



NEWS RELEASE

No Flood Mitigation Funding for Abbotsford, Merritt and Princeton

ABBOTSFORD June 3, 2024 – Three BC municipalities devastated by flooding in 2021, along with industry and business leaders are calling on the federal government to change the way it funds climate change disaster prevention after all being turned down for critical flood infrastructure funding through the Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund (DMAF).

The federal government launched the \$2 billion DMAF in May 2018, adding an additional \$1.375 billion in 2021, all of which is to be allocated over the next 9 years. DMAF is a national, competitive, and merit-based contribution program requiring communities to apply for funding through a competitive applications process.

“It’s absolutely ridiculous,” said Abbotsford Mayor Ross Siemens. “The 2021 flood caused significant damage to our regional and provincial transportation infrastructure, property and businesses, and severely impacted agricultural production in the most productive area of Canada. For the first time in our history, we witnessed a 9-day closure of the key transportation corridor (the Trans-Canada Highway) through the Fraser Valley, which links Canada’s largest port with the interior and Alberta, and yet through this competitive granting program, we did not make it on the list of federal priorities.”

Across BC, the 2021 atmospheric river event disrupted major railway lines, closed several major highways (some for several months), halted the movement of people, goods and services, resulting in severe disruptions to the Asia Pacific gateway supply chain, closed the US/Canada border, and devastated businesses, farms, residences and distressed residents. In Merritt, for example, this storm necessitated dozens of swift water rescues, and caused the flooding of hundreds of homes, months of lost school days, and hundreds of millions of dollars in destruction, including a bridge collapse, a wastewater treatment plant failure, and extensive private and public property damage.

Post flood, the City of Abbotsford took immediate action to assess and develop a flood prevention and management infrastructure solution that would safeguard the community, residents, and the region’s well-being and economic stability. The City applied for DMAF funding when the grant program opened for applications in the summer last year as encouraged by senior government officials.

The City of Merritt developed a comprehensive Flood Mitigation Plan to support their DMAF application. This plan provides updated river modelling that details that a much greater number of homes are now at risk (1,270 homes are now identified as in the flood zone compared to the 130 homes previously identified in the original Provincial floodplain modelling). The flood protections that Merritt had prior to 2021 are now washed down the river and the city remains extremely vulnerable to future and inevitable flooding. The City of Merritt needs a new dike system plus the funding required to purchase the land under its footprint.

The Town of Princeton hired a consultant to update the municipality’s current flood mitigation plan and embarked on a long-term hydrological model simulation identifying the magnitude of future winter and rain events in the vicinity of the municipality. The plan includes options for future diking projects and relocation of key infrastructure.

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However, the competitive DMAF requirements mean that municipalities have to compete for the funding with all other communities across Canada. With limited financial means and expertise, this means smaller municipalities and communities do not always have the resources needed to undertake the lengthy and sometimes costly process of preparing an application that stacks up against other applicants competing for the funding.

“Senior levels of government promised to support us. They told us this was the way to get it,” said Merritt Mayor Michael G. Goetz. “We have shared detailed engineering reports that say the return-on-investment of this design is 7:1. Honestly, if preventing an almost guaranteed future disaster with a project like this doesn’t make the cut, I can’t imagine what projects in Canada will.”

“It’s like hoping to win the lottery,” said Princeton Mayor Spencer Coyne. “Community members lost their homes, key infrastructure was impacted, and the community was devastated. The DMAF funding was key to the flood mitigation and adaptation plan of Princeton, but now we are left vulnerable and trying to find a way to pay for the impacts of global climate change on our own with a population of 3,000 and tens of millions of dollars in costs. Rural BC, no, rural Canada is the economic engine of this country and cannot be forgotten just because we might be small.”

In 2019, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) recommended that the federal government “reevaluate” the DMAF program’s eligibility criteria so that communities of all sizes could “access critical funding and support”, yet no changes were made.

Abbotsford’s funding application proposed a solution that would ensure the Trans-Canada Highway would remain open, BC’s provincial food supply would be protected, and ensured that the flow of goods and services by truck and train to and from the Port of Vancouver would continue.

Merritt’s application proposed a system of setback dikes that would increase riparian area, provide room for the river, and provide safety and protection for the thousand-plus residents who now find themselves in a flood inundation zone after modern engineering projections tripled the potential flood levels.

Princeton’s application proposed structural and non-structural elements, including land acquisition for diking to protect the community, as well as the relocation of critical infrastructure (sewer lift station). With the anticipated increase in winter flooding events, similar to the one experienced in November 2021, a 1.642-km dike is paramount for preventing overland flooding in the future.

The 2021 floods have been called the most expensive natural disaster in Canadian history, leaving the three mayors wondering, if work to protect against this level of disaster doesn’t qualify for federal support, then what does.

In June 2023, Canada’s first National Adaptation Strategy was released by the federal government. Disaster resilience is one of the five key systems around which the strategy is organized.

Despite preparing such resilience strategies, Abbotsford, Merritt and Princeton are left wondering how they will be able to find the funding they desperately need to ensure their communities are prepared in the face of increasing extreme climate events.

