WHAT WE HEARD

ENGAGEMENT REPORT

Goat River Watershed
Water Sustainability Planning
JUNE 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report brings together what was heard through engagement carried out in 2025 and into early 2026. Input was gathered in a variety of ways:

- a Water Values Survey (220 responses),
- six open houses in the Goat River Watershed communities of Canyon, Erickson, Kitchener, Town of Creston, West Creston, and Wynndel (137 participants),
- Kitchen Table Conversations (1 submitted),
- an online engagement platform,
- and a dedicated producer engagement initiative that included on-farm visits and conversations with 15 producers

Together, these engagement streams reached a broad cross-section of residents, agricultural producers, and community members.

Of 220 survey respondents, 128 described themselves as very concerned about local water sustainability, and another 62 said they were somewhat concerned. Across all engagement streams, there was a consistent message that the quantity of water available in the Goat River Watershed is declining. Participants described lower river levels, declining well reliability, drought, changing runoff timing, infrastructure inefficiencies, forestry and land use impacts, and concerns about fairness and accountability in water allocation.

Producers added a specific operational dimension, describing the mismatch between when water is available and when it is most needed as an increasingly acute reality for farms and orchards across the watershed. There was also a strong desire for clearer communication from the agencies that shape local water outcomes.

This report does not present decisions. It is a record of what the community shared, organized into themes that can help guide the next phase of planning, technical work, and continued engagement.

7 THEMES EMERGED:

1: Changing Water Conditions and Visible Signs of Stress
2: Water Availability, Access, and Seasonal Reliability
3: Infrastructure, Storage, and System Efficiency
4: Land Use, Forestry, and Watershed Health
5: Governance, Fairness, and Accountability
6: Communication, Trust, and Shared Learning
7: Local Adaptation, Practical Ideas, and Long-Term Vision

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THANK YOU

Engagement of this kind depends on people being willing to open their doors, share their experiences, and trust that what they say will be heard and reflected honestly. It also depends on those who work to build the relationships, create the spaces, and design the processes that make genuine community conversation possible.

Every person who took the time to complete a survey, attend an open house, welcome a conversation on their farm, or sit around a table with their neighbours has contributed something meaningful to this work. That generosity of knowledge and spirit is reflected throughout these pages.

The RDCK is grateful to the following for making this work possible:

- yaqan nuʔkiy staff, Nasookin and council
- RDCK Board of Directors
- RDCK Planning, GIS, and Water Services Staff
- Irrigation, Improvement and Diking Districts in the Goat River Watershed
- Kootenay Boundary Farm Advisors (KBFA) and Community Leaders
- Amy Allcock, photography and drone imagery
- Residents, producers, and community members across the Goat River Watershed

INTRODUCTION
SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Goat River Watershed (GRW) sits within the traditional territory of yaqan nuʔkiy ʔamakʔis, whose relationship with this land and water extends across millennia. In May 2024, yaqan nuʔkiy and the Regional District of Central Kootenay (RDCK) wrote jointly to the Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship (WLRS) requesting support for watershed sustainability planning, and have since been engaging residents across the communities of Canyon, Erickson, Kitchener, Town of Creston, West Creston, and Wynndel. This work is carried out by yaqan nuʔkiy and the RDCK as equal governments, with a shared commitment to building toward water sustainability for all beings who depend on the watershed.

Through engagement, it became clear that the roles of the many agencies involved in water stewardship are not always visible to residents and producers. Responsibility for water is divided across multiple bodies: yaqan nuʔkiy holds inherent rights and responsibilities for the stewardship of land and water within their traditional territory; the Province of British Columbia is responsible for water licensing and allocation under the Water Sustainability Act; the RDCK plays a role in infrastructure, service delivery, and regional planning; Irrigation and Improvement Districts manage local water delivery to agricultural and residential users; and the federal government holds jurisdiction over fisheries and fish habitat under the Fisheries Act, with responsibilities relating to Indigenous rights and title. Clarifying these distinctions, and helping residents understand where the RDCK has leadership and influence, emerged as an important need throughout the process.

