

Submission re: Human-Wildlife conflicts

Prepared by: WildSafeBC, a program owned and operated by the British Columbia Conservation Foundation

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Education and collaboration are key components of creating social change and reducing human-wildlife conflict throughout the province of British Columbia. The WildSafeBC program delivered by the British Columbia Conservation Foundation effectively does this and with additional investment can increase the program's impact in the communities where we live.

Background of WildSafeBC

The reduction of human-wildlife conflict throughout the province has been the sole goal of our WildSafeBC program since 2013, and prior to that, our highly successful Bear Aware program had focussed on reducing human-bear conflict since 1999.

WildSafeBC is based on a neutral approach to educating the public, businesses, and organizations about how to reduce human-wildlife conflict where people "live, work, play, and grow." Our neutrality is based upon the idea that we are not here to "save" or "destroy" wildlife, but instead our focus is to find ways that we can reduce the potential for conflict with wildlife, and in so doing, make our communities safer for humans and wildlife.

WildSafeBC uses messaging that encompasses the four areas of our lives where conflict with wildlife normally occurs. The four areas of conflict include where we,

- **Live:** our homes and residential neighbourhoods are magnets now for bears and deer;
- **Work:** when our work takes us into where the wildlife normally resides e.g. when tree planting, or building pipelines, we increase our exposure to the potential for human-wildlife conflict;
- **Play:** where we mountain bike, walk our dogs, camp or hike we are entering in areas normally occupied by wildlife and again increase the potential for conflict;
- **Grow:** commercial production of berries, tree fruits, produce, honey and a variety of livestock creates a huge opportunity for conflict as wildlife tries to access the veritable buffet we create for them.

It should be noted that WildSafeBC presently provides messaging with regards to all forms of wildlife that we can be in conflict with. Our list of publications includes information on conflict reduction with: bear, deer, cougars, coyotes, wolves, skunks, bats, rats, raccoons, moose, and rattlesnakes.

The cornerstone of our educational process is teaching people how a variety of attractants bring wildlife into our urban settings, and how this access to anthropomorphic foods usually sets in motion a trajectory of food conditioning, human habituation, and eventually the creation of 'problem-wildlife.' The 'problem-wildlife' that we create then creates a risk to human safety. To stop this progression, we

provide solutions as to how attractants can be managed. This management is usually through either the removal of the attractant as with keeping garbage inside, or through exclusion - such as with the construction of proper, predator-resistant electric fencing.

Our educational program is based on both local delivery, through a community coordinator, and provincially through social media and traditional media (print, radio and television.) Local delivery is based on a community coordinator that engages the public through door-to-door canvassing, school programs, public events, social media and who provides support for the local Conservation Officers by delivering education in response to specific conflict areas. At present we have 25 of these local programs running.

Provincially we reach the public through our website (www.wildsafebc.com) and a variety of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). Our website is particularly effective, and we enjoy “first-page” Google search results on many of the key species that we deal with.

Funding and program participation

At present, our primary funding is obtained through the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy (MOECCS) on a yearly term. With base funding in place we then invite communities to apply for a coordinator position for their community. In the application they state what funding they can also provide to the program. Applications are then evaluated through a decision-making matrix that looks at a variety of terms, including, amongst other considerations: number of years the program has been supported already, amount of extra-funding provided (pro-rated against population base), actions taken towards being a Bear-Smart community, in-kind contributions, etc.

By partnering with the local community and other funders we are able to provide \$2.50 of program delivery for every \$1 provided by the provincial government – which is a very effective use of public funds. Our present annual funding level from the MOECCS is \$275,000 and when other financial support is included from our other funding partners, the total annual budget of the program is approximately \$700,000.

The challenge – lack of funding

While we are extremely appreciative of the support we receive from the province, both financially and through the dedicated work of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy employees that we work directly with, additional funding is needed if we are to make any substantial gains in our efforts to reduce human-wildlife conflict on a broad level.

Including the total financial support of all the funding partners, the total expenditure of the program equates to just fifteen cents per person on an annual basis (based on an estimated population of 4.8 million BC residents in 2018 – source BC Government website). This is not sufficient to create the lasting societal change needed reduce the impacts of humans on wildlife populations.

We have identified four main areas of improvement to the WildSafeBC program we feel will greatly increase the penetration and acceptance of our messaging. Investment in these areas would yield substantial and direct benefits in terms of reducing the amount of human-wildlife conflict experienced in the province.

Increased funding would allow for:

1. **Increased number of communities supported to reduce human wildlife conflict** and increased level of social change within the communities.
2. **Increased service to First Nation Communities.** At present there are no funds specifically earmarked for First Nation community engagement. First Nations funding to deliver custom designed human wildlife conflict programs that are culturally appropriate should be a priority of the government.
3. **Increased access to electric fencing** throughout the province. It has been shown in numerous communities that properly built, and maintained, electric fencing is the safest way to reduce livestock and/or crop loss when dealing with bears, coyotes and wolves.
4. **Development of a certification program** that would recognize the positive efforts of businesses and organizations that adhere to best practices around reducing human-wildlife conflicts in their day-to-day operations.

Call to action

We strongly recommend that the government engage with the British Columbia Conservation Foundation to develop a budget with key priorities outlined that would allow us to, on a province-wide basis, “help keep wildlife wild and communities safe!”