



Regional Agricultural Strategy

Regional District of Central Okanagan

“What We Heard” Engagement Summary Report

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1.0 Introduction

The objective of the Regional Agricultural Strategy (RAS) is to develop a regional approach to supporting a thriving agricultural sector in the Central Okanagan. The intent is to address key challenges facing agriculture in the region, such as pressures from population growth, a changing climate, and an evolving economy. The RAS will utilize feedback to develop actions and strategies to support and protect agriculture in the Central Okanagan for the following 10 years.

The RDCO's original Regional Agricultural Plan was developed in 2005. The need to update the plan was first identified as a priority within the Regional Growth Strategy Priority Projects Plan in 2017. Phase 1 included the completion of the Central Okanagan Agricultural Background Report in winter 2022. Development of the Regional Agricultural Strategy (Phase 2) is currently underway and anticipated for completion in fall 2025.

2.0 Engagement Objectives

The engagement process included engaging representatives who are involved in agriculture in the Central Okanagan and who are impacted by, and involved in, soil deposit and removal. Engagement activities contributed to the consulting team's understanding of the local context, including assets, gaps, opportunities, and challenges facing both the development industry and the agri-food sector. The consulting team followed the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) engagement goals and spectrum. The following IAP2 goals helped guide public engagement activities:

- Inform: To provide balanced and objective information to assist the audience in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions.
- Consult: To obtain feedback and input on alternatives, and/or decisions through the project process;
- Involve: To ensure concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered; and
- Collaborate: To find common ground and identify preferred solutions.

The engagement work centred around the five objectives of the Regional Agricultural Strategy (Figure 1.)

1. Develop a regional strategy to protect agricultural land;
2. Promote resilience and the economic viability of farming
3. Encourage economically, environmentally, and socially beneficial agricultural practices;
4. Promote food security, equity, and well-being of residents; and
5. Develop regional soil management policy.



Figure 1. The five objectives of the Regional Agricultural Strategy.

3.0 Engagement Activities

Engagement activities included Working Group meetings, Focus Group sessions, and interviews. The engagement work provided a forum for participants to weigh in on the five RAS objectives by identifying challenges and indicating opportunities.

3.1 Regional Agricultural Strategy Working Group Meetings

The RAS working group was formed in October 2024 as a coalition of representatives from member municipality governments, Westbank First Nation, the Cross-Commodity Leadership Support Project, Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Interior Health, the OK Sterile Insect Release program, and five individuals representing the regional agri-food sector. The terms of reference of the Working Group indicates that their role is to provide feedback and direction regarding the RAS and to help guide the project process. A total of three (3) meetings were held with the working group from October 2024 to January 2025 and another two (2) meetings are planned for the spring and summer of 2025.

3.2 Key Representative Focus Group Sessions

Three (3) focus group sessions were hosted with the following audiences:

- Representatives from the development industry, including the Urban Development Institute, held online on the morning of December 17, 2024.
- Local government and First Nations representatives held on the afternoon of January 14, 2025 at the RDCO office.
- Representatives of the agricultural community held in the evening of January 14, 2025 at the RDCO office.

Each session was 1.5-3.0 hours long and was attended by 10-15 individuals, plus RDCO planning staff and the consulting team members, who facilitated the events.



Figure 2. Focus group session with members of the agricultural community.

3.3 Interviews

Interview invitations were extended to individuals, organizations, and agencies who were not able to attend the focus group sessions. The interviews were held via Zoom or by phone. The interviews included individuals from Westbank First Nation, Okanagan Nation Alliance, BC Ministry of Environment, Central Okanagan Economic Development Commission, Interior Health, Small Scale Food Processors Association, Irrigation

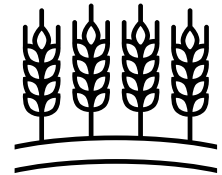
Districts, Okanagan Tree Fruit Project, BC Grape Growers Association, University of British Columbia Okanagan, and the Southern Interior Construction Association.

4.0 What We Heard: Key Themes

The following list of themes are presented based on the five objectives of the Regional Agricultural Strategy.

