

Municipality of North Cowichan Mill Closure Response Working Group MINUTES

March 20, 2026, 9:00 a.m.
Municipal Hall - Large Committee Room

Members Present	Mayor Rob Douglas, Chair Councillor Mike Caljouw Councillor Christopher Justice
Advisors Present	Jeff Kibble, Member of Parliament, Cowichan-Malahat-Langford Pamela Cooling, Senior Constituency Advisor to Qwulti'stunaat - Debra Toporowski, MLA, Cowichan Valley Brad McRae, Director of Government Relations, Western Forest Products Brian Bull, Chemainus Sawmill, United Steelworkers Carlo Dal Monte, Vice President, Energy Development, Domtar
Advisors Absent	Geoff Dawe, National President, Public and Private Workers of Canada (PPWC)
Staff Present	Ted Swabey, Chief Administrative Officer Andrea Hainrich, Deputy Corporate Officer Kayla Reid-Starck, Legislative Coordinator

1. CALL TO ORDER

There being a quorum present, the Chair called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m.

2. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

IT WAS MOVED AND SECONDED:

That the agenda be adopted as circulated.

CARRIED

3. ADOPTION OF MINUTES

IT WAS MOVED AND SECONDED:

That the Working Group adopt the minutes of the meeting held February 20, 2026.

CARRIED

4. PRESENTERS

4.1 Community Futures Cowichan

Cathy Robertson, General Manager, Community Futures Cowichan provided a presentation to the Working Group regarding their approved application to the BC Rural Economic Diversification and Infrastructure (REDIP) Program, and responded to questions from the Working Group. She also requested that the Working Group direct any existing small-medium businesses in the Cowichan Valley to Community Futures Cowichan to learn more about the program.

5. BUSINESS

5.1 Roundtable Updates

Mayor Douglas reported on advocacy efforts focused on securing a long-term water supply for Crofton beyond 2026, including discussions with Jobs and Economic Growth Minister Ravi Kahlon regarding water licensing constraints and infrastructure needed to support future growth, particularly along Highway 18 and near the new Regional Hospital.

He advised that funding opportunities, including through the Canada Infrastructure Bank, and noted potential industrial interest tied to broader economic development, including exploratory expansion activity by Seaspan on Vancouver Island.

He provided updates on advocacy for mill workers, including correspondence with the federal Minister of Jobs and Families regarding EI concerns, attendance at a provincial briefing on the \$70 million worker support funding, ongoing investor interest in the mill site, and acknowledged continued frustration with gaps between political announcements and on-the-ground outcomes.

Carlo Dal Monte advised that the Crofton mill water system presents significant operational and financial challenges due to its scale, complex pumping requirements, variable costs, and ongoing supply obligations to industrial users, with annual pumping costs potentially exceeding \$1 million.

He also reported that the weir and associated water licence remain a long-standing and complex issue involving multiple stakeholders; surrendering the licence would typically require decommissioning the weir, which is considered highly unlikely.

He provided updates on current water and mill conditions, noting low snowpack and efforts to secure approval to retain water earlier, continued de-risking activities at the mill site. He also reported that another layoff is anticipated around April 7, 2026, affecting approximately 60 to 80 employees, with an estimated 15 to 20 staff remaining for care and maintenance, in addition to security personnel. Although, he advised that additional staffing of approximately 3 to 4 employees will be required to operate the weir.

Brian Bull spoke to ongoing frustrations with EI, citing confusion around eligibility criteria, particularly the definition of a “long-tenured worker” and inconsistent communication from Service Canada, which has left some long-service employees ineligible for extended benefits. He emphasized the urgency facing workers nearing the end of their EI benefits and noted that uncertainty around the future of the sawmill has caused some to delay decisions while holding out hope for a restart.

Brian Bull stressed the need for greater clarity from Western Forest Products regarding long-term plans for the Chemainus Sawmill. Brian Bull asked whether MP Kibble could seek clarification from Minister Hajdu on what constitutes a “complex situation” in EI eligibility determinations.

Pamela Cooling asked for clarification regarding the \$70 million funding announcement, specifically how the funding would be distributed across Canada and was advised by Mayor Douglas that the \$70 million allocation is designated for British Columbia.

She also noted that MLA Toporowski has been actively advocating on behalf of the Cowichan Valley, including meeting directly with colleagues (Members of the Legislature) and undertaking door-to-door outreach with cabinet ministers to secure face-to-face discussions regarding the current situation in the region.

