



BC FIRST NATIONS
FORESTRY
COUNCIL

BC First
Nations
Forestry &
Youth
Conference
2026



FOREST NATIONS RISING

FROM STRONG ROOTS TO GLOBAL HORIZONS

May 12 - 14, 2026

ki?láwna? | Kelowna, BC

nsyilxcən

PROCEEDINGS REPORT

FORESTRYCOUNCIL.CA

Thank you to our 2026 Conference SPONSORS + EXHIBITORS

FOREST STEWARD ALLY



ROOTS & RELATIONS ALLY



STUDENT ALLY



EXHIBITORS

BC Community Forest Association
BC Forest Safety Council
BC Timber Sales
Canada Wildfire Technology
Canadian Tree Nursery Association-ACPF
Cariboo Carbon Solutions
Delta Forestry Group
First Nations' Emergency Services Society
First Nations Fisheries Council
Forest Professionals BC
Forsite Consultants
Harnois Greenhouses
Indigenous Services Selkirk College
Inland Truck & Equipment
InnovaTree Carbon Group Ltd.
Interfor Corp
Natural Resources Canada
Okanagan Training & Development Council
Phoenix Connect/DR systems
PRI Consultants Ltd./Ecora Consultants
PRT Growing Services
Ron Anderson & Sons (RAS)
Relentless Mechanical
Ridgeline Wildfire Solutions
Selkirk College
Silviculture Innovation Program
Spidex All Terrain Excavating Inc.
Standwell Forest Investments
Stillwater consulting Ltd
The Truck Loggers Association
The University of British Columbia
USNR
Waratah Forestry Canada
West Fraser
Western Forest Products Inc.

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CONTENTS



Wednesday, May 13

- 6 Conference Opening & Cultural Welcome
- 8 First Nations Keynote - Regional Chief Terry Teegee
- 9 Ministry of Forests Update - Honourable Ravi Parmar
- 10 The Hemlock Paradox
- 12 Fireside Chat
- 14 First Nations Awards of Excellence
- 16 IFSP Student Awards
- 18 **BusinessConnect Stage**
 - 18 First Nations Centre of Excellence for Economic Development
 - 19 Building Resilience in First Nations Forestry
 - 20 Partnerships, Modernization & Certification
 - 21 First Nations Ecological Restoration Strategy
 - 22 Economic Growth, Stewardship & Wildfire Resilience
- 23 BBQ Social & Expo Networking Event



The table of contents is interactive. Click any heading to jump directly to the session within the report.

Thursday, May 14

- 24 Welcome
- 24 Building Forest Wealth Through Ownership
- 26 First Nations Case Study: Managing the Land Through Action - Our Partnership Story
- 28 Pathways for Managing Cultural Heritage Resources
- 30 From Local Roots to Global Markets
- 32 **BusinessConnect Stage:**
 - 32 Burning Bright: Developing a Local First Nations Fire Crew
 - 33 Roots to Revenue, Economic Opportunities in Standing Forests
 - 34 The Next Generation: A Call to Action
- 36 Youth Conference
- 37 Conference Closing
- 38 Polar Dip & VIP Winemaker's Dinner
- 39 Golf Tournament & Cultural Land Tour

OVERVIEW

The 2026 BC First Nations Forestry Conference was hosted on the traditional, unceded territory of the Syilx (Okanagan) Nation in Kelowna, BC. This year's conference was guided by the theme ***Forest Nations Rising: From Strong Roots to Global Horizons***, bringing together First Nations, industry, government, sponsors, and partners to shape the future of forestry in British Columbia. This year's event reflected both the growing strength of First Nations leadership and the deepening relationships transforming how forests are stewarded, managed, and shared. The continued support of industry leaders, program partners, sponsors, and educational institutions, alongside the dedication of Nations and government, made this gathering possible and underscored a shared commitment to advancing the sector together.

The conference focused on the next chapter of First Nations-led forestry, rooted in long-standing knowledge of the land. As the original stewards, First Nations continue to be central to addressing the economic, social, cultural, and ecological challenges facing BC's forests. Sessions explored ownership, stewardship economies, cultural heritage, wildfire resilience, modernization, certification, and global market opportunities, while highlighting the next generation of Indigenous leaders stepping into the sector. **Across every conversation, one truth stood out: meaningful progress in the forest sector is a collective effort**, where First Nations, industry, sponsors, partners, and government each play an essential role in building a transformed, resilient, and reconciled forest sector grounded in partnership, accountability, and intergenerational responsibility.

BY THE NUMBERS

3

DAYS

512

PARTICIPANTS

56

EXHIBITORS &
SPONSORS

60%

FIRST NATIONS
ATTENDEES

161

YOUTH
ATTENDEES



“When we say we, we're talking about everybody in the room, everybody under the roof of the house, everybody who has to carry the responsibility of how we're moving forward.”

Lennard Joe

A uniquely First Nations experience providing:



Meaningful Networking



Purposeful Collaboration



Informative Engagement



Indigenous Business Support

A fun experience celebrating on-the-ground connection.