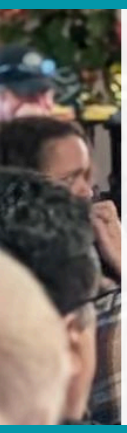
The data in this report is compiled from engagement conducted from October 2025 to April 2026, covering Phases 1, 2, and a portion of Phase 3. For more information about the phases, **please visit engage.rdck.ca/projects/goatwatershed.**

Resident and community input gathered through engagement is valued and integrated into a broader understanding of the watershed. This knowledge, grounded in direct observation and place-based experience, complements technical and scientific data and contributes to a more complete picture of conditions, pressures, and priorities across the watershed.

METHODOLOGY

HOW WE ENGAGED

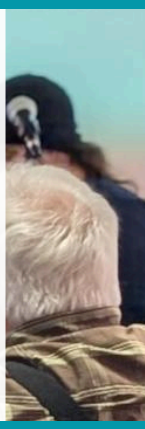
WATER VALUES SURVEY



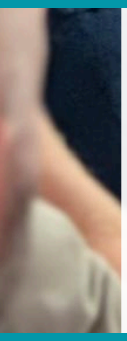
220 responses were received from communities across the watershed, with the largest numbers from the Town of Creston (60), Erickson (40), Canyon (32), and Wynndel (30). The survey asked about concern levels, observed changes, perceived threats, and interest in staying involved and was available online and in paper form at RDCK Creston office. The survey remains open at engage.rdck.ca/projects/goatwatershed

COMMUNITY EVENTS

Project staff attended the Creston Valley Fall Fair, the Creston Valley Farmers Market, and other community events to raise awareness, connect with residents, and create accessible opportunities for people to share their perspectives.



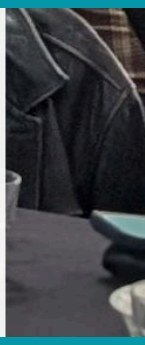
OPEN HOUSES



Six open houses were held between fall 2025 and early 2026 in Wynndel (16), West Creston (10), Town of Creston (37), Kitchener (18), Canyon (32), and Erickson (24), with 137 participants in total.

KITCHEN TABLE CONVERSATIONS

A guide and workbook were developed to support small group discussions hosted by residents in their homes or other informal settings. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives among people they know. One completed workbook was submitted and its content is reflected in this report.



PRODUCER ENGAGEMENT

A dedicated initiative ran from January to April 2026, led by a RDCK Community Liaison with an agricultural and horticultural background. It began with a Lunch and Learn at Jimmy's Pub in collaboration with the Kootenay Boundary Farmers Association (KBFA), where 50 farmers and residents were in attendance. Following this, 15 farmers participated in on-farm visits, phone conversations, and attendance at producer events. Findings are integrated throughout this report.

3D MODELS AND MAP

A physical model of the Goat River Watershed is on display at the Creston Valley Visitor Centre, showing how water moves through the landscape from the upper Purcell slopes to the valley floor, with place names in both Ktunaxa and English.

An online 3D map with interactive data layers is available at engage.rdck.ca/projects/goatwatershed

WHAT WE HEARD

THEME 1: CHANGING WATER CONDITIONS AND VISIBLE SIGNS OF STRESS

Consistent across the survey, open houses, and producer conversations was that residents and producers are observing real changes in local water conditions, rooted in specific places, specific seasons, and specific years when things are noticeably different from before.

Not all participants shared the same level of concern. 14% of survey respondents indicated low concern or did not know enough to say, a perspective that was also reflected at some open houses. This is part of the full picture and reflects how location within the watershed shapes perspective.

Of 220 survey respondents, 52% reported significant changes in local water conditions and 24% reported minor changes, representing 76% of all respondents.

The changes described were wide-ranging:

- lower river levels
- drying creeks and springs
- reduced well productivity
- warmer water temperatures
- increased algae
- earlier and shorter freshet
- seasonal patterns that no longer follow rhythms people can anticipate.

