

Report

Date April 17, 2024
Subject Forestry Review and Quw'utsun Nation Engagement Update

File:

PURPOSE

To provide an update on the status of the forestry review and engagement with Quw'utsun Nation and outline the next steps associated with developing a forest management plan for the Municipal Forest Reserve.

BACKGROUND

At the August 21, 2019, regular Council meeting, Council approved a proposal from the UBC Partnership Group to conduct a multi-objective, landscape-scale scenario analysis and forest carbon project evaluation for North Cowichan's Municipal Forest Reserve (MFR). Parallel engagement processes were also recommended to seek public feedback and to begin a dialogue with First Nations about potential future forest management options.

In 2021, once COVID-19 restrictions had been relaxed, Council temporarily paused the forestry review process and commenced important Council-to-Council dialogue with Quw'utsun Nation to better understand First Nations interests in the MFR. As a result, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Quw'utsun Nation was signed in August 2021, signifying Council's commitment to working with Quw'utsun Nation and outlining the roles and activities of a joint working group. The working group's goal is to work collaboratively and openly exchange information related to the stewardship and use of the MFR for the benefit of the community.

Shortly after the MOU was signed, a two-phase public engagement process was launched where feedback received from the community would help inform and guide the development of forest management scenario options developed by the UBC Partnership Group. The first round of public engagement on values was presented to Council on February 8, 2022, and shared with the UBC Partnership Group. The UBC Group used this feedback to guide the development of four forestry management scenarios later presented to Council on October 4, 2022. During the fall of 2022, the second round of the public engagement process sought feedback on a preferred forest management scenario. Findings from this round of engagement were presented to Council on March 7, 2023, and shared with the UBC Partnership Group in preparation for presenting a final draft of the forest management scenario options for Council's consideration. The public engagement indicated a preference for Scenario 3, Active Conservation.

The UBC Partnership Group presentation of the final draft forest management scenarios to Council has been on hold as staff awaited further input and feedback from Quw'utsun Nation to ensure their interests are integrated into the decision-making process.

DISCUSSION

Respecting the commitments of the MOU, municipal staff continue meaningful dialogue and discussions with the Quw'utsun Nation working group about the management and use of the MFR. A total of eight meetings have taken place, six of which occurred in 2023, including the first government-to-government meeting with the current Council in November 2023. These meetings have been respectful, insightful, and meaningful as both parties continue to build a stronger relationship and better understand the Quw'utsun Nations' interests in the MFR.

From these discussions, staff have learnt that Quw'utsun Nation's interests go beyond traditional forest management practices and touch upon several aspects related to the stewardship and recreational use of the municipal forests that include:

- future trail development;
- forest carbon credit program;
- co-management;
- revenue sharing;
- procurement;
- culturally sensitive areas; and,
- biodiversity.

Future trail development

Concerns surrounding recreational use and trail development within the MFR have been raised, most notably around the increased public use of Mount Tzouhalem and proposed trail development plans for Mount Richards. Staff have communicated that Council referred the potential development of mixed-use trails on Mount Richards to the Economic Development Committee (EDC) in response to a proposal submitted by the Cowichan Trail Stewardship Society in January 2023. Seeking input from Quw'utsun Nation about the Mount Richards trail development will be an important part of the forestry review process, and staff recommend that the EDC not make any recommendations to Council without first considering feedback from Quw'utsun Nation. North Cowichan has sent a referral letter to the Quw'utsun Nation members seeking input, and it will also be a continued topic for discussion as part of ongoing MOU working group meetings.

Forestry review analysis/forest carbon credits

Combined with the forest scenario analysis work conducted by the UBC Partnership Group, a forest carbon credit project feasibility study was completed in 2020. The analysis concluded that a forest carbon credit project was possible and the extent to which it was contingent on the forest management regime. Staff later secured \$200,000 in grant funding through the Provincial Rural Economic Diversification and Infrastructure Program to work on the development of a forest management plan that would include further investigation into a potential forest carbon credit project. The potential forest carbon credit project concept generated significant discussion and interest from the public, Quw'utsun Nation members, and North Cowichan Council. As such, staff will work in partnership with Quw'utsun Nation and proceed with a request for proposals to hire a qualified contractor to investigate further a

forest carbon credit project which could be considered as the forest management plan for the MFR is developed in the future.

Co-management

The subject of co-management agreements was introduced at the MOU working group meetings. There is consensus to explore further co-governance models and frameworks that could potentially be implemented to benefit both parties. There have been preliminary inquiries into various local and provincial examples. However, more research and discussion will be required before any conclusions or recommendations are brought to Council for consideration. This work is anticipated to be funded through the \$200,000 grant funding received to further the development of a forest management plan.

Revenue sharing

Revenue sharing in relationship to the co-management models has been a continual topic of discussion at the MOU working group meetings. While no specific details have been determined, it is anticipated this will be an ongoing and developing topic of interest that will require further discussion.