- ✓ **Social gatherings & entertainment**
- ✓ **First Nations Awards of Excellence Ceremony**
- ✓ **IFSP Student Awards**
- ✓ **VIP Winemakers Dinner**
- ✓ **Golf Tournament Fundraiser**
- ✓ **First Nations led Land Tour**





2026 CONFERENCE THEME

FOREST NATIONS RISING

FROM STRONG ROOTS TO GLOBAL HORIZONS

KELOWNA, BC

DAY 1: Conference Opening

Welcome Protocol



Dave Marchand

Councillor
Okanagan Indian Band

Cultural Opening



Krystal Withakay

Artist & Knowledge Keeper
Sylx Nation

Master of Ceremonies



Greg Hopf

Storyteller
Moccasin Trails

Forestry Council Host



Lennard Joe

CEO
BC First Nations Forestry Council

The 2026 conference opened under the theme Forest Nations Rising: From Strong Roots to Global Horizons, beginning with a traditional welcome from the Okanagan Indian Band that grounded attendees in the territory and protocols of the host Nation. Master of Ceremonies Greg Hopf wove storytelling and cultural teachings throughout the morning, setting a tone of reflection and relationship-building. CEO Lennard Joe followed with opening remarks that positioned the conference as a turning point for the sector, calling on attendees to think beyond business-as-usual and toward a forestry future shaped by First Nations leadership, ecological responsibility, and shared accountability.

Key Takeaways

- Forestry must move beyond extraction toward stewardship, ecological responsibility, cultural values, and community wellness.
- "Land first" approaches were positioned as a guiding principle for how decisions get made across the sector.
- Cultural teachings and land-based reflections framed forests as living systems, not commodities.
- The conference theme calls for collective leadership rooted in strong cultural and ecological foundations, with a clear horizon beyond provincial borders.



WHEN THE RAVENS BEGAN TO FLY

PART 1 OF 2



WHEN THE RAVENS BEGAN TO SHARE

PART 2 OF 2



First Nations Keynote



**Regional Chief
Terry Teegee**

BC Assembly of
First Nations

In his keynote address, Regional Chief Terry Teegee reflected on the growth of the BC First Nations Forestry Council from its origins during the mountain pine beetle crisis to the strong and influential organization it is today. He highlighted the long-standing role of First Nations in British Columbia's forest sector and emphasized the importance of forestry to community economies, stewardship, employment, and long-term sustainability. While acknowledging ongoing challenges facing the sector, including mill closures, reduced harvest levels, trade uncertainty, and political tensions, he stressed the need for stronger partnerships, long-term tenure, procurement opportunities, workforce development, and implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA). Regional Chief Teegee concluded with a message of optimism, noting that collaboration between First Nations, industry, and government will be essential to building a stronger and more sustainable future for forestry in British Columbia.

Key Takeaways

- First Nations leadership, participation, and decision-making are essential to the future of forestry in British Columbia.
- Long-term planning, tenure certainty, and implementation of DRIPA are critical to supporting sustainable forestry and economic reconciliation.
- Forestry continues to provide important economic opportunities for First Nations and forest-dependent communities through employment, procurement, and business development.
- Strong relationships and collaboration between First Nations, industry, and government are necessary to address current challenges facing the sector.
- Despite economic uncertainty and sector downturns, there is optimism for the future of forestry through renewed partnerships, stewardship, and growing First Nations leadership.



VIEW SESSION SLIDES



Ministry of Forests Update



Honourable

Ravi Parmar

Minister of Forests,
British Columbia

Minister Ravi Parmar highlighted that British Columbia's forest sector is facing significant structural and market challenges, but emphasized that First Nations leadership is central to its future direction. He noted the growth of First Nations tenure from 3% in 2003 to over 22% today as evidence of long-term progress driven through partnerships between Nations, industry, and government. While acknowledging pressures such as stumpage, market instability, and mill closures, he stressed the need for collaborative, regionally tailored solutions and a shift toward future forestry opportunities in stewardship, land management, wildfire mitigation, and on-the-ground resource work. He also reaffirmed government investment in First Nations forestry capacity and underscored that rebuilding trust, improving communication, and strengthening First Nations participation are essential to advancing DRIPA and the long-term resilience of the sector.



Key Takeaways

- First Nations forestry leadership and tenure growth (3% to 22%+) was framed as a major structural shift in BC forestry, with continued expansion supported through partnerships and targeted investments.
- Government confirmed ongoing review of stumpage and appraisal/pricing systems as a key barrier for First Nations acquiring and operating tenure, with no immediate fix but recognition of the issue and regional complexity.
- The sector is facing compounded pressures from global market instability, trade challenges, mill closures, and regulatory constraints, reinforcing the need for structural reform rather than incremental fixes.
- Future forestry employment is expected to shift away from traditional mill-based jobs toward field-based roles in stewardship, forest management, wildfire mitigation, biodiversity, and land-based work, with uncertainty acknowledged for forestry students and new graduates.
- On DRIPA and implementation, the Minister acknowledged trust has been strained between government and First Nations leadership, and emphasized that progress depends on rebuilding relationships and maintaining dialogue alongside public communication of successes.
- A strong political undercurrent was present, with emphasis on the risk of policy reversal under potential future governments, reinforcing the importance of public narrative-building around First Nations role in forestry.
- Overall direction emphasized forestry as a shared system dependent on First Nations participation, where economic outcomes, tenure decisions, and sector viability are increasingly inseparable from Nation-government-industry collaboration.