4.1 Preserve and Protect the Agricultural Land Base

- Currently there is inconsistency in terms of the residential footprint allowable on agricultural land depending on the municipality and/or RDCO zoning. While there are upper limits imposed on the principal residence by the province, the overall footprint (including garage, driveway, septic, yard, and accessory residential structures) is determined at the local level. Instituting a consistent residential footprint within each community's zoning would "equalize development opportunities", particularly for non-farmers seeking to live in agricultural areas.
- There is a need to work towards minimizing the barriers in place that limit densification in the urban core (e.g. new builds in West Kelowna have height restrictions based on fire department response capabilities).
- Participants indicated inconsistencies as to what is allowed on farmland and/or what bylaws are being enforced. There is a need to make sure definitions and bylaws are applied consistently across the region.
- Protection of farmland extends beyond the ALR boundary, as there is a lot of arable land in the Central Okanagan that is not necessarily in the ALR. This land needs similar protection albeit at the local zoning level. An example provided was concerns around the removal of peat from land that may or may not be in the ALR.
- Invasive weeds are a serious threat to farmland. In order for a bylaw to work well there would need to be consistency and support from across the region.
- Participants noted that support from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (MAF) and the Agricultural Land Commission is critical. One example provided was that mapping conducted 1-2 years ago by MAF can help to inform farmland protection initiatives and water security planning.
- Other issues mentioned that were outside the direct jurisdiction or control of the RDCO include: Farmers would like support/advice for crop production and processing for diversified crops; the high cost of land is being fuelled by speculation and making it difficult to get into farming as a career.



4.2 Support and Collaborate on Agricultural Planning with WFN and OKIB

- WFN is developing an invasive plants list and ensuring that traditional plants are not included in the list.
- While WFN has a building permit application process that requires detailed monitoring of soil and fill movement, it does not yet have a soil bylaw. WFN has indicated interest in observing the direction that the RDCO decides to take with soil and fill policies and will aim to align with this work.
- Okanagan Nation Alliance representative indicated Syilx water rights should be acknowledged in regional water planning and that there are no Indigenous advocacy groups for ranching or farming BC.
- There has not yet been participation from OKIB in the focus groups however efforts are being made to conduct interviews with key staff.

4.3 Address Soil and Fill Deposit and Removal

The importance of this issue was underscored at all meetings as one that is not just about the protection of agricultural land, but also about the ability for member municipalities to meet their housing development targets. The desire is to avoid creating a situation whereby jurisdictions without a soil bylaw (e.g. RDCO

Electoral Areas) end up receiving large amounts of unauthorized and often contaminated soil from rapid development occurring around the region.

The discussion on this topic was deeper than the other theme areas, and therefore the level of detail is more robust. A summary of the discussion is provided here.

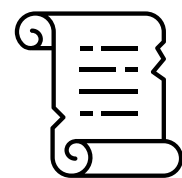
Availability of Deposit Locations

- Development permits for residential projects result in a large amount of fill and exceed the ability of existing deposit sites to accommodate the volumes being produced.
- The provincial push to create more housing is generating a large proportion of the fill challenges, therefore there should be collaboration between government levels to find suitable deposit locations.
- For larger scale developments there is a lack of viable locations for soil deposit close to the core metropolitan areas, which is leading to delays in development projects. Some of the factors identified included landfill capacity and that land is too expensive to set up privately managed deposit sites.
- Development industry representatives also noted that when deposit sites are located far from source sites, that the additional haulage distances exacerbate the cost of development and impacts the overall price of housing.
- Local government staff also noted that long hauling distances do not align with greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction targets and climate adaptation goals.
- Solutions that were identified by the focus group participants included the development of a demand – supply app or other such inventory, that would allow those who have soil and fill to move be matched with sites that are authorized to accept the material.
- There was some interest in involving provincial agencies to discuss the viability of using mines, Crown land sites or other provincial locations to deposit fill material. Determining where materials from past hazards events (such as housing material due to wildfires, or soil and rock materials due to landslides) are deposited by the province could be helpful.
- Local government representatives indicated that industry has a role to play in determining where suitable fill sites are located, and that perhaps those conversations need to be facilitated between industry and the province.
- It was acknowledged that there will be costs involved if greater tracking requirements and soil-related regulations are brought in, but many participants pointed out that perhaps the industry had been able to operate without enough “guardrails” for too long and regulations are now warranted before the problems have become too acute.