Quotes:

Chief Dalton Silver, Sumas First Nation (Semá:th)

“The recent flood has had a devastating impact on several of our Indigenous communities, affecting our people and resources profoundly. We are calling upon the federal government to provide the support needed to ensure the safety of our people and others as well as the lands and resources.”

Ken Popove, Mayor, City of Chilliwack

“In the Fraser Valley, we know that flooding does not recognize municipal borders, and that protecting each of our communities from flooding requires significant collaboration and investment. The closure of the Trans-Canada Highway during the 2021 atmospheric river event had a significant impact on Chilliwack. In addition to supply chain disruptions, many residents were unable to make their way to their places of employment, or access medical services. We are glad to be part of a strong partnership with our neighbouring communities as we work together towards our shared flood mitigation goals, and will continue to advocate to senior levels of government to acknowledge this critical need.”

Jason Lum, Chair of the Board, Fraser Valley Regional District

“It is profoundly disappointing to learn that our friends and neighbours in Abbotsford, Princeton, and Merritt were not successful in their application for federal flood mitigation funding. Local governments in British Columbia stand ready to work together collaboratively. The piecemeal grant funding process by which we are forced to compete against each other for these critical dollars needs to change, and it needs to change now.”

Mike Younie, Chief Administrative Officer, City of Mission

“The City of Mission is supportive of the federal government investing in long term flood mitigation plans and works in municipalities and regional districts within British Columbia. Ageing infrastructure and projected impacts of climate change demand renewed flood mitigation planning and infrastructure investments, but those investments exceed local governments’ financial capacity. It is critical that the Government of Canada take a leadership role in addressing these financial challenges to ensure the resiliency of our communities.”

Jeremy Dunn, General Manager, BC Dairy

“Infrastructure failure poses a significant threat to Sumas Prairie farms, who generate economic benefits for the Abbotsford community, in addition to contributing to our provincial food supply. It is crucial for government to take the steps needed ensure that our local and provincial infrastructure is upgraded to protect our homes, our businesses and our provincial economy from future impacts related to extreme climate events fueled by ongoing climate change.”

Gerald Linden, President, Southern Railway of British Columbia Ltd.

“Southern Railway of British Columbia Ltd. (SRY) supports the efforts being made by the City of Abbotsford and other towns and cities in Southwest BC to advocate for long term flood mitigation infrastructure funding. Like everyone in the region SRY was significantly impacted by the flood event in November 2021. Our mainline from Chilliwack to Abbotsford was out of service for close to a month. With the help of transportation partners and industry we were still able to maintain rail service to customers in the Fraser Valley like Ritchie Smith Feeds and Clearbrook Grain that are critical to the feed industry. We believe it is vitally important that all levels of government take steps to ensure that infrastructure is upgraded to protect our region and economy. The financial burden can’t only be placed on local government. The federal government needs to support our communities by prioritizing and allocating funding.”

Anita Huberman, President and CEO, Surrey Board of Trade

“We need revolutionary change by the federal government in cooperation with the provincial government to prevent future and similar flood disasters from re-occurring. This sustained call for action for funding and other supports needed by Abbotsford is also important for Surrey as we are all a part of the South Fraser Economic Region. Investing in flood prevention and mitigation strategies generates employment opportunities and ensures the continuity of business operations including for our agricultural businesses so that they can protect their assets. This contributes to the overall economic resilience of a city as well as economic growth and stability.”

Dr. Joanne MacLean, President & Vice Chancellor, University of the Fraser Valley

“The devastating 2021 flood had a profound impact on our UFV community, disrupting students' lives and studies as the highway closure isolated them from our campus. As an institution deeply rooted in the Fraser Valley, we understand the importance of a secure future in agriculture for our students, whose education and careers are linked to the well-being of this region. Investing in flood mitigation is investing in the future of our

students and the resilience of our agricultural community. We urge senior government to come forward with funding support to ensure a flooding disaster of this magnitude does not happen again.”

Gurmeen Banipal, President, Fraser Valley Indo-Canadian Business Association

"The Fraser Valley Indo-Canadian Business Association stands with the City of Abbotsford, the City of Merritt, and the Town of Princeton in their collaborative efforts to secure essential disaster mitigation funding. The November 2021 floods were the most expensive natural disaster in B.C.'s history and have had a profound impact on the business community in the Fraser Valley. The FVICBA can attest firsthand to the catastrophic impacts that continue to affect our local business communities, economies, and critical infrastructure. This funding is crucial for the long-term flood mitigation plan, which will significantly impact our business communities by providing much-needed security and stability. By investing in extreme weather measures, we can ensure the resilience of our local businesses and protect the economic backbone of our region."

Alex Mitchell, CEO, Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce

"The Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce supports the City of Abbotsford's application for long-term infrastructure funding to address flood mitigation in our community. Significant investments are needed to prevent disruptions to supply chains and support the local businesses and farmers that drive Canada's food security should another extreme weather event occur in the future."

Clare Seeley, Executive Director, Tourism Abbotsford

"The Tourism Abbotsford Society fully supports the City of Abbotsford's application for long-term flood mitigation infrastructure due to the impacts still felt from the 2021 floods. We continue to support and advocate for tourism stakeholders impacted by this including the financial strain, disrupted operations, and reputational damage to the community from a tourism perspective."

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