The Hemlock Paradox

Moderator



Jason Fisher

Executive Director
Forest Enhancement
Society of BC

Speakers



Shannon Janzen

Owner
Hypha Consulting



Hugh Scolah

Owner
Ginko Land Stewardship

The “Hemlock Paradox” panel explored a structural economic challenge in British Columbia’s coastal forest sector where a large share of available fibre, particularly hemlock and balsam, is currently uneconomic to harvest despite high overall volume.

Shannon Janzen explained that roughly half of the coastal forest is hemlock and balsam, which sits below logging cost. This creates reliance on higher-value cedar and douglas-fir to make harvest operations viable. She described this as a “doom loop” where uneconomic fibre, mill closures, and declining investment reinforce each other. Without finding new value for hemlock, she argued the broader system including sawmills, pulp mills, and secondary manufacturing is at risk.

Hugh Scolah focused on investment and regional development. He noted that coastal forestry is seen as high risk due to fibre uncertainty and mill closures, but also said this creates opportunity if regions can organize fragmented tenures into coordinated systems. He pointed to Port Alberni as an example where First Nations leadership and regional collaboration could support shared fibre planning, stronger investment cases, and a shift into manufacturing and value-added production. Jason Fisher emphasized the governance and systems side of the problem. He noted that forestry regulation is highly complex and interconnected, meaning changes often create unintended consequences. He stressed the importance of pulp mills and sawmills as anchor institutions that keep the system functioning and highlighted the need for coordinated planning to maintain fibre flow and economic stability.

“Everywhere is different and everywhere has a different solution, so regional decision making, regional-type solutions kind of have to come from the ground up.”

Shannon Janzen, RPF

Across the discussion, Port Alberni was used as a case study showing how fragmented tenures including First Nations, private lands, Crown tenures, and industry agreements could be coordinated into a regional model. The panel emphasized that First Nations now hold a significant share of fibre and are key to any future governance or investment approach. Rather than relying on provincial action alone, they suggested regions can self-organize through shared inventory, coordinated harvest planning, and collective investment strategies. A central theme was the shift from a “doom loop” to a potential “flywheel” where coordination, stable supply, and investment in manufacturing could strengthen the system. Data sovereignty and locally controlled forest inventory were also highlighted as essential for building investor confidence and supporting decision-making. Overall, the panel positioned hemlock not as a liability but as an untapped opportunity that could support a more resilient, regionally coordinated forest economy.

Key Takeaways

- Apply the “hemlock paradox” as a broader diagnostic tool for identifying uneconomic fibre challenges across regions, not just the coast.
- Shift focus from species-specific constraints to system-level solutions that address fibre mix, manufacturing capacity, and overall value recovery.
- Invest in modern, competitive manufacturing capacity to raise the value of lower-value fibre and improve full-log profitability.
- Develop coordinated regional governance models that enable First Nations, industry, and local partners to self-organize beyond provincial “checkbox” processes.
- Create dedicated regional coordination capacity (neutral conveners or entities) to maintain momentum, build relationships, and move projects forward.
- Build reliable, regionally controlled forest inventory systems to support investment planning, including fibre that may be outside current road access assumptions.
- Advance data sovereignty so regions can control and use forest information to build investor-ready business cases and improve decision-making.
- Strengthen regional “proof of concept” pilots (e.g., Port Alberni and similar regions) to demonstrate viable coordination, harvest planning, and manufacturing models.
- Support stable anchor institutions such as sawmills and pulp mills as critical components of regional fibre ecosystems and employment stability.
- Enable faster pathways to implementation by reducing administrative burden and exploring tools such as automation and streamlined coordination processes.
- Reframe stumpage and tenure systems within the broader system context, ensuring policy supports investment attraction and improved fibre value realization rather than reinforcing low-margin outcomes.
- Prioritize moving up the value chain toward manufacturing and closer-to-market processing to reduce reliance on raw fibre export and improve economic resilience.



[VIEW SESSION SLIDES](#)



Fireside Chat

Speakers



Lennard Joe

CEO
BC First Nations Forestry Council



Garry Merkel

Director
Centre For Indigenous Land
Stewardship at UBC

This fireside conversation focused on forest sector transformation in British Columbia, with emphasis on First Nations leadership, land stewardship, and governance change. The discussion included both speakers' personal and professional journeys in forestry and land management, with Garry Merkel reflecting on the early presence of Indigenous forestry professionals and the limited authority they historically held despite carrying significant stewardship responsibility. Lennard Joe added perspective on relationship-building, mentorship, and the importance of First Nations leadership in shaping a more inclusive forestry future.