Councillor Justice advised the Working Group that there is a motion scheduled for April 1 Regular Council meeting regarding fibre security and local forestry jobs which was introduced at the [March 18 Regular Council](#) meeting.

Councillor Caljouw expressed frustration that Service Canada has not been able to resolve EI issues for affected workers, noting this as a straightforward issue that should be addressable. He also raised concerns about the weir's role in supplying water to Crofton and the broader implications for the Cowichan Valley, and emphasized the need for increased media attention on these issues.

MP Kibble advised that his petition in support of the members of the Public and Private Workers of Canada (PPWC) and USW Chemainus Sawmill workers, has received 340 signatures, noting that 500 are required for it to be tabled in the House of Commons, requiring a formal written response from the Minister. He emphasized the need for factual data, such as the number of affected workers versus those receiving benefits, to support accountability and indicated his willingness to pursue further media coverage once more information is made available. MP Kibble also requested that Mayor Douglas share any available presentation materials from the recent provincial briefing.

Brad McRae provided an overview of broader challenges facing the forestry sector, noting that Western Forest Products has implemented operational changes in the Campbell River area that have allowed some workers to return to work, with potential for fibre movement to the Mid-Island. He reported a significant decline in coastal harvest levels, advising that while the allowable annual cut for 2025 was approximately 13.8 million cubic metres, actual harvest was closer to 6.3 million cubic metres, representing an estimated 42% decline between 2019 and 2025. He further advised that the availability of economically viable fibre is affected by multiple factors, including high extraction and transportation costs, regulatory complexity, conservation measures, natural events, and market pressures such as tariffs and duties.

Brad McRae noted that forestry functions as an interconnected ecosystem, with fibre supply closely tied to mill operations and largely sourced from the North Island and broader island assets. While many parties are working with positive intent, he expressed concern that efforts are often undertaken in silos, with limited coordination or awareness of related initiatives. He advised that he had no updates at this time regarding Chemainus sawmill, but would share information with the Working Group as it becomes available.

Brad McRae recommended that the Working Group schedule a meeting with the Campbell River Business Advisory Team to better understand its coordinated,

ecosystem-based advocacy approach, noting that the Team advocates not only for forestry but also for other resource-based sectors such as aquaculture and tourism. He suggested that a coordinated advocacy approach spanning the Mid-Island to the North Island would be beneficial, recognizing the value of shared efforts and strength in numbers. He advised that the Business Advisory Team is scheduled to meet March 27, 2026, and that the agenda for the meeting hasn't been finalized so there may be an opportunity to be included in that meeting.

5.2 Worker Supports

The Working Group discussed Worker Supports under 5.1 Roundtable Updates.

5.3 Advocacy to Senior Levels of Government

The Working Group identified the following actions:

- Encourage PPWC and USW Chemainus Sawmill workers to sign MP Kibble's EI petition, emphasizing the importance of reaching the 500-signature threshold required for tabling in the House of Commons.
- Brian Bull and Geoff Dawe to follow up with MP Kibble's office to provide clear, factual data outlining the specific EI challenges members are facing, including eligibility issues and gaps in support. The recommended point of contact is Nicole Timmermans, Director of Constituency Affairs (via email), who can direct inquiries to the appropriate staff member.
- Mayor Douglas to share the presentation slides from the recent briefing with Provincial staff with MP Kibble and Cathy Robertson (Community Futures Cowichan), to support federal advocacy efforts and ensure alignment across levels of government.
- Working Group members to assist in spreading awareness of the new Community Futures program by sharing information through existing networks and community channels to ensure eligible businesses are informed and able to access available supports.
- Pursue advocacy coordination by arranging a meeting between members of the Working Group and Campbell River's Business Advisory Team, chaired by Mayor Kermit Dahl, to discuss their ecosystem-based advocacy model. The Business Advisory Team's next meeting is scheduled for March 27, 2026.
- MLA Toporowski's office is preparing an impact letter related to the situation; Pamela Cooling will follow up with Brian Bull to gather the necessary information to finalize the letter.
- Continue to seek increased media coverage to keep the situation visible and top-of-mind for decision-makers and the public.

5.4 Actions from Member of Parliament, Jeff Kibble's Town Hall

The Working Group identified Actions from MP Kibble's Town Hall under 5.1 Roundtable Updates.

6. NEW BUSINESS

None.

7. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting ended at 10:33 a.m.

Signed by Chair or Member Presiding

Certified by Recording Secretary