

# Kootenay Connect \$4 million conservation project finishes first year

by Jan McMurray

The \$4 million, four-year 'Kootenay Connect' conservation project is nearing the end of its first year, and was recently featured in a news conference hosted by federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change Jonathan Wilkinson and Project Manager Marcy Mahr.

Mahr is a Hills resident and is managing the project for the Kootenay Conservation Program.

"Of all the projects funded by the Canada Nature Fund, Minister Wilkinson chose ours first [to feature in a news conference] because he is so impressed with what we are doing in the Kootenays," Mahr told the *Valley Voice* in an interview. "The level of cooperation and expertise in our region has allowed us to put together a package of 50 projects in four important Kootenay corridors. And we're already seeing results on the ground."

The federal government awarded the project with \$2 million in August 2019. This has been matched with funding from many regional and local organizations to add up to a \$4 million investment in protecting species at

risk and ecological connectivity in the Kootenays.

Kootenay Connect consists of over 50 projects that will benefit 28 federally listed species at risk and 36 species of local concern.

The four focal corridors of the Kootenay Connect project cover about one million hectares and include the Bonanza Biodiversity Corridor between Slocan Lake and Summit Lake; the Creston Valley; the Wycliffe Wildlife Corridor; and the Columbia Valley Wetlands.

Mahr says the Kootenay Connect project is informed by a study she did with Michael Proctor, grizzly bear expert from Kaslo, with funding from the Fish & Wildlife Compensation Program. The study identified 12 corridors as high priority biodiversity hotspots in the Kootenays.

"When this amazing opportunity to access \$2 million in federal funding came along, we chose these four corridors because they are places with champions already advancing conservation at a landscape level," Mahr said. "But we still have a vision for all 12 corridors."

Mahr says she is working with 12

partners and their consultants on the project, bringing the Kootenay Connect team to 25.

Much of the activity in the first year has been planning work, completing inventories of species at risk and their habitats, and mapping, Mahr says. "The four-year timeframe allows us to do some really good up-front planning and will allow us to monitor the projects really well, too."

Year one saw two on-the-ground projects: wetland restoration in the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area to support the northern leopard frog; and improving dry ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forest ecosystems and restoring native grasslands and meadows in the Wycliffe Wildlife Corridor to support federally at-risk Lewis's Woodpecker and Williamson's Sapsucker and the American badger.

The federal government announced the \$1.35 billion Nature Legacy Fund in 2018 – the largest investment in nature conservation in Canadian history – to support the goal of protecting 25% of the land mass of Canada by 2025. Of this \$1.35 billion, \$15.6 million was earmarked for the Canada Nature Fund's Community-Nominated Priority

Places for Species at Risk. Kootenay Connect is one of only 15 projects chosen under this program in 2019.

"We're ahead largely because of the Fish & Wildlife Compensation Program and the Columbia Basin Trust," Mahr says. "Through their programs, they have provided guidance as well as funding, and have helped to prioritize and build capacity. The downside is that they are compensation programs, but they have provided overall strategic support to do better conservation in the region."

## Bonanza Biodiversity Corridor

The Slocan Lake Stewardship Society (SLSS) is the champion organization for the Bonanza Biodiversity Corridor (BBC) component of the Kootenay Connect project.

SLSS has a budget of more than \$500,000 over the four years for the BBC, thanks to the federal Canada Nature Fund and the Columbia Basin Trust.

In the first year of the project, SLSS has been focusing on planning and permitting, and expects to get started on wetland restoration at Hunter Siding next month, reports SLSS President Wendy King.

"We've been doing lots of assessments – fish, amphibian, species at risk – that will inform our on-the-ground wetland restoration projects," said King.

The plan is to do wetland restoration

at Hunter Siding this fall, and along Upper Bonanza Creek and Summit Lake in 2021.

In the last year of the project, the focus will be on completing an application for conservation reserve status, which is what the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area has.

"Thanks to this funding, we'll have really good quality data for our conservation reserve status application," King said. "It's a real feather in the Kootenay Conservation Program's hat, and ours, that we qualified for federal funding."

Mahr says the work of SWAMP (Slocan Wetland Assessment and Monitoring Project) from 2014 to 2018 determined that the BBC is one of the most diverse places in the Kootenays for wetland types.

"We built up a lot of data through SWAMP and now we're adding to that data," King said.

King says being part of the Kootenay Conservation Program's partner network has been invaluable. "We have shared in a wealth of knowledge with other groups in the Kootenays. It's allowed us to cut corners, share resources, and just bounce ideas off one another."

More information about the BBC project will be released soon, King promises.

For more information on Kootenay Connect: [kootenayconservation.ca/kootenay-connect/](http://kootenayconservation.ca/kootenay-connect/).

## No word on when Galena Trail repair work will begin

by John Boivin, Local Journalism Initiative reporter

Hikers and bikers won't likely be using the Galena Trail from Three Forks to the cable car anytime soon.

Regional District of Central Kootenay staff are still assessing the work that has to be done on that portion of the trail, including the historic cable car, before repair work can begin.

"There is going to be a geotechnical assessment of what needs to be done to do the repairs in a way that will return the trail and the cable car both to a stable operating condition," says Richard Allin, the chair of the commission that oversees the trail.

The 13-kilometre trail was first damaged late last year when Carpenter Creek undercut a bank and sloughed off a point on the trail. But that was nothing compared to what followed during the spring freshet, especially the storm that hit the region on the May 31 weekend.

"The creek just raged through there, and did some damage to the access point of the trailhead, and further eroded the trail, until there was less than a metre of trail, then a steep drop-off to the creek," says Allin.

The upper portion of the trail has been closed from Three Forks to the cable car since. The portion of the trail from the cable car to Roseberry, about two-thirds the overall length, is still open to the public.

The popular cable car was first closed in early spring during the coronavirus shutdown, as it was feared public use of the hand-pulled cable car could spread the virus. The rain event in May also damaged the foundation of the cable car, and it will also have to be repaired.

The geotechnical survey, which is to get underway this summer, says

Allin, will be a complete assessment of both the washed-out section of the trail and the cable car's underpinning.

The work is being done with the help of a federal government grant of \$100,000 for repair work under the Canada Infrastructure Program. That money is being matched by \$80,000 from the Province and \$20,000 from

the Regional District. It's being topped up with a provincial disaster assistance program grant the RDCK has received, says Allin.

Repairing the damaged portion of the trail will not begin at least until next season, says Allin. In the meantime, the public is asked to respect posted signage and stay off the closed portion of the trail.



Hikers and bikers won't likely be using the Galena Trail from Three Forks to the cable car anytime soon.

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