

AUDIT AT A GLANCE

MANAGEMENT OF THE CONSERVATION LANDS PROGRAM

Why we did this audit

- British Columbia has the greatest diversity of native fish and wildlife in Canada.
- The Conservation Lands Program contributes to government's strategy to maintain diversity through conserving some of the most biologically productive estuaries, wetlands and grasslands in the province.
- If the program is not managed effectively, habitats that it conserves could be harmed, including the fish and wildlife that depend on them.

Objective

To determine whether the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development has effectively managed the Conservation Lands Program to conserve important habitat for the benefit of significant fish and wildlife species.

Audit period: We focused on the period 2016–2020 but also assessed older documents and data as applicable to our work.

Conclusion

We concluded that the ministry had not effectively managed the Conservation Lands Program to conserve important habitat.

We made 11 recommendations mainly focused on:

- providing strategic direction
- increasing direction to staff to collaborate with Indigenous peoples
- revising all outdated management plans for wildlife management areas (WMAs)
- resolving threats to the most at-risk conservation lands
- improving tracking of inventory
- monitoring and reporting publicly on the effectiveness of the program

The ministry has accepted all 11 recommendations.

What we found

Strategic direction

Species and habitats identified

- Species identified include species at risk, migratory birds and culturally important species
- Some habitats identified (e.g., wetlands) support high species diversity

Habitats not ranked by ministry

- Conservation partners, not ministry, ranked habitats by priority
- Only 1 of 8 regions had ranked habitats for the program

Recommendation 1

Lack of overall direction

- No provincial strategic plan
- Goals not renewed for over 30 years
- Non-administered conservation lands lacked direction on future purpose

Recommendation 2, Recommendation 3



OFFICE OF THE
Auditor General
of British Columbia

What we found (continued)

Strategic direction (continued)

Lack of direction on collaboration with Indigenous peoples

- Limited direction to staff to collaborate with Indigenous peoples specifically on the program
- Only 3 of 8 regions provided specific direction to collaborate with Indigenous peoples on the program

Recommendation 4

Managing conservation lands

Conservation lands designated as WMAs

- 9 WMAs designated in 4 of 8 regions (2010–2018)
- 31 WMAs designated in 7 of 8 regions (since inception)

Most WMA plans not current or approved

- Average age of WMA plans was almost 19 years
- About 70% of plans not approved
- 3 WMAs didn't have WMA plans

Recommendation 5

Risks to conservation lands from human activity

- Hundreds of unauthorized activities had occurred on conservation lands
- Activities included motor vehicle use, dogs off-leash, harvesting and dumping
- Limited strategies for unauthorized use
- Some incompatible overlaps between grazing tenures and conservation lands

Recommendation 6, Recommendation 7

Infrastructure being maintained

- All 8 regions reported on infrastructure
- Record-keeping lacking, including on dams managed by Ducks Unlimited Canada

Recommendation 8

Program inventory, monitoring and reporting

Inadequate inventory of conservation lands

- Inventory data inconsistent and not readily available
- Number of non-administered conservation lands not accurate

Recommendation 9, Recommendation 10

Program effectiveness not monitored or reported

- Ministry lacked performance measures and targets to assess progress
- Some reporting on site-level conservation work

Recommendation 11

After reading the report, you may want to ask the following questions of government:

1. How much should government rely on non-profit organizations to secure and manage conservation lands?
2. How will the ministry reduce unauthorized activity on the most at-risk conservation lands?
3. How will government collaborate with Indigenous peoples through this program to achieve shared conservation outcomes?