Procurement – Silviculture and FireSmart

Over the last few years, North Cowichan has direct awarded small silviculture contracts to Khowutzun Forest Services (KFS). North Cowichan and Quw'utsun Nation have mutually benefited from these direct award contracts. They have provided local First Nations employment opportunities and assurance that important silviculture work can continue in the MFR without delay. Given these benefits, there has been recent discussion around exploring options to direct award larger (>\$100,000) forest related works, such as FireSmart fuel mitigation. Although further discussions are required before proceeding to ensure all area First Nations are considered and receive equal economic/employment opportunities from this proposed work, both parties had general support to explore this further.

Culturally sensitive areas

The working group identified that the UBC Partnership Group's analysis work did not originally consider culturally sensitive areas. More discussion will be required to develop strategies to identify, map and incorporate culturally sensitive areas into future management planning to ensure appropriate protection measures are implemented and supported.

Biodiversity

North Cowichan staff made a presentation to the MOU working group with information about the Biodiversity Protection Policy project that is currently underway. Staff have been engaging with Quw'utsun Nation members as part of a separate engagement process, but if this is a topic of interest, it will be discussed further in future working group meetings.

In addition to these recurring themes, staff have been working on other related aspects of the forestry review, including discussions around the continuance of the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC). At the February 21, 2023, Council meeting, Council adopted the FAC Terms of Reference and asked staff to seek feedback from Quw'utsun Nation to determine if continued representation is necessary on the FAC given the establishment of the working group under the MOU. Preliminary discussions have taken place, but the focus has been on the topics outlined in this report. It is staff's position that while discussions continue with Quw'utsun Nation, there is no immediate requirement to establish the FAC.

Following a future forest management decision by Council, the FAC's Terms of Reference will need to be reviewed by Council to align with the forest management direction, prior to the re-establishment of the FAC.

Next steps

Quw'utsun Nation remains highly interested in furthering the discussion and dialogue about MFR-related activities and being an active participant in the future forest management strategy decision process. North Cowichan remains committed to continued engagement with the Quw'utsun Nation and seeking feedback on various topics of interest that will guide a future collaborative forest management decision-making process. The information and feedback collected from the public engagement process will be included in continued discussions and decision-making.

To support the initiatives outlined above, Council directed staff at the closed council meeting on November 15, 2023, to suspend any forest management recommendations, including new recreational trail development, until a co-management plan framework for the MFR is developed in partnership with Quw'utsun Nation and endorsed by Council.

Council also supported the following initiatives that Quw'utsun Nation endorsed at the November 2023 meeting:

- a) hire a consultant using the approved grant funding to investigate further and refine the details of a potential forest carbon credit project within the MFR in partnership with the Quw'utsun Nation and report back to Council when the review is complete;
- b) direct award economic opportunities that relate to forest activities within the MFR to qualified Quw'utsun Nation members; and,
- c) continue co-management discussions considering future trail development, advancing mapping of culturally sensitive areas, and revenue sharing frameworks.

In preparation of the final draft forest management scenarios, UBC Partnership Group completed its review of the round 2 engagement feedback. It concluded that no significant changes were required to the scenarios presented to Council on October 4, 2022. In consideration of Council's current direction and the UBC Partnership Group's conclusion, this analysis work is complete, and their contractual obligations are deemed to be fulfilled.

OPTIONS

1. **(Recommended Option)** This report is being provided for information only.

IMPLICATIONS

Timing – Developing a co-management forest management framework for the MFR depends on the ongoing discussions with Quw'utsun Nation, which could take several months or possibly years to complete. Staff intend to continue working with the Quw'utsun Nation to develop a co-management framework and further investigate a forest carbon credit project in the MFR.

Financial – In addition to the 2024 budget allocation of \$80,000 rolled over from the 2023 budget, a further \$200,000 in grant funding has been secured to start developing a forest management plan, including exploring the feasibility of a potential forest carbon credit project. Staff anticipate this funding will be sufficient to start this work, but should additional funding be required, staff will update Council and seek direction at that time and/or through the 2025 business planning process.

Part of the forestry budget may be required to provide additional training and supervision to support Quw’utsun Nation members as new economic/employment opportunities are being developed through the FireSmart fuel mitigation work.

Staff successfully secured \$15,000 to help fund the engagement activities related to the Quw’utsun Nation and would like to gratefully acknowledge the support of BC Healthy Communities' PlanH grant.

Staff time – Continued staff and administrative resources will be required for ongoing contract administration and meeting coordination. Additional staff administration resources may be required to support the ongoing meetings and discussions.

Public communications/engagement – The forestry review process was fulsome, yielded high public participation, and generated numerous comments and feedback on the community vision and potential management of the MFR. These engagement findings will continue to be utilized to advance discussion with Quw’utsun Nation.

Joint statements will be released at key milestones and/or when a significant update occurs. Should the requirement for greater public engagement opportunities arise, staff will seek further direction from Council, including any budget implications.

RECOMMENDATION

This report is for information only.

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