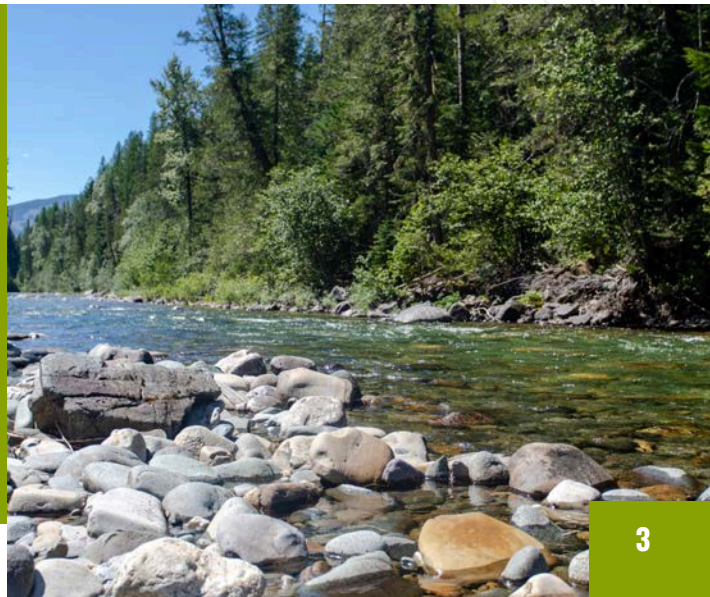
A consistent finding from producer conversations was that timing has become as significant a concern as total supply. Water is typically available in spring, but demand peaks in July and August are exactly when late-season flows have been declining most noticeably. As one producer put it: “We do not need more water in April. We need it when it is hot.” This showed that producers are experiencing this mismatch not as a future risk, but as a current operational reality.

Residents and producers were not speculating, but describing what they have already seen, in places they know well.

“I’ve never seen the Goat River this low. The holding ponds at the intersection of Reclamation Road and West Creston are bone dry.”

“The stream going through my yard has dried up for the first time in 30 years we have been here.”

“The Goat River peak flow date has been slowly moving from end of May to mid-May. The winter snowpack is less and melting sooner than before.”



WHAT WE HEARD

THEME 2: WATER AVAILABILITY, ACCESS, AND SEASONAL RELIABILITY

Late summer shortages, falling wells, and seasonal restrictions were among the most frequently described concerns.

Communities reporting water shortages and dried wells with notable frequency:

- Canyon
- Lister
- Alice Siding
- West Creston

This variability highlights the importance of understanding the watershed as a whole and responding to the specific vulnerabilities of communities and water systems.

Alongside observations of changing water conditions, a consistent message was that water concern extends beyond quantity. Availability, timing, and the reliability of delivery systems matter as much as total supply.

Residents access water through municipal or community systems, private or shared wells, irrigation districts, and direct surface water, and experiences of shortage and stress vary accordingly.

Agricultural producers described the access and reliability concern from the perspective of their operations. For producers growing crops such as tree fruit, water reliability is not only a seasonal operational question but also a long-term investment question. Tree fruit systems represent investments of 20 to 25 years, and water shortfalls during critical growing periods can compromise not just a single season's yield but the long-term viability of an entire orchard. The mismatch between when water is available and when it is most needed is particularly important for these operations.

Producers noted that uniform restrictions applied across all farm types may protect some operations while inadvertently leading to the end of others. They identified the need for planners to understand that water decisions have consequences that extend far beyond the current growing season.

"About five years ago, our street in Canyon ran out of water for a month. This year, at present [September 2026], we are on Stage 3 water restrictions."

"Many wells around me have dried up. Neighbours with springs have cut off those they used to share with and cut down fruit trees as there is not enough water."

WHAT WE HEARD

THEME 3: INFRASTRUCTURE, STORAGE, AND SYSTEM EFFICIENCY

A recurring theme across the survey and open houses was that the performance of existing water systems, how water is moved, stored, priced, and monitored, shapes the experience of water availability as significantly as natural supply itself.

Participants pointed to pressure inconsistencies, suspected leakage and distribution losses, and infrastructure that has not kept pace with demand.

The Erickson Improvement District transition to RDCK management drew particular attention in the survey, with respondents describing steep cost increases without corresponding improvements in service or water quality. The ongoing metering project in Erickson brings this into focus.

Metering came up across the survey and open houses as both a practical tool and a contested idea. Supporters cited data generation, leak detection, waste reduction, and fairer cost relationships, while others were concerned about the impact on those already paying high flat rates. The debate reflects a broader tension between water as shared public infrastructure and water as a service where pricing reflects individual use.

Producer conversations added technical detail to this theme. Infrastructure performance was the most immediate and actionable constraint identified by producers. Pressure inconsistencies, pipe sizing changes that were not communicated to producers prior to implementation, suspected leakage, and uneven distribution were all described, with significant and sometimes unexpected consequences for field-level water delivery.