A core theme was the need to move beyond short-term extraction models toward an integrated approach where ecological, social, and economic well-being are treated as interconnected and inseparable. The conversation explored how co-management and co-governance approaches, including DRIPA implementation, are reshaping the legal and institutional foundations of forestry in British Columbia. Both speakers emphasized that existing governance systems must evolve beyond rigid territorial and colonial frameworks toward approaches grounded in relationships, shared responsibility, and long-term thinking.

Garry Merkel highlighted that current challenges are less about technical capacity and more about readiness, meaning the ability of systems and institutions to function in fundamentally different ways. He also stressed the importance of accountability and rebuilding trust through clearer standards of engagement between governments and First Nations. Lennard Joe reinforced that First Nations participation is not temporary or conditional, describing them as “sticky capital” that remains rooted in place and invested in long-term outcomes. Emerging opportunities discussed included stewardship-based economies, cultural tourism, carbon markets, and diversified land-based development, all framed as pathways that align economic development with land care and community wellbeing. The dialogue consistently returned to the idea that land must be placed at the centre of decision-making, with governance and economic systems designed to support long-term stewardship rather than short-term extraction.

Key Takeaways

- Forestry must integrate ecological, social, and economic well-being as interconnected priorities rather than competing trade-offs.
- Co-management, co-governance, and DRIPA implementation are reshaping the legal and institutional foundations of forestry in BC.
- Governance systems must move beyond colonial and rigid territorial frameworks toward relationship-based decision-making rooted in land stewardship.
- Old governance habits must be replaced with stronger, clearer standards for engagement and accountability between governments and First Nations.
- Stewardship economies, cultural tourism, carbon markets, and diversified land-based development represent significant future opportunities.
- First Nations are permanent, long-term land partners described as “sticky capital,” reinforcing the need for land-centred decision-making.
- The sector shift is driven more by readiness and institutional change than by technical capacity alone.



“My vision at some point is that we can just learn to all celebrate our common roots and attach ourselves to land.”

Garry Merkel, RPF





First Nations Awards of Excellence

Speakers



Lennard Joe

CEO

BC First Nations Forestry Council

The First Nations Awards of Excellence honour individuals whose leadership has shaped First Nations forestry in British Columbia.



AWARD OF EXCELLENCE

Dave Nordquist
(in memoriam)

Dave Nordquist has been an important voice in many rooms involving First Nations forestry, land stewardship, rights and title, and community. His career has successfully walked in two worlds by combining his traditional community values, language and knowledge with western approaches to forestry science. Dave's legacy is his unrelenting commitment to creating a better world for First Nations communities and successfully creating a path for future generations in his community to confidently carry his work forward.

David Anthony Nordquist Sep 8, 1968 - Nov 10, 2025

[Watch Dave's Tribute](#)



PROGRAM PARTNER OF
THE YEAR

Nick Arkell

GORMAN
Group

For over 50 years, Nick Arkle has been a dedicated leader within Gorman Group, including the past decade as CEO. Throughout that time, Nick has been a strong and consistent supporter of the Indigenous Forestry Scholarship Program (IFSP), helping advance opportunities for First Nations students pursuing careers in forestry and related fields.

Building meaningful relationships with First Nations has been a long-standing priority for the Gorman Group for more than 45 years.

Nick and the Gorman Group's genuine commitment to student success and long-term relationship building has left a lasting impact. We are deeply grateful for their continued partnership, leadership, and support.





IFSP Student Awards

Speakers



Catherine Langille

Workforce Development Lead
BC First Nations Forestry Council

The IFSP Student Awards honour students from our Indigenous Forestry Scholarship Program for their dedication to cultural reconnection and community, as well as their commitment to leadership and academic pursuits in Forestry.

2026 Graduating Students

Andrew Negreiff
Hyla McQuaid
Rylan Adams
Annalease Martin
Trisha Paniagua
Liam Beliveau

2026 Outstanding Achievement

Illyana Christian
Tanya Steinauer
Shaelyn Chesley-Steves
Tamara Strachan
Trisha Paniagua

Program Partners





STUDENT OF THE YEAR
Illyana Christian



**COMMITMENT TO
LEARNING AWARD**
Zoe Mathias



EMBRACING YOUR ROOTS
Rylan Adams



MENTOR OF THE YEAR
Mykayla Riley



GOOD RELATIVE AWARD
Molly Akerman

To explore these students' stories or to read the 2026 Future Faces of Forestry & Awards of Excellence yearbook, please click the buttons below.



I Am Forestry Videos

2026 Yearbook



BusinessConnect STAGE

Master of Ceremonies



Harlan Schilling
CEO
BC First Nations
Centre of Excellence

Speakers



Jordan Coble
Councillor
Westbank First Nation

The BusinessConnect Stage & Expo hosted dynamic conversations and real-world stories. It featured innovative projects, partnerships, and practical opportunities shaping the future of Nation-led forestry, business, and collaboration across the sector.