Potential Regulatory Tool Options

- Focus group participants agreed that a soil bylaw for the RDCO Electoral Areas would have the immediate effect of better tracking soil movement within the region, however there are other tools that the regional district could utilize. For example, some municipal partners tackle soil permitting within the Development Permit process and include it as a requirement under Development Permit Area guidelines. However, it is important to design these processes such that they do not result in soil tracking exemptions.
- Engineering plans and remediation plans can also support these development permit applications and provide details regarding soil removal and deposit plans.
- There was an overall concern that without a soil bylaw, the RDCO Electoral Areas will be the only subareas in the region that are not regulated and will subsequently become an informal designated dumping area for unauthorized fill material.
- Regional consistency as to what criteria will trigger a soil permit application is key.
- Local governments in other areas (such as the Fraser Valley) are working with the ALC strategically to investigate suspicious soil and fill deposit activity. However, they are trying to tackle challenges

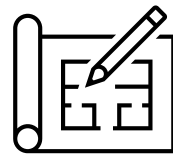


after they occur because they did not have any soil bylaws proactively in place. The Electoral Areas of the Fraser Valley Regional District are now having to play catch-up and apply significant resources to deal with an increase in unauthorized activities.

- A multi-pronged policy and regulatory approach is going to be required to see changes occur on the ground and this could involve sharing resources across the region.
- Both the WFN and District of Lake Country indicated they would be updating their soil policies and regulations based on the direction(s) that RDCO decides to take on the issue. Furthermore, the City of West Kelowna indicated that they may also consider revising their soil bylaw if an example or template was provided by the RDCO, in an effort to support a consistent regional approach.

Current Permitting Processes and Timelines

- There are challenges associated with the order, timing, and coordination amongst government agencies responsible for issuing development and/or soil permits.
- The inconsistencies and timeframes lead to confusion amongst applicants. Participants suggested that government agencies meet and develop a procedure that is more transparent, explains the timelines clearly, and also outlines the types of notifications of intent and/or applications required.
- Industry representatives noted that when soil and fill permit applications are submitted via established processes, they sometimes become matters that the public takes interest in, and are therefore subject to political pressure. However, it was felt by industry that it would be more appropriate for the applications to be weighed and considered based on technical merits.
- Currently, the ALC process is not implicitly connected to the local government permitting process for applications stemming from the ALR, and this could be reviewed.



Role of Qualified Environmental Professionals

- Focus group participants understood the need for including reports from Qualified Environmental Professionals (QEP) with soil permit applications, however there was overall agreement that there are a lack of QEPs specializing in soil removal and deposit, and that furthermore there is a lack of transparency between government agencies and private landowners as to which QEPs are considered acceptable.
- While there is reticence around provincial and local governments vetting QEPs publicly, all in attendance were in agreement that a greater number of good QEPs combined with clearer communication as to which have a solid reputation in submitting acceptable report standards would be appreciated by all parties.

Reuse and Recycling of Soil and Fill Materials

- Focus group participants identified the need to better reuse and/or recycle the material that is being removed and deposited. In many cases there may be valuable topsoil that could be sold or donated for agricultural purposes. However there is a lack of standardized soil quality testing before relocation.
- Similarly, there may be construction materials, metals, concrete, or other items that could be repurposed. However, the lack of a site and/or service to sort these materials combined with a lack of regulations requiring operators to do so, is resulting in all materials being mixed together when deposited.
- There are direct and indirect climate change mitigation impacts on having legal deposit sites located in proximity to development sites, along with opportunities to reuse and recycle materials whenever possible.

Compliance and Enforcement

- There was general agreement by focus group participants that funds are actively being transferred through tipping fees between those depositing and those receiving the soil/fill material.
- While the actual amount of money being exchanged could be debated, it was agreed that it is enough such that the existing level of profitability is outpacing any perceived compliance and enforcement impacts should ALR regulations or local bylaws be ignored.
- Many acknowledged that the lack of capacity of ALC and local bylaw enforcement officers is compounding the issue, such that most enforcement work is done on a complaints-based approach.
- Participants were interested to see how much bylaw enforcement resources are already being spent on this issue (local governments and the ALC), as a way of measuring the current magnitude of the problem. RDCO bylaw enforcement noted that over the past 2 years there were 21 complaints lodged that could be processed based on existing regulations, and an additional 22 complaints that could not be processed because there was no soil bylaw to which the complaints applied. It was further noted that the majority of the 43 complaints have been received since 2023.
- Some wondered if there were enforcement tools used in other jurisdictions that could be applied in the Central Okanagan (e.g. using GPS to track truck movement, confiscating equipment or vehicles if the right permits are not obtained; publish the names of bylaw violators).
- It was agreed that consistency in the regulatory tools used on a regional basis will make enforcement easier.
- At a very minimal level, there was interest by both industry and government to have a better strategy for tracking where soil and fill is being removed from, and which location(s) it is being brought to for deposit.



