



Regional Board Report

Request for Decision

To: Regional Board
From: Director of Development & Engineering Services
Date: March 20, 2025
Subject: Regional Agricultural Strategy (Phase 2) – Update

Voting Entitlement: *All Directors - Unweighted Corporate Vote - Simple Majority (LGA s.208)*

Purpose: To provide a progress update on the Regional Agricultural Strategy (Phase 2).

Executive Summary:

Agriculture is an important part of the heritage and cultural identity of the Central Okanagan. It contributes to the economy, the landscape, and to the high quality of life enjoyed by residents. Several challenges are facing agriculture in the region, such as pressures from population growth, a changing climate, and an evolving economy. In response, the RDCO is updating the Regional Agricultural Strategy (RAS), which will facilitate a coordinated regional approach to supporting a thriving agricultural sector in the Central Okanagan.

The Regional Agricultural Strategy (Phase 2) was launched in October 2024. Since initiation, a draft vision statement and focus areas have been developed, with input from representatives from the agricultural sector, development industry and municipal, provincial, and first nation government partners. Based on this input, seven Key Focus Areas have been identified: 1) preserve and protect the agricultural land base; 2) support and collaborate on agricultural planning with WFN and OKIB; 3) address soil and fill deposit and removal; 4) prepare for emergencies and climate change with agriculture in mind; 5) continue to regionally advance water security for farming; 6) create certainty for farm worker housing; and 7) communicate and advocate the importance of local agriculture.

The project team identified several challenges and opportunities within each of the Key Focus Areas which are described in Attachment 1: "What We Heard Report". To address these opportunities and challenges, the project team developed several early draft recommended actions, which are described in Attachment 2. Moving forward, the project team will refine the list of actions and prepare a Draft Regional Agricultural Strategy for presentation to the Regional Board. The Draft Regional Agricultural Strategy will then be shared with the public in early summer, and the Final Regional Agricultural Strategy will be brought to the Regional Board for endorsement, anticipated later this fall.

Recommendation(s):

THAT the Regional Board receive the Regional Agricultural Strategy (Phase 2) update for information;

AND THAT the Regional Board direct staff to proceed with developing the Draft Regional Agricultural Strategy based on the report from the Director of Development and Engineering Services dated March 20, 2025.

Respectfully submitted by: Thor Goodman, Planner and Mariah VanZerr, Regional Planning Manager

Report Approved by: Danielle Noble-Brandt, Director of Development & Engineering Services

Approved for Agenda: Sally Ginter, Chief Administrative Officer

Strategic Plan Alignment:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emergency preparedness | <input type="checkbox"/> Truth and reconciliation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Health and wellness | ✓ Environment and climate – Regional priority only |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regional transportation | ✓ Growth and development – Electoral Area priority only |

Background:

The Central Okanagan is one of Canada's fastest growing regions. Over the next several years, the RDCO is advancing key regional planning initiatives to address topics that impact each government partner and pose challenges across jurisdictional boundaries. Since agriculture is an important part of the Central Okanagan's economy, heritage and quality of life, a regional approach allows for enhanced coordination on shared cross-jurisdictional challenges, such as pressures from population growth, a changing climate, and an evolving regional economy. A regional approach has the advantage of tackling complex inter-jurisdictional issues comprehensively, optimizing outcomes and maximizing resource efficiencies toward the effective achievement of shared goals.

The RDCO's original Agricultural Plan was established in 2005. The necessity to update the plan emerged as a priority within the Regional Growth Strategy Priority Projects Plan in 2017. Phase 1 culminated with the completion of the [Central Okanagan Agricultural Background Report](#) in winter 2022. Phase 2 commenced in October 2024 and aims to revise the Regional Agricultural Strategy following the steps outlined in the timeline below. This strategy is being developed with the assistance of Upland Agricultural Consulting and is expected to be finalized by fall 2025.

Regional Agricultural Strategy (Phase 2) – Timeline:



Regional Agricultural Strategy (Phase 2) – Engagement Update:

Regional agricultural strategies are an effective way of integrating agricultural, farming, and local food system priorities into local and regional government policies, practices, and functions. Upon the commencement of Phase 2, the RAS Working Group was established, and the draft RAS Vision

Statement along with key focus areas were formulated. These were further refined through engagement with key interested parties, including interviews and focus groups with the development industry, agriculture industry, and local, provincial and First Nation government partners.

RAS Working Group

The RAS Working Group plays a crucial role in offering feedback and direction for the RAS, guiding the project's progress. This group includes representatives from member municipality governments, Westbank First Nation, the Cross-commodity Leadership Support Project, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Interior Health, the OK Sterile Insect Release program, and the regional agri-food sector. Since its inception in October 2024, the Working Group has convened three times to help shape the vision statement, objectives, and focus areas of the RAS.