The BusinessConnect Stage was opened by Harlan Schilling, the CEO of the BC First Nations Centre of Excellence (FNCOE). Established in the fall of 2023 through a BCAFN Chiefs-in-Assembly resolution, FNCOE is a First Nations-led institution dedicated to economic reconciliation, growth, and self-determination across all sectors, upholding BC First Nations inherent rights and title.

The Centre's service delivery model emphasizes community-based delivery, increased participation in Canada's economy, and a commitment to honour culture, history, and values, offering support across business development, governance advisory, economic development planning, and project management. Initiatives highlighted included the Young Indigenous Leaders Exchange Program to the Indo-Pacific Region and the proposed ~800 km Yukon-BC Grid Connect transmission project.

The introduction framed BusinessConnect as a venue for spotlighting innovative projects, partnerships, and practical opportunities shaping the future of Nation-led forestry, business, and cross-sector collaboration.

Key Takeaways

- FNCOE is positioned as a First Nations-led institution advancing economic reconciliation and self-determination across all sectors.
- The Centre delivers community-based services in business development, governance, economic planning, and project management.
- Flagship initiatives include the Young Indigenous Leaders Exchange and the Yukon-BC Grid Connect transmission project.
- BusinessConnect was framed as a stage for real-world Nation-led project stories and partnership opportunities.



BUILDING RESILIENCE IN FIRST NATIONS FORESTRY



Speakers



Michael Bonshore

President & CEO
Visions First Nations Financial Services
Managing Director
FNBDA



Khoi Mai

Indigenous Markets Lead
PwC Canada

This session examined the impacts of the current forestry downturn on First Nations communities and highlighted practical strategies for Economic Development Corporations to build resilience and navigate economic uncertainty. Michael Bonshore introduced the First Nations Business Development Association, established in 2020 to represent and advocate for First Nation-owned Development Corporations across BC. It now reflects 101+ member Development Corporations and over 130 First Nations involved, with a mandate to drive sustainable economic growth within traditional territories and the province.

Khoi Mai of PwC Canada framed BC forestry across a “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow” lens: a sector historically dominated by large firms, commodity markets, vertical integration, and large investments, now transitioning through First Nations assertion of authority into a future defined by First Nations control, ownership, procurement, and management. Macroeconomic trends, geopolitical uncertainty, a shift toward “more value, less volume,” and digitization were named as forces reshaping the sector, alongside persistent barriers around access to capital, human capital, and information.

Key Takeaways

- FNBDA represents 101+ Development Corporations and 130+ First Nations, advocating for sustainable economic growth within traditional territories.
- BC forestry is shifting from a large-firm, commodity-driven model toward First Nations control, ownership, and management.
- Macro forces, geopolitical uncertainty, “more value less volume,” and digitization, are reshaping investment scale and risk profiles.
- Access to capital, human capital, and information remain the central barriers for Nation-led enterprises.
- Resilient strategies for Economic Development Corporations are central to navigating the current downturn.



BusinessConnect STAGE

Partnerships, Modernization & Certification

Speakers



This session brought together industry, certification, and Nation partners to explore how partnerships, forest sector modernization, and certification standards can advance First Nations-led forestry. The Forest Modernization Committee (presented through Tolko) framed the work as “Stewardship in Practice, Partnership in Action,” signalling an industry shift toward partnership-based approaches that go beyond consultation.

The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) presented its 2022 Forest Management Standard, structured around 17 objectives that include a dedicated objective to recognize and respect Indigenous Peoples' rights, alongside objectives on planning, biodiversity, special sites, climate-smart forestry, fire resilience, and continual improvement. SFI noted that 65 Indigenous communities, businesses, and partnerships across Canada and the United States are certified to the SFI Forest Management Standard, with almost half located in BC, and pointed to its MOU with the BC First Nations Forestry Council and an SFI Certification Playbook designed to help First Nations businesses, organizations, and communities pursue certification.

Across the presenters, certification was presented as a mechanism (not a prescription) through which First Nations can advance self-determined priorities while developing their own processes to manage cultural values, special sites, water, and ecological objectives.

Key Takeaways

- Forest sector modernization was framed as partnership-driven stewardship rather than consultation-only engagement.
- SFI's 2022 standard includes a dedicated objective recognizing and respecting Indigenous Peoples' rights.
- 65 Indigenous communities and businesses across Canada and the US hold SFI certification, nearly half in BC.
- SFI and the BC First Nations Forestry Council have signed an MOU and developed a Certification Playbook for First Nations.
- Certification can act as a structured pathway for First Nations to advance self-determined cultural, ecological, and operational priorities.



First Nations Ecological Restoration Strategy



Speakers



Robert Phillips

Political Executive
First Nations Summit



Kevin Scott

Board President
RESOLVE Canada

Robert Phillips, a member of Tsq'escen' (Canim Lake Band) of the Secwepemc Nation and a Political Executive for the First Nations Summit, brings an extensive background in treaty and self-government negotiations. That grounding in rights, title, and self-determination shaped the session's central case: that restoration governance and priorities should sit with Nations as rights and title holders, consistent with UNDRIP and DRIPA.