Above-ground irrigation lines were identified as preferable by some producers precisely because leaks are visible and easy to address, unlike buried systems where problems can go undetected.

Where water costs are fixed regardless of actual use, there is little financial incentive to reduce consumption, a dynamic that can work against conservation goals even among producers who are motivated to improve water system efficiency.

"Water meters will help some people become more responsible, but others, where money is not a problem, will continue to waste water."

"I am concerned that in Erickson we pay more than three times for water than those living in the Town of Creston. Pretty sure we all get our water from the same source."

WHAT WE HEARD

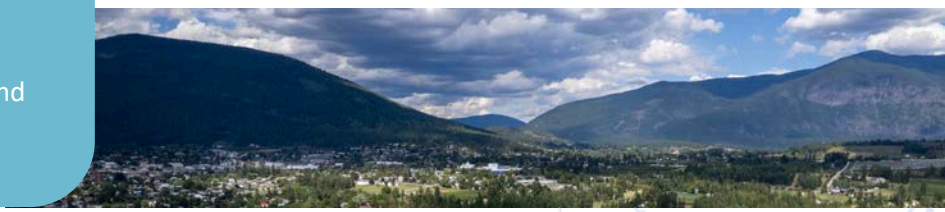
THEME 4: LAND USE, FORESTRY, AND WATERSHED HEALTH

Specific concerns raised through the survey and open houses:

- Duck Creek watershed in Wynndel named multiple times, with residents describing the threat of pending logging access and consequences for the Wynndel Irrigation District
- Arrow Creek, which feeds directly into the Goat River system, identified as severely affected by logging in surrounding areas
- Concerns about fish health, water temperature, invasive species, wetland function, and water quality

Residents, producers, and open house participants repeatedly drew a direct line between forestry practices, land clearing, and the water conditions they are observing. For many people in the watershed, the logging question is not separate from the water question. Forest conservation supports water conservation.

While this report notes the correlation between forestry practices and changes in water flow, forestry is considered beyond the scope of the current Water Sustainability Act tools being explored with the Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship.



Producer conversations reinforced the land-water connection from an agricultural perspective. Producers identified soil health as a water management tool in its own right, describing mulching, composting, and cover cropping as practices that improve water retention and reduce irrigation demand. The phrase "soil is storage" captured a key insight: how land is managed at the farm level has direct implications for how much water is needed from external sources. Producers expressed a clear understanding that their operations are part of a connected system.

The overall picture is one of strong community interest in treating the watershed as a connected system. Residents are asking for the conditions that produce water to be protected, including the forests, wetlands, soils, and stream corridors that regulate flow and maintain the ecological functions that a healthy water supply depends on.

"Mountain springs drastically affected by logging around Arrow Creek. These streams feed the Goat River. Extremely low water levels overall, small streams no longer year round, fish habitats lacking depth and coverage."

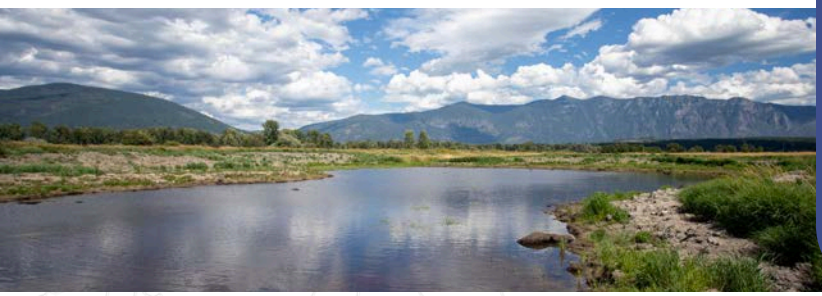
"Large amounts of forest removed in local watersheds. Appears to be altering stream flow timing and quantity over the years."

WHAT WE HEARD

THEME 5: GOVERNANCE, FAIRNESS, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Survey respondents expressed frustration with how water is governed, who is responsible for what, and whether existing rules and systems are being applied fairly and effectively.

These concerns ranged from specific grievances about pricing and licensing to broader questions about who has power over watershed decisions and whether community voices are meaningfully included.



