

# **Developing a Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Framework as a Priority for All Sectors**

A CONVERSATION PRIMER



WATER, LAND AND RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP  
VERSION 2.3

**Note: The previous version of this document referred to the product as a Declaration on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health and which is now instead called a Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Framework. This version has edits and updates to reflect the change.**

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# 1. PREFACE

Moving forward in a way that supports implementation of the Old Growth Strategic Review (OGSR) and recognizes and respects UNDRIP and its commitment under DRIPA, the Province intends to facilitate conversations with First Nations to support the co-development of an Old Growth Strategic Action Plan and a B.C. Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Framework (“Framework”) - previously referred to as a Declaration on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health.

This conversation primer aims to build a shared understanding to support dialogue and collaboration on the approach to co-developing this Framework.

This primer is written in the context of the following:

- The Ministries of Forests (FOR) and Water, Land and Resource Stewardship (WLRS) are responsible for supporting the implementation of the recommendations of the Old Growth Strategic Review (referred to as the OGSR) in collaboration with Indigenous leaders and in consultation with labour, industry, and environmental groups, with FOR leading the overall OGSR implementation.
- While the focus of this primer is on Old Growth Strategic Review Recommendation #2, the Province acknowledges that the OGSR is a package and specifically that implementation of Recommendation #1 is foundational to overall OGSR implementation.

## **OGSR Recommendation 1: Indigenous Involvement**

Engage the full involvement of Indigenous leaders and organizations to review this report and any subsequent policy or strategy development and implementation.

## **OGSR Recommendation 2: Prioritizing Ecosystem Health and Resilience**

Declare the conservation and management of ecosystem health and biodiversity of British Columbia’s forests as an overarching priority and enact legislation that legally establishes this priority for all sectors.

- The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (2019, SBC, C.14);
- Section 2.6 through 2.9 of the Declaration On The Rights Of Indigenous Peoples Act Action Plan 2022-2027 and the commitment that Ministries across government will continue to work in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous peoples across the Province to implement actions identified in the Action Plan, reflecting our mutual commitment to work together in partnership; and
- Related strategies, programs and engagement processes including Together for Wildlife, Collaborative Indigenous Stewardship Framework, Cumulative Effects Framework, Modernized Land Use Planning, Watershed Security Strategy and Fund Discussion Paper, etc.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The OGSR was shaped by an extensive engagement process and concluded with a set of 14 recommendations for improving forest management within a shifting paradigm towards more holistic and sustainability-focused stewardship.

In recognizing that conservation of long-term ecosystem health and biodiversity is key for protecting the health and wellbeing of communities as well as maintaining vital resources for future generations, the second recommendation of the OGSR calls on the Province to “*declare the conservation and management of ecosystem health and biodiversity of British Columbia’s forests as an overarching priority and enact legislation that legally established this priority for all sectors.*”

Several common themes have emerged from conversations that have taken place over the years between government and Indigenous leaders, Indigenous peoples, stakeholders, the public, local governments, environmental non-governmental organizations, conservation groups, farmers, ranchers, and rural communities on topics related to ecosystem health and biodiversity.

First is the imperative of recognizing Indigenous peoples as long-time stewards of the environment and building a foundation for co-management that is rooted in respect for Indigenous rights and knowledge, in alignment with the B.C. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. Other main points of consensus included respect for regional diversity; more complete, trusted, and accessible data, information, and knowledge; and capacity building and support for consistent meaningful engagement and collaborative action.

These themes, among others, were incorporated to form the OGSR recommendations. However, underpinning the transformation towards a more inclusive, stable, and effective management framework is the condition that ecosystem health and biodiversity be treated as pillars of a sustainable economy (rather than constraints).

A formal B.C. Framework prioritizing biodiversity conservation and ecosystem health would serve to facilitate the necessary shift in guiding management practices better aligning with goals of protecting species, conserving vital ecosystem resources, and ensuring the health and long-term social and economic wellbeing of communities across the Province. As such, the scope of the Framework is not limited to forests but extends to all ecosystem types in British Columbia including terrestrial (e.g., forest, grasslands and desert) and aquatic (e.g., rivers, streams, lakes, wetlands and estuaries) ecosystems.

### 3. APPROACH

Of the 14 recommendations in the OGSR, B.C.'s prioritization of ecosystem health and biodiversity is identified as one of the five essential "required conditions for change" that is, being foundational and a core component to facilitate a shift towards integrated and inclusive stewardship of BC's forests and ecosystems.

Through collaboration, the Province intends to have co-developed a B.C. Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Framework that applies to all sectors and that will guide the Province to legally establishing this priority in partnership with Indigenous peoples, stakeholders, local communities, and other partners.

The Province's proposed approach to advancing a Framework that prioritizes ecosystem health and biodiversity involves:

#### 3.1 PHASE ONE – CO-DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

Co-develop with Indigenous leaders, and with input from key stakeholders, a B.C. Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Framework that applies to all sectors and sets our path forward to support implementation, aligned with other foundational recommendations (e.g., governance, three-zone management framework, better public information).