Kevin Scott, Board President of RESOLVE Canada, brought a complementary strategy-and-financing lens. With twenty-five years developing strategic plans, alongside policy expertise across land-use planning, parks, wildlife management, forestry, and climate change, he anchored the focus on how to fund restoration at scale, mobilizing capital through blended, long-term funding models.

For First Nations, ecological restoration is more than repairing damaged land. It is an expression of stewardship, self-determination, and the responsibility to care for territory. A Restoration Strategy sets out how a First Nation defines its own priorities, governs the work, and secures the resources to sustain it over the long term. As much as it is an ecological opportunity, it is also an economic one: done well, it generates jobs, training, and revenue, keeping ecological work and community well-being advancing together.

Key Takeaways

- A restoration strategy is a governance tool first: it defines who leads, who decides, and who benefits.
- Secure durable, long-term financing rather than relying on single grant cycles.
- Build internal capacity so First Nations can move from strategy to on-the-ground delivery.
- Structure partnerships with governments, ENGOs, and industry on the First Nation's terms.

Funding Opportunities

Program availability and intake dates change, so confirm current status on each program's page before applying.

- [Tripartite Framework Agreement on Nature Conservation](#)
- [Nature-Smart Climate Solutions Fund](#)
- [Project Finance for Permanence \(PFP\)](#)
- [Ecosystem Enhancement Program \(Columbia Basin Trust\)](#)

Economic Growth, Stewardship & Wildfire Resilience

Speakers



The final two organizations to close the BusinessConnect Stage were the Wildfire Resilience Consortium of Canada (WRCC | CRFFC) and Mercer International, who shared insights on wildfire resilience, stewardship, and regional economic growth. WRCC presented its vision of ensuring all Canadians have access to wildfire knowledge through seven place-based knowledge networks spanning Canada's five terrestrial ecozones: the Pacific Cordillera, Taiga, Prairie, Boreal, and Atlantic Maritime. These networks are designed to foster two-way knowledge sharing, resource development, and collaboration. The organization's mission is to engage the wildland fire ecosystem by connecting knowledge holders, knowledge generators, and knowledge users while accelerating innovation in wildland fire management through a whole-of-society approach.

Mercer International introduced its “One Mercer in British Columbia” presence across three integrated businesses: Mercer Forestry Services (Southern Interior, established 2019), Mercer Celgar (Castlegar, producing kraft pulp since 1961, ~500,000 tonnes per year), and Mercer Mass Timber (Okanagan Falls, established 2023, producing cross-laminated timber and glulam). Mercer outlined four commitments it carries into BC conversations: listen first (recognizing Nations as rights-holders and governments), partner rather than just consult, steward the fibre by using more of what is available and keeping value in the region, and grow the workforce through training and career pathways.



Key Takeaways

- WRCC operates seven place-based knowledge networks across Canada's five terrestrial ecozones to foster wildfire resilience.
- WRCC's approach centres two-way knowledge sharing, collaboration, and whole-of-society innovation in wildland fire management.
- Mercer's BC footprint links forestry services, kraft pulp at Celgar, and mass timber manufacturing into one integrated business.
- Mercer is publicly committed to listening first, partnering rather than consulting, stewarding the fibre, and growing the workforce.



BBQ Social & Expo Networking Event

The BBQ Social & Expo Networking Event gave attendees a chance to unwind, reconnect, and continue conversations from the day in a relaxed and welcoming setting. The evening featured great food, music, Indigenous artisan workshops, interactive games, and prizes, and showcased the strength and diversity of the sector through 56 exhibitors and sponsors, including First Nations businesses, forestry organizations, educational institutions, and industry partners. Attendees explored new products and services, shared ideas, built relationships, and celebrated the growing network of people working together to support First Nations leadership and opportunities in forestry. More than a social, the evening was a reminder that the relationships built off-stage are just as important as the dialogue on-stage in advancing the future of Nation-led forestry.

The skies cleared on the final evening, creating the perfect opportunity for attendees to explore the large outdoor equipment displays.



DAY 2: Welcome

Lennard Joe reflected on the shift from rain to sunshine as a reminder of gratitude, adaptability, and being grounded in the land. He shared storytelling, including Raven and creation stories, as a way of understanding how the land continues to speak through many voices and perspectives.

He also spoke about identity in forestry, explaining how his shift from “First Nations forester” to “forester who is First Nations” helped him express both professional and cultural identity without separation. Framing the conference as a gathering of family, he highlighted shared vision, intergenerational learning with students, and the importance of building connection, alignment, and a collective future for forestry.



Building Forest Wealth Through Ownership



Don Roberts

President & CEO
Nawitka Capital Advisors

Don Roberts opened Day Two with a candid assessment of Canada’s forest sector competitiveness, arguing that the country is losing the global commodity game of low-cost, high-volume production. He noted that BC Interior harvesting and transportation costs are more than 2.5 times those of the US South, with most of the gap coming from forest operations rather than milling or stumpage. This cost structure makes the current model increasingly unsustainable.