Key governance concerns raised through engagement:

- Water licensing identified as a persistent structural problem
- Regulatory timelines described as too slow to keep pace with farming and land management realities
- Licensing delays of several years creating investment uncertainty
- Disparity between water pricing in Erickson and the Town of Creston
- Questions about whether large agricultural users are contributing proportionately to the systems they depend on

Producer conversations added a specific governance dimension. The distinction between provincial and RDCK roles was not always clear to producers and contributed to confusion about who to contact and who has authority to act. Producers described regulatory processes that feel misaligned with the timelines of agricultural decision-making. Licensing timelines of several years are structurally misaligned with agricultural planning horizons, and decisions about what to plant, what to invest in, and how to manage risk cannot wait for regulatory processes that move on a different timeline.

Producers expressed a desire for more direct, ongoing communication channels with the agencies that shape their water access. What this theme reflects is a deeper need for clarity, consistency, and confidence that the systems governing water in the watershed are working in the public interest.

"Government needs to get involved in managing water usage and very soon as we are almost to the point where it is too late to change the current trajectory."

"Policies that support environmental protection of the watershed and public systems that are more efficient should be priorities."

WHAT WE HEARD

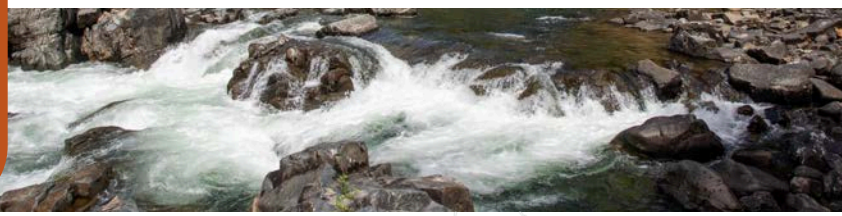
THEME 6: COMMUNICATION, TRUST, AND SHARED LEARNING

Of 220 survey respondents, 95 wanted to receive updates and information, and 36 expressed interest in attending future discussions or events. Many noted that the engagement process itself introduced them to new information about local watershed conditions.

Open house participants asked for continued information sessions in plain language, raised underlying concerns about process transparency and whether input would lead to real action, and sought clearer communication about agency roles and decision-making responsibilities.

Alongside concern about water conditions and governance, respondents and engagement participants want better information, more meaningful communication, and greater confidence that what they share will actually be used.

The communication concern operated on two levels: a practical need for information about what is happening and how the planning process is unfolding, and a deeper need for confidence that engagement leads somewhere.



Trust was identified as a significant factor in producer participation. Producers who felt their input would be heard and acted upon were more willing to share detailed operational information. Those who had experienced inconsistent communication or follow-through from agencies were more guarded. The relationship-based approach of the producer engagement initiative, beginning with the Kootenay Boundary Farm Advisors (KBFA) Lunch and Learn, was specifically designed to address this trust gap, and it made a meaningful difference.

Participants expressed a desire to be kept informed as the planning process moves forward. The level of interest in receiving updates and attending events indicates that the community is engaged and willing to remain involved. Maintaining accessible and transparent communication channels, and demonstrating clearly how input is being used, will be important to sustaining that engagement over time.

"The community engagement is important for informing residents because the average resident assumes our watersheds are being protected. Most people do not understand there is no sustainability plan in place."

"Why would we engage if nothing changes."

WHAT WE HEARD

THEME 7: LOCAL ADAPTATION, PRACTICAL IDEAS, AND LONG-TERM VISION

Alongside concern and frustration, engagement revealed genuine commitment, practical ideas, and a clear vision for what a healthier water future could look like in the Goat River Watershed.

People are adapting, thinking about solutions, and willing to be part of change.

Of 220 survey respondents, the most commonly chosen actions were:

- 69 said they would encourage businesses and farms to adopt water-efficient practices
- 64 said they would support policies that protect local water

Specific ideas raised through engagement:

- Metering coupled with fair pricing
- Protecting riparian areas through legislation
- Sourcing agricultural water from the Kootenay River
- Requiring rather than encouraging efficient practices among large users