**Deliverable:** Co-developed Framework in June 2023.

#### 3.2 PHASE TWO – WORKING TOWARDS IMPLEMENTATION

Explore if and how legislation can be developed or updated, along with other system changes, to achieve the vision and intent set out in the Framework. A key goal will be to ensure that we are immediately improving the system following the release of the Framework, including implementation guidance, changes to existing policy, improved information, and accountability, while also considering longer term changes.

As part of the consideration for legislative requirements, there may be multiple ways to give legal effect to the Framework and these can include a combination of the following:

- Use of existing legislative tools, including the exercise of regulatory powers to develop new regulations;
- Potential legislative changes and additions to existing legislation; and
- Development of new legislation.

**Deliverable:** Implementation of enabling tools, possibly including updates to existing legislation and developing new legislation, policies, and guidance, to successfully implement the Framework across all sectors.

## 4. BACKGROUND

### 4.1 PRIORITIZING ECOSYSTEM HEALTH AND BIODIVERSITY

British Columbia is home to the greatest biodiversity of any province or territory in Canada. Biodiversity (or 'biological diversity' referring to ecosystems, species, and genetic diversity, and the processes that shape them), is an integral part of the B.C. identity and fundamental for supporting a multitude of economic sectors including forestry, tourism and recreation, hunting and trapping, biological and medical research, and many others. Biodiversity is also a pillar of food and livelihood security within and beyond the province as well as an essential component of ecosystem resilience.

In recent decades, the need to protect biodiversity has become more urgent in response to increasing threats to ecosystems (primarily from human activities), but also as a way of helping to increase our adaptive capacity to global environmental change. The mounting effects of climate change (including catastrophic wildfires, flooding, and mountain pine beetle outbreaks) have compounded the impacts of human-induced habitat fragmentation and loss, threatening the productive capacity and resilience of many ecosystem types. Recognizing these challenges, along with the health, safety, and livelihood risks that they bring to human populations, communities across British Columbia are now advocating for a higher standard of ecosystem stewardship and biodiversity conservation.

A new integrated and inclusive stewardship paradigm that prioritizes biodiversity and ecosystem health across all sectors is needed to address the emerging environmental challenges as well as achieve true and lasting reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Focusing on ecosystem health as a broad-based goal will serve to guide future development to minimize biodiversity risk and ensure ecosystem health and well-being outcomes for species, habitats, and human communities. As a holistic and dynamic concept, ecosystem health further implies a collaborative and adaptive approach to management, where health is not limited to current conditions, but is understood to be essential for long-term resilience and maintaining resources for future generations.

### 4.2 CONNECTION WITH OTHER GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

There are many government initiatives and mandates that point towards moving to a land management system that focuses on maintaining ecosystem health, including:

- measures for species at risk and conserving B.C.'s biodiversity;
- developing a co-managed land and resource management regime with Indigenous peoples; and
- continuing to advance Modernized Land Use Planning (for ecosystems, rivers, lakes, forests, lands, and waters), Forest Landscape Planning, Together for Wildlife Strategy, Watershed Security Strategy, Coastal Marine Strategy, Marine Salmon Strategy and Cumulative Effects Framework.

Implementing a B.C. Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Framework offers an opportunity to support a coordinated and cohesive approach to align and strengthen these existing initiatives, as well as support advancing key government priorities.

## 5. CREATING THE FRAMEWORK

Elements of a framework may include one or more of the following: a vision statement, principles, goal and targets, commitments, and actions to be agreed by the signatories. Recognizing that there are many ways to draft a framework, to help prompt discussions, this section offers examples of how each element might be considered or included in a framework on biodiversity and ecosystem health. The ideas and examples provided are based on:

- The OGSR report, including implementation advice for the framework, and what we heard report
- Examples from existing frameworks related to ecosystem health and biodiversity
- Themes from recent previous government engagements

### 5.1 VISION AND PURPOSE

OGSR advised the Province to declare the conservation of ecosystem health and biodiversity as a priority in the land management framework. This would serve as a catalyst for change from the current approach that manages for sustainable forests (subject to constraints) to managing for ecosystem health, recognizing that resources (e.g., timber) are one of the many benefits that healthy ecosystems provide.

*“Shift our thinking from trees and timber to healthy ecosystems that provide many benefits”*

*(OGSR report)*

A framework that prioritizes ecosystem health and biodiversity would guide land management practices towards better alignment with goals of minimizing species loss (and preventing irreversible loss of biodiversity), maintaining vital ecosystem services, and ensuring the resiliency and long-term cultural, social, and economic wellbeing of communities across the province.

