

Lower Cowichan River Cleanup 2025 Statement of Intent

At the annual Lower Cowichan River (Quw'utsun Sta'lo) Cleanup, more than 100 members of our community come together each year to remove more than a metric ton of garbage from the sta'lo' and the surrounding watersheds. This effort comes at a particularly important time for the sta'lo', a time when many of the creatures that call the river home are under particular stress after several hot, dry months. When we come together at the end of the summer for the River Cleanup, our efforts help to not only remove a staggering amount of potential pollutants that may put extra pressure on river-dwelling creatures when water levels are low and temperatures are hot, but also prevent garbage from being washed downstream as the fall rains arrive.

Bringing our community together to celebrate and care for our watershed is the driving force behind the River Cleanup. At the Cowichan Watershed Board, we are working to put together an event that is both an opportunity to give, as well as one that has something to offer for kids and families, Elders, people of all abilities, and all members of our community. It is this coming together that makes the River Cleanup so special, reflecting our guiding principle of "*Nutsamat kws yaay'us tth qa*": We come together as a whole to work together to be stronger as partners for the watershed. These goals cannot be achieved without careful attention to creating and supporting overarching opportunities to participate in the Cleanup and ensuring that the Cleanup is able to simultaneously address the needs of the river and the community that calls this watershed home.

We recognize that the term "cleanup" is sometimes used synonymously when referring to the way that the unhoused community is "cleaned out", displaced, and dispossessed by way of various enforcement agencies. At the River Cleanup, we are clear in our intentions to only remove garbage from the river, not people's belongings, and to respect the space and privacy of unhoused community members. This conversation is something we bring annually to the route leaders as well as to every volunteer who participates to make this event happen by addressing it at the opening of our event each year. It is a conversation that cannot be neglected if we hope to work with the community as strong partners for the watershed.

As a part of our commitment to ensuring that our Cleanup is respectful of the unhoused community living along the river, we work to ensure advance and ongoing communication around the Cleanup's date and intent. To help us connect with the unhoused community regarding the River Cleanup, we work with community partners, including the Substance Use Integrated Team (SUIT) from Island Health, to help spread the word about the event, and connect with the unhoused community about areas where volunteers can support the removal of garbage and waste. In advance of the event, our staff walk the Cleanup routes to identify areas that may need extra attention. While out on the routes, they also share information about the upcoming Cleanup when the opportunity arises and connect with people who may have insight into what is, or isn't, considered garbage along the river.

We look forward to seeing you at the River Cleanup and working together as a community to support the health of our beloved sta'lo' for generations to come.