He described the sector as an integrated system where changes in ownership, processing, and regulation create ripple effects across the value chain. Transformation depends on both “felt risk” and “perceived opportunity,” and if either is missing, change does not occur.

A core theme was the role of ownership in shaping investment behaviour. Roberts compared four ownership types: publicly traded companies, timberland investment management organizations (TIMOs), timberland cooperatives, and First Nations and local communities. He explained that differences in time horizon, capital mobility, and return expectations determine what gets built and where capital flows.

He pointed to Scandinavian cooperatives such as Metsä as examples of long-term, locally anchored investment, including about US\$7 billion invested in Finland since 2015, with major spending on biorefinery-scale innovation. In contrast, listed companies tend to move capital to lower-cost regions, reinforcing Canada’s investment challenge.



Roberts argued that Canada's forestry challenge is largely structural. Forest ownership is separated from the industries that create added value, while governments focus more on regulation than investment. This creates uncertainty for long-term investors and weak alignment between public land objectives and industrial strategy.

He outlined reform options including tenure reform, long-term fibre agreements, blended finance, Crown investment vehicles, privatization, mosaic ownership, and hybrid First Nations–private models. He evaluated these against economic effectiveness, fiscal exposure, political feasibility, and long-term success, concluding that the status quo is the weakest option.

His central conclusion was that hybrid First Nations–private ownership models, supported by private-sector joint ventures and stable government “hosting conditions,” offer the strongest long-term alignment with manageable fiscal exposure. Governments should focus on providing transparency, longevity, and certainty rather than acting as capital allocators.

He closed by noting global precedent for large-scale land transfers to First Nations and local communities, with about 250 million hectares transferred in recent decades, showing that structural change at scale is already underway.

The Diagnosis: A Model Reaching Its Limits

- Canada is losing the commodity game. BC Interior harvesting and transport costs run more than 2.5 times those of the US South, and the gap sits in the forest, not the mill.
- Ownership shapes everything. Time horizon, risk appetite, and where capital flows all trace back to who owns the land, listed companies chase lower-cost regions, while locally anchored owners invest for the long term.
- The status quo is the highest-risk option. Real transformation needs both felt risk and perceived opportunity, and the conditions for change are already in place.

The Path Forward: Aligning Ownership, Investment, and Stewardship

- Hybrid First Nations–private models offer the strongest long-term alignment with manageable fiscal exposure, pairing intergenerational stewardship and sovereign authority with private capital and discipline. The precedent is real: roughly 250 million hectares have shifted to First Nations and local control globally in recent decades.
- Government's job is to enable, not allocate. Its role is transparency, longevity, and certainty (TLC) — backed by tenure reform, blended finance, and stable, outcome-based regulation.
- Test before scaling. Launch hybrid pilots in willing regions and build clear pilot-to-scale pathways for new ownership and investment models.
- Move up the value chain. Diversify beyond commodity lumber into bioeconomy, carbon, higher-value products, and fuller fibre utilization.

First Nations Case Study: Managing the Land Through Action: Our Partnership Story

Speakers



Frank Joe

Forestry Advisor
Yucwmenlúcwu



Kyle Runzer

Forestry Manager
Yucwmenlúcwu



Trish Balcaen

CEO
Balcaen Consolidated
Ltd | Coldstream Ranch Ltd

This case study explored the Yucwmenlúcwu (Caretakers of the Land) partnership as a practical example of relationship-based forestry led through action rather than theory. Using the Splatsin Development Corporation forestry model as a live case, speakers described how trust, sincerity, transparency, humility, and shared stewardship values underpin collaboration between First Nations leadership, industry partners, and contractors.

The discussion highlighted a shift toward landscape-level forest management that integrates ecological health, cultural responsibility, and economic opportunity. On-the-ground practices include selective and partial harvesting, reduced road construction through more efficient planning, retention of cedar and hemlock for long-term value, and integrated wildfire mitigation.

Speakers emphasized that adaptive learning and continuous improvement are more important than pursuing a “perfect” plan, while also identifying systemic barriers in current appraisal systems and operational incentives that remain rooted in older industrial forestry models. The session reinforced a central message: without the land, there is no value.

Key Takeaways / Actions

Relationship-based forestry is the foundation of success

Effective partnerships depend on sincerity, transparency, trust, humility, and shared stewardship goals across First Nations, industry, and contractors.

Integrated stewardship model in practice

The Splatsin-led approach balances ecological, economic, cultural, and operational priorities through coordinated, on-the-ground decision-making.



“We’re actually building partnerships like we build forestry operations. We have direction first, and then we make changes with experience.”

Kyle Runzer

[VIEW SESSION SLIDES](#)



Operational shift toward lighter, more adaptive forestry

Practices include selective harvesting, reduced road development, retention of cedar and hemlock, wildlife and habitat enhancement, and improved community access considerations.

Landscape-level planning over stand-level intervention

Management is increasingly applied across entire areas of caretaking responsibility rather than isolated cut blocks, supporting long-term forest resilience.

Economic outcomes are being redefined, not reduced

While some short-term costs may increase, integrated planning is reducing duplication of treatments (e.g., roads, planting, spacing) and improving long-term value recovery.