A key theme throughout the OGSR recommendations is that we should not only acknowledge Indigenous peoples as stewards of the environment, but also leaders in guiding how to establish a land management regime that achieves a higher standard of land care. A framework directed toward ecosystem health should be grounded in a Provincial-Indigenous government-to-government approach that is respectful of Indigenous rights and in alignment with the B.C. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

The advice in the OGSR is consistent with themes heard through previous related government initiatives.

#### EXAMPLES OF VISIONS:

The following vision statements are some existing examples that could be a starting point for discussion, inclusion or adaptation.

- UN Convention on Biological Diversity 2050 Vision: “Living in Harmony with Nature” where “by 2050, biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored and widely used, maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet and delivering benefits essential for all people”.
- Together for Wildlife Vision: Wildlife and their habitats thrive, are resilient, and support and enrich the lives of all British Columbians.



## 52 PRINCIPLES

Principles are intended to create the environment needed for a framework to be achieved. They are typically viewed as “rule” type statements that guide actions and decisions and can be used to interpret gaps in laws and guide policies. For example, to support the implementation of the UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), ten principles were developed to address two needs: first, the need for a shared vision of ecosystem restoration, and second, the need for guidance to maximize net gains for biodiversity, ecosystem health and integrity, and human health and well-being from all types of restoration projects, programs and initiatives.

In the case of a B.C. Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Framework, principles can be used to inform the approach, outcomes, or the rules for developing and implementing existing and new enabling legislative and policy tools to implement the Framework (Phase 2 of this work).

### EXAMPLES OF PRINCIPLES

The examples of principles provided below are based on the OGSR implementation advice and themes from previous what we heard reports:

- Province-Indigenous government-to-government foundation;
- Fairness and cohesion across sectors working towards common standards for achieving ecosystem health goals;
- Holistic and integrated approach;
- Science-based approach with equal respect for all knowledge systems;
- Continuous learning and adaptation;
- Inclusive and participatory;
- Accountability, particularly to the public and
- Responsive and flexible to regional circumstances and ecosystems

Additional Considerations	
1	Thinking about your community, the Nation(s) you work with, or your organization, and if principles are desired, which principles are important to include in the Framework?
2	What other principles do you feel are important?

### 5.3 GOALS AND TARGETS

Many frameworks include goals and targets that are aligned with the vision which helps set the strategic direction, informs decision-making and may catalyze behavioural change for communities and individuals. In addition to the goal of healthy ecosystems, OGSR contains other foundational goals including improved governance, sustainable practices (e.g., three zone policy) and improved public information. It will be important that the framework is aligned with these foundational goals.

#### Some examples of what is meant by an outcome-focused goal:

- Prevent irreversible biodiversity loss, maintain or improve landscape level ecosystem health (e.g., supporting connectivity) and vital ecosystem services.
- Greater co-ordination within and across different sectors working towards ecosystem health.
- Increased public awareness, understanding and support of biodiversity and ecosystem health goals and priorities, and how individuals and communities can manage for ecosystem health.

Additional Considerations	
1	Thinking about your community, the Nation(s) or organization you work with, which goals or outcomes are important to include in the Framework?
2	Are there any other goals or outcomes that are important to include in the Framework?

### 5.4 COMMITMENTS AND ACTIONS

Commitments in a framework can be action focused and related to goals and targets. Commitments set an accountability for the Province or others entering the commitment (e.g., signatories). While a framework does not necessarily need to include commitments and actions, previous engagements on other government related initiatives showed frustration about there being too much talk from government and not enough action. Commitments and actions within the Framework may help address this frustration.

Examples of different commitments/actions to show variety for scope and specificity:

- We commit to implementing all recommendations of the OGSR and will develop a comprehensive action plan to support implementation by the end of 2023.

- We commit to collaborating with Indigenous partners on policies and initiatives to advance implementation of the framework that supports collaborative stewardship of the environment, addresses cumulative effects and respects Indigenous Knowledge.
- We commit to ensuring all-related provincial legislation, strategies and agreements, management systems and processes are consistent with the framework.
- We commit to setting provincial ecosystem health targets and measures and will support all regions in the province to develop their own transition plans to meet their different and unique needs.
- We commit to monitoring progress through public annual reporting.
- We commit to providing research support and incentives for innovative work targeted towards achieving ecosystem health goals and supporting sectors make the transition.

<b>Additional Considerations</b>	
1	Do you think that the framework should be more directive and include commitments and actions?
2	If so, which commitments and actions are important to include in the Framework?
3	What other commitments/actions are important to you?

## **5.5 ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FRAMEWORK**

1. Are there other key themes or priorities that should be included in the Framework?
2. What do "ecosystem health" and "biodiversity" mean to you? How should these terms be incorporated or conveyed within the Framework? Is it sufficient to include these as concepts in the Framework, or is more specificity required?
3. With an understanding of the type of themes you would like to see in the Framework, now consider what form a framework could take to best convey the key themes and priorities that you have identified.