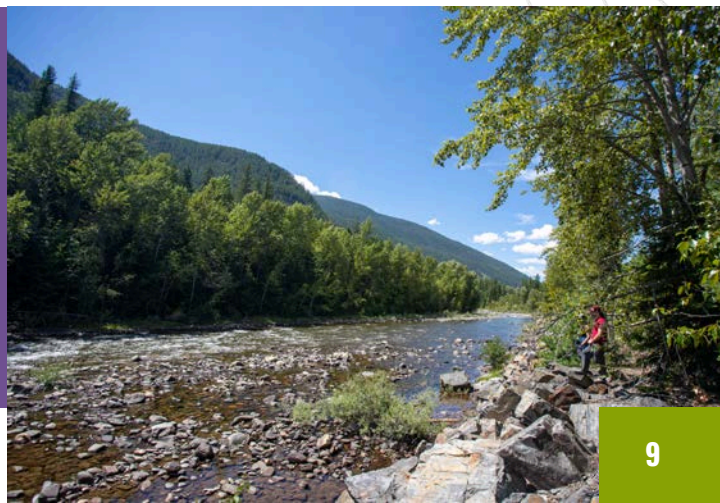
Producer conversations contributed a range of practical examples of adaptation and innovation. Producers described drip irrigation systems, above-ground irrigation lines for easier leak detection, soil-building practices including mulching and composting, and crop transitions designed to reduce water demand over the long term.

On-farm water storage, including reservoirs, ponds, and tanks, was identified as a priority opportunity, with capital cost and permitting complexity cited as the primary barriers. Producers also identified shared equipment initiatives, mobile irrigation audit teams, and an agricultural bus tour for decision-makers modelled on Okanagan examples as practical near-term opportunities.

Across engagement, participants identified a consistent set of long-term priorities: reliable household water access, a viable agricultural sector operating in ways that support watershed health, functioning ecosystems, and a planning approach that addresses water sustainability over generations rather than in response to individual events.

"Water is more important than gold or oil or money. Water is life."

"This is such important work and needs to be dealt with better. It is also important to reach more people in this community to share the knowledge, concerns, and collaborative effort to protect our watershed."



RECOMMENDATIONS
WHAT THIS PHASE OF ENGAGEMENT POINTS TOWARD

Strengthen the evidence base while keeping lived experience visible

Technical work on groundwater, surface water connections, and watershed hydrology is responsive to what people described through engagement. The place-based observations that residents and producers shared are a form of knowledge that should remain visible alongside technical findings. Planning that integrates both will be more complete than planning that relies on either alone.

Address water availability through both system improvements and demand-side action

Infrastructure assessment and repair, loss prevention, storage development, and more coordinated planning across water systems were consistently identified as practical opportunities. These should be pursued alongside efforts to support water-efficient practices among households, farms, and businesses. Neither approach alone is sufficient.

Keep land use, forestry, and ecological health central to the conversation

The connection between what happens on the land and what happens to the water was one of the most strongly felt themes across engagement. Forestry practices, riparian health, wetland function, and soil management all belong at the table in water sustainability planning, alongside the agencies that make decisions about land use.

Clarify roles and establish more direct communication channels

The distinction between provincial and RDCK responsibilities was a source of genuine confusion, and clearer communication about how decisions are made and how input feeds into planning outcomes will be essential for maintaining trust. This applies equally to producers, who expressed strong interest in structured, recurring forums for direct dialogue with decision-makers, built on the foundation established through this engagement.

Plan for the long term across the full range of watershed priorities

Water sustainability planning in the Goat River Watershed needs to account for household water security, agricultural viability, ecosystem health, and fairness across communities and water users. These are not competing priorities. They are interconnected, and planning that addresses one while ignoring others will produce incomplete and potentially inequitable outcomes.

NEXT STEPS
THE WORK AHEAD

The engagement summarized in this report is one part of an ongoing water sustainability planning process for the Goat River Watershed.

The input gathered will inform the next phase of work in direct and specific ways. Following the publication of this report, the process will move into the second part of Phase 3, with more focused conversations with residents, irrigation and improvement districts, and industry.

In addition to engagement, technical work is underway to address information gaps identified through the planning process. A Preliminary Assessment of Hydraulic Connectivity in the Goat River Watershed will develop a clearer understanding of the relationships between bedrock groundwater, overlying aquifers, and surface water systems across the watershed.

The RDCK and yaqan nuʔkiy are also in conversation with the Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship to investigate the issues, desired outcomes, and possible tools available to support water sustainability in the Goat River Watershed.

The input gathered through this phase of engagement will be carried forward into the planning and technical work that follows.

For more information, please visit the Goat River Watershed Water Sustainability Planning page at **engage.rdck.ca/goatwatershed.**