Systemic misalignment remains a key barrier

Appraisal systems, stocking standards, and operational incentives are often structured for older industrial models and can discourage innovative stewardship approaches.

Adaptive learning is central to success

The partnership prioritizes continuous improvement and real-time learning over rigid planning, emphasizing responsiveness to land-based outcomes and community input.

Core principle: land-based value creation

The discussion reinforced that long-term economic and community value depends on maintaining healthy land systems, captured in the message: “Without the land, there is no value.”

Pathways for Managing Cultural Heritage Resources



Nick Reynolds

Manager, Special Projects
Forest Practices Board of BC

Nick Reynolds, Manager of Special Projects with the Forest Practices Board (FPB) of BC, presented an overview of an ongoing special report on Cultural Heritage Resources (CHRs) in BC forestry. CHRs are defined under the Forest Act as culturally, historically, or archaeologically significant sites and objects, including burial sites, culturally modified trees, cedar bark areas, cultural trails, monumental cedars, traditional use sites, and spiritual or ceremonial places. The presentation traced key legal milestones shaping CHR protection, including Meares Island, R. v. Sparrow, and Delgamuukw, the 1994 introduction of CHRs into legislation, and their 2004 inclusion as a FRPA value. Despite this framework, Forest Practices Board data (2009–2025) shows medium to high cultural heritage impacts in 42% of sampled cutblocks across five Natural Resource Districts, indicating ongoing implementation gaps.

Reynolds outlined at least ten intersecting pathways for CHR management, reflecting a complex system rather than a single approach. These include FPPR Section 10 forest stewardship planning, Government Actions Regulation (GAR) resource features, Forest Landscape Plans, the Heritage Conservation Act, Land Act Section 93.4 objectives, Forest Act provisions (including Part 13 designations), focused legislation such as the Nisga'a Final Agreement and Haida Gwaii Reconciliation Act, private agreements between First Nations and licensees, and Strategic Engagement Agreements. He emphasized that outcomes depend on how consistently CHRs are identified, integrated into operational planning, and supported through First Nations engagement and agreements. The session concluded that DRIPA and UNDRIP Article 27 are increasingly shaping the future of CHR management by driving alignment of BC laws with Indigenous rights, laws, and stewardship responsibilities.

Key Takeaways / Actions

- CHRs include both archaeological and living cultural values such as traditional use and ceremonial sites.
- BC uses at least ten overlapping legal and collaborative pathways for CHR management, with no single system.
- FPB data shows 42% of sampled cutblocks (2009–2025) had medium to high impacts to cultural heritage values.
- CHR protection is rooted in key court decisions and has evolved through successive legislative frameworks since 1994.
- Effectiveness depends on implementation, First Nations engagement, and integration of Indigenous-led stewardship into operations.
- DRIPA and UNDRIP Article 27 are emerging as the primary framework guiding future alignment and reform.

[VIEW SESSION SLIDES](#)



Forest Nations Rising



From Local Roots to Global Markets

Speakers



Frank Hui

President
Coast Fraser



Lindsay Tighe

General Manager
Stuwix Resources
Joint Venture
Chief
Shackan Indian Band



Gary Wilson

CEO
Tiičma Management
Services LP.

This panel explored how First Nations forestry enterprises are linking community-based stewardship with global market opportunities, and how international diversification, partnerships, and certification are reshaping BC's forest sector. Speakers emphasized that global forestry markets are in a period of disruption, but this is creating new openings for agile exporters and Indigenous-led enterprises to reposition BC wood in higher-value markets.

Frank Hui described the current global landscape as volatile but opportunity-rich, referencing a ~\$145B U.S. lumber wholesale market, ongoing Canada–U.S. softwood tariff pressures, and a shift in manufacturing demand from China toward Vietnam, India, Mexico, and Middle East infrastructure growth. Coast Fraser Enterprises, now active in 47+ markets and recognized as the 2025 BC Diversified Exporter of the Year, has shifted from a ~95% China-weighted model to a diversified global strategy spanning Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and opportunistic North American channels.

He emphasized First Nations partnerships as central to this strategy, highlighting joint export initiatives, co-branding of certified Indigenous forest products, expanded distribution into Japan, Germany, and the UAE, and shared logistics models that create local employment on traditional territories. Certification (PEFC, FSC, chain-of-custody) was framed as a baseline requirement for premium markets and aligned with First Nations stewardship. Indigenous-managed forestry was positioned as an emerging premium global category, with potential to define BC wood as trusted, sustainable timber.

They urged closer alignment among First Nations, industry, and government to tackle systemic barriers such as costs, policy constraints, and market volatility. They also highlighted trade missions as important opportunities to build relationships and strengthen market intelligence.

Overall, the panel highlighted that First Nations forestry is not only participating in global markets but helping redefine them. By combining stewardship, certification, and strategic global partnerships, BC's forest sector can expand access to premium markets while strengthening community economies and advancing long-term reconciliation through trade.

Key Takeaways / Actions

