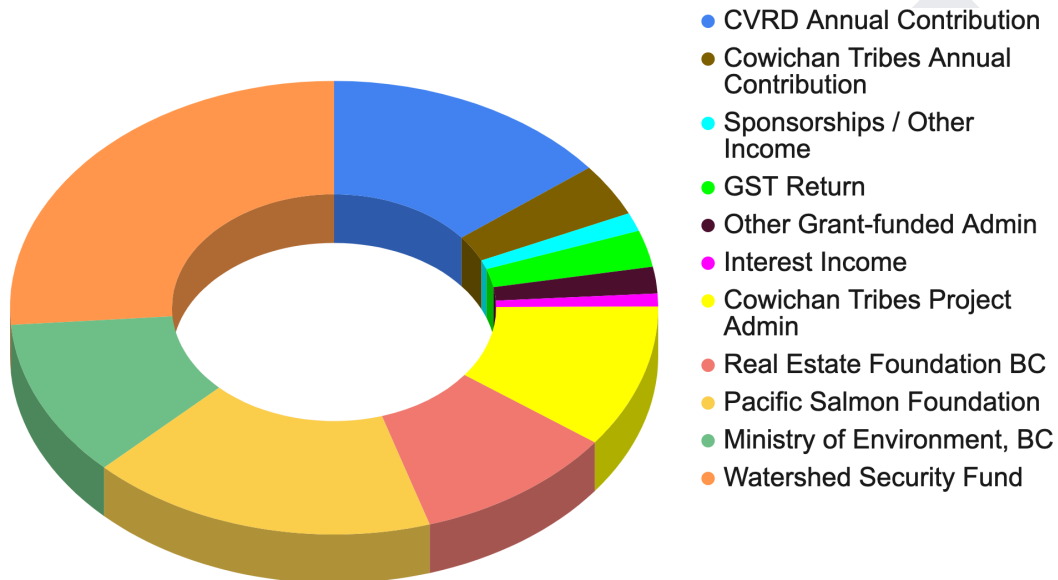
- 💧 Finalized the review of the CWB Governance Manual to incorporate CWB supported recommendations from Setting the Course, and other updates.
- 💧 Solidified the staff team of 4 [core staff](#) and started exploration of how to expand and diversify.
- 💧 Expanded Project Staff capacity through two youth internships, summer staff to support River Cleanup, and communications and graphics support.
- 💧 Provided consistent budget tracking and timely reporting on grants and funding commitments for the Watershed Society, partners, and funders.
- 💧 Engaged Board members as participants in CWB work (e.g. presentations to conferences, schools, etc; Speaker Night MCs; River Cleanup route leaders; Society members; etc.). In 2024 this included a wonderful day visiting the Quw'utsun Sta'lo' and the weir at Lake Cowichan in a bus tour with CWB members, elected members from the Cowichan Tribes and CVRD councils, and senior staff from both partners.
- 💧 Maintained office filing structure for both base operations and all project work.
- 💧 Grew the Society's contingency savings fund by an additional \$9,379.19 to help a) manage cash flow; b) withstand unforeseen circumstances and c) improve our ability to respond quickly to situations.
- 💧 Build capacity through securing a 3-year grant from the Watershed Security Fund to help us do our important work, better.

Financials

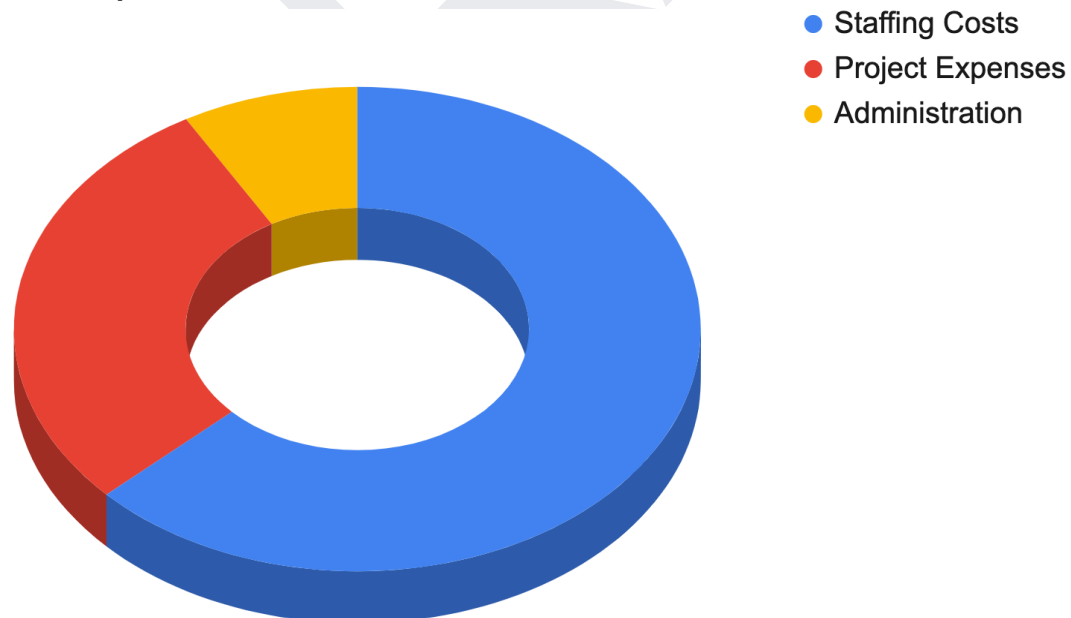
The financial administration for the CWB is provided by the **Cowichan Watershed Society (Society)**, a registered BC non-profit society (#S0061620).

The two charts below provide an overview of our total revenue sources and total expenses. Additional details are included in the accompanying narrative.

Total Revenue



Total Expenses



The CWS receives annual core funding from the CWB's founding partners, Cowichan Tribes, and Cowichan Valley Regional District. The partners have contributed to core CWB functions at \$20,000 and \$50,000 respectively since 2011, with the CVRD committing to increase its annual contribution to \$77,000 starting in 2024. These funds are critical to sustaining the Cowichan Watershed Board. Annual costs include core staffing, meeting expenses, book-keeping support, community engagement and partner communications, insurance, etc.

In addition, the Society supports the CWB priorities by obtaining Project Grants and Project Contracts to advance specific objectives as outlined in the Impact Plan. Project budgets are typically 1–3-year budgets, which change annually to reflect priorities at that time and as additional funding resources (grants or contracts) allow.

Current Project Grants supporting the work of the CWB include:

- a three-year grant from the Real Estate Foundation of BC (REFBC) to support the Shift to Indigenous Co-Governance;
- BC Ministry of Environment (MOE) to support Water Quality Attainment in the Cowichan and Koksilah Watershed;
- Pacific Salmon Foundation to support the CWB in addressing the Drought Induced Fish Kill on the Cowichan River; Water Quality testing and Internships.
- the Watershed Security Fund, which was established in 2023 through a historic contribution by the Province of B.C. of \$100 million to kick start the creation of the Fund. The First Nations Water Caucus – with the First Nations Fisheries Council – and the Real Estate Foundation of BC provide interim stewardship and support the co-development of a permanent entity for the Fund. The CWS received \$400,000 over 3 years for our programming.

The Society also provides services under contract. Currently Cowichan Tribes has contracted the Society to provide significant administrative support for the Koksilah Watershed Planning process and Cowichan Weir. These funds are administered on behalf of Cowichan Tribes and as such are not included in the graphs above, except to recognize the grant funded administrative funds that the CWS collects to enable us to support these processes.