

REGIONAL ADAPTATION ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM | PROJECT SUMMARY

Drought Alert Project Keeps Producers “In the Know”

IF BC FARMERS WERE LOOKING for a ‘dry run’ for the future, the summer of 2015 provided a glimpse of the kind of summer conditions expected to become more common throughout the province. The extended hot, dry summer moved water issues to the top of the list for producers everywhere.

In the Cowichan Valley, summer water supply is an ongoing concern. According to climate projections, the area will experience more frequent extreme precipitation events in winter, but also hotter and drier summers with increasing risk of drought conditions.

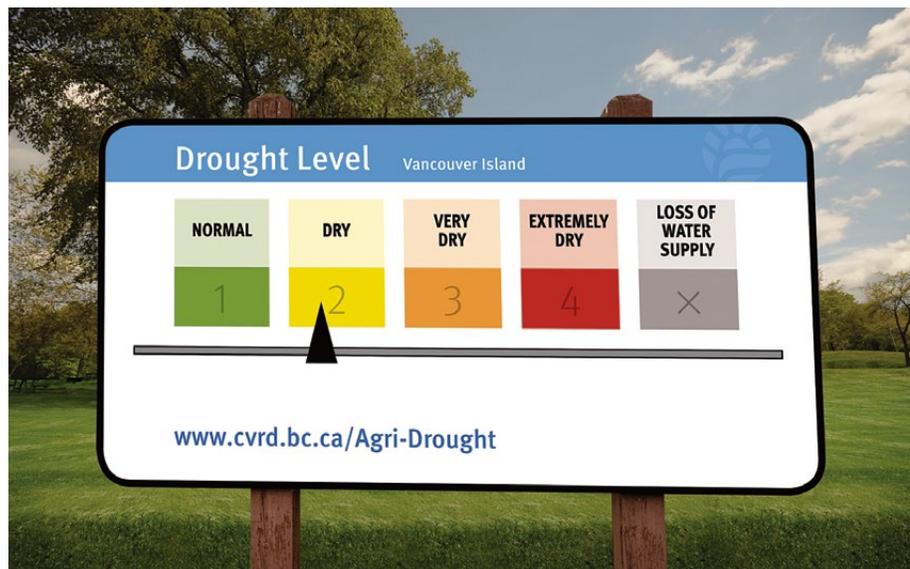
The Drought Alert pilot project grew out workshops that brought Cowichan producers together to plan and prepare for extreme events such as wildfire, flood and drought. The workshops were the collaborative effort of the BC Agriculture & Food Climate Action Initiative and the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD).

PROJECT	<i>Drought Alert System Pilot Project</i>
LOCATION	<i>Cowichan Valley</i>
COMPLETION	<i>December 2016</i>
PROJECT LEAD	<i>CVRD Public Safety Division</i>
FUNDING PARTNERS	<i>Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, BC Ministry of Agriculture, CVRD Public Safety Division</i>

“We wanted to raise awareness that climate change is here and, as part of that, to ask producers for feedback on what they need,” explains Sybille Sanderson, emergency program coordinator for the CVRD. “One key issue that was raised is that producers have not necessarily been aware of changes in the status of regional water levels, making it more difficult to suitably prepare and respond. As a result of that feedback, we developed a pilot to test different ways of notifying farmers about changing drought levels.”

Drought levels — defined by the provincial government (hydrological) Drought Classification system — are

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important for agriculture because although they aren't specific to each local water course, they are a reflection of stream flows in the area. The levels are also linked to specific objectives like voluntary reductions and eventually (in extremely dry conditions) the possibility of localized regulatory responses. Although the provincial government issues drought alerts and updates, existing communication channels had not been reaching many Cowichan producers.

In response, the Cowichan Drought Alert pilot project is testing a series of communication tools to ensure farmers know the drought level in their area, understand what the drought levels mean and are able to access relevant information in one convenient location. The most effective communication methods will be integrated into the on-going activities of the CVRD Public Safety Division and shared with other interested communities.

The communication tools being tested include drought alert signs (installed along popular rural routes in the CVRD) and direct mail post cards. Producers can also sign up for other notification tools, including text and phone alerts. Included with the various alerts is a website URL; the site (www.cvrld.bc.ca/agri-drought) houses the latest information about drought and water restrictions and provides information about livestock and irrigation management during drought conditions.

“As a farmer I try to be aware of the growing conditions, and the most limiting factor for growing conditions is water,” says Chris Groenendijk, a dairy farmer in the Cowichan Valley growing forage without irrigation. “The drought alerts are a wake-up call to look ahead and make sure that I will have enough feed. Once you're in the drought there's not a lot you can do, but there are decisions you can make to manage your inventory, and choices you can make to help conserve moisture in the soil.”

Projects like this are part of the work being delivered by the BC Agriculture & Food Climate Action Initiative (CAI). CAI develops tools and resources to assist BC farmers and ranchers with adapting to impacts of climate change. CAI's Regional Adaptation Enhancement Program provides up to \$300,000 to implement priority projects identified in each regional adaptation strategy.

www.BCAGClimateAction.ca

The BC Agriculture & Food Climate Action Initiative was launched in 2008 by the BC Agriculture Council to enable a proactive and pan-agriculture approach to climate change issues. The Climate Action Initiative is currently supported by the BC Agricultural Research & Development Corporation and the Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC with funding provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the BC Ministry of Agriculture through Growing Forward 2, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative.