RAS Vision Statement

The vision statement defines the RAS's long-term goals and aspirations, guiding all its objectives and policies. Crafted by the RAS Working Group and refined through feedback, it reflects the region's agricultural aspirations:

Central Okanagan agriculture feeds our community, our economy, and our future. It is based on strong relationships between the farming community, all levels of government, and Indigenous communities. Farmland is protected, farms are thriving, and the community supports a regional food system that sustains present and future generations through a strong local business environment, water security, climate resilience, and the responsible adoption of technology.

The RAS will outline actions to support this vision. Furthermore, an implementation plan will be created to establish a monitoring and evaluation framework with specific targets and metrics for tracking the progress of the RAS over the next decade.

Focus Group Sessions

Seven Key Focus Areas were created with the RAS Working Group and presented to three focus groups: development industry representatives, municipal and first nation staff, and agricultural community representatives. The seven discussion areas are:



Preserve and protect the agricultural land base



Support and collaborate on agricultural planning with WFN and OKIB



Address soil and fill deposit and removal



Prepare for emergencies and climate change with agriculture in mind



Continue to work regionally towards water security for farming



Create certainty for farm worker housing



Communicate and advocate the importance of local agriculture

During each focus group, participants were asked to provide feedback on the draft vision statement and discuss challenges and opportunities related to the Key Focus areas. The diversity of disciplines represented by the three focus groups allowed for input from the development and agricultural sectors, as well as local government perspectives.

Interviews

Interview invitations were issued to various individuals, organizations, and agencies that were unable to participate in the focus group sessions. The interviews included representatives from Westbank First Nation, Okanagan Nation Alliance, BC Ministry of Environment, Central Okanagan Economic Development Commission, Interior Health, Small Scale Food Processors Association, irrigation districts, Okanagan Tree Fruit Project, BC Grape Growers Association, University of British Columbia Okanagan, and the Southern Interior Construction Association.

What We Heard Report

The engagement approach provided a comprehensive understanding of regional agriculture needs and priorities. By involving stakeholders from various sectors, focus groups and interviews identified challenges, opportunities, and collaboration areas, fostering a cohesive regional development strategy. Below are examples of challenges and opportunities for each Key Focus Area heard during the engagement process:

- Drought and decreased precipitation are posing water security challenges for agriculture.
- Emergency and natural hazard events are complicating the relocation of livestock.
- The increasing demand for new housing is leading to a higher volume of soil that requires relocation.
- There is a shortage of authorized (legal) soil deposit locations, which can result in farms becoming unintended soil dumping sites.
- The zoning and regulatory frameworks for farmworker housing vary across the region, causing implementation difficulties.

A complete summary of the feedback received during engagement can be found in Attachment 1: What We Heard Report.

Early Draft Recommended Actions

To address the opportunities and challenges identified in the What We Heard Report, the project team developed several early draft recommended actions, described in Attachment 2: “Regional Agricultural Strategy (Phase 2) – Presentation”.

Next Steps

Moving forward, the project team will refine the early list of recommended actions and share them with the RAS Working Group for review and feedback. The project team will use the refined list of actions to prepare the Draft Regional Agricultural Strategy. The Draft Regional Agricultural Strategy will encompass policies, actions, and an implementation plan designed to address key challenges and promote the agricultural sector's success in the Central Okanagan, both now and in the future.

The Draft Regional Agricultural Strategy will be presented to the Regional Board in early summer, prior to public engagement. A public open house and community survey will gather feedback on the draft and a Final Regional Agricultural Strategy will be submitted to the Regional Board for endorsement, expected later this fall.

Considerations:**Organizational/External:**

Development Services staff is responsible for the overall project management, contract management, and administrative functions of project delivery. The Regional Agricultural Strategy will inform future regional planning projects and initiatives such as the RGS update, and other key land use policy and planning frameworks.

The Working Group for the Regional Agricultural Strategy includes representatives from member municipality governments, Westbank First Nation, the Cross-commodity Leadership Support Project, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Interior Health, the OK Sterile Insect Release program, and the regional agri-food sector. Additionally, several Focus Groups have been held to inform the Regional Agricultural Strategy. Focus Group members have included representatives from the development industry, municipal and first nation staff, and agricultural community.

Financial:

The Regional Board has approved \$106,080 as part of annual budget deliberations to support this work. The RDCO also received a grant from the Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC, which is providing \$10,000 in funding to offset the total amount for the Phase 2 Regional Agricultural Strategy update.

Considerations not applicable:

- Legal/Statutory Authority
- Alternate Recommendation

Attachment(s): 1. What We Heard Report
 2. Regional Agricultural Strategy (Phase 2) - Presentation