4.4 Prepare for Emergencies and Climate Change with Agriculture in Mind

- Many participants pointed out that agricultural land can be helpful at mitigating the impacts of emergency events, such as accommodating floodwater, acting as a fire break between forests and urban areas.
- It was noted that increased crop diversification could provide greater economic and food-system resilience against extreme weather events.
- Agro-forestry and targeted grazing for fire suppression are good management practices that could be widely advertised to the farming community.
- Farmers were interested in discussing how to be recognized for the supportive role farms and agricultural land plays in climate adaptation and emergency event management. Some ideas were assistance for creating FireSmart farms and ranches, or grants to restore riparian areas, and to take a targeted approach.
- It was recognized that during an emergency the agricultural community takes care of itself a lot and shares supplies and resources with those in need.
- Some areas are more vulnerable than others and non-commercial hobby farms may not fit into emergency response plans: examples provided included hobby farms in the Joe Rich and Ellison areas.
- The RDCO could play a role by encouraging the use of Buddy Farm agreements or helping to plan out livestock evacuation routes.



4.5 Continue to Work Regionally Towards Water Security for Farming

- Producers would like to see the RDCO set out a framework for prioritizing water use for agriculture when droughts occur.

- Preferential water pricing for agriculture is inconsistent across the region and it has been recommended that consistent pricing for agriculture be adopted for many years.
- In some areas water is allocated at a set price per year, not metered and priced according to actual use. Producers indicated that more conservation measures would be put into place if the farming community had to pay per use, rather than be provided a set allocation of water per year.
- Many farms have already adopted conservation practices such as drip or micro-jet, but there is potential for more water conservation practices.

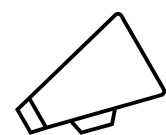


4.6 Create Certainty for Farm Worker Housing

- It was widely agreed by municipal representatives and members of the agricultural community that consistency across the RDCO and member municipalities is required for farmworker housing in order to provide clarity for farmers and create an equal playing field.
- Many of the larger farm operations (who require farmworkers) have farms in multiple municipalities and/or electoral areas and have to navigate inconsistent zoning.
- It was recognized that it can be challenging to get all the RDCO and member municipality jurisdictions involved in the discussion, but the overall goal is to get zoning aligned and to a point that it works for the farmers.
- Key issues within the realm of local government zoning include farmworker housing siting / location, temporary vs. permanent structures, etc.
- There is a need to explore alternative housing solutions on agricultural land that allow multiple generations to live and work on farms without compromising land protection.
- While it would be ideal to move farmworker housing into existing residential areas, it was acknowledged that it is not realistic due to the nature and timing of the work and also because it would require reliance on transit services that are not cost-effective to extend to rural areas.
- It was noted that in some jurisdictions there are public hearings on farmworker housing applications but not for large scale processing – there is a sense that it represents an inconsistency as both have impacts on the utilities needed and both have a footprint on the land.

4.7 Communicate and Advocate for the Importance of the Local Agricultural Sector

- Many participants felt that there is a strong need for shared regional Agricultural Coordinator position in the Central Okanagan.
- There is a role for the region to ensure that communication, education, advocacy and messaging remains consistent. This could be a shared role amongst Central Okanagan communities.
- There was emphasis on the need for an Okanagan-wide collaboration and dialogue, where all Regional Districts come together to discuss challenges and opportunities.
- There is a need to educate the public more about the agriculture sector, this could include establishing an annual event to recognize farmers and foreign agricultural workers, using RDCO social media platforms to highlight the importance of the sector, etc.
- RDCO should ensure that farmers' rights are balanced with conservation policies, preventing unnecessary restrictions on land use for agriculture.
- Topics raised that could involve education and/or advocacy include: community gardens – feedback around how to expand them; spraying (or lack of spraying) of fruit trees in residential gardens; the need for food waste composting; and a regional land trust to support new farmers.
- It was also noted that a language barrier exists within some members of the farming community, and that it is important to provide translation services for agricultural resources.



5.0 Next Steps

The input received during these engagement activities will be used to further inform the RAS. The summary of what we heard will be presented at the forthcoming RAS Working Group meeting. Subsequently, a draft set of actions and strategies for the RAS will be developed that will be presented to the RDCO Board in early spring of 2025. A second round of Focus Group sessions, followed by an Open House and Survey in late spring will serve to provide input and feedback into the draft RAS, which will be finalized in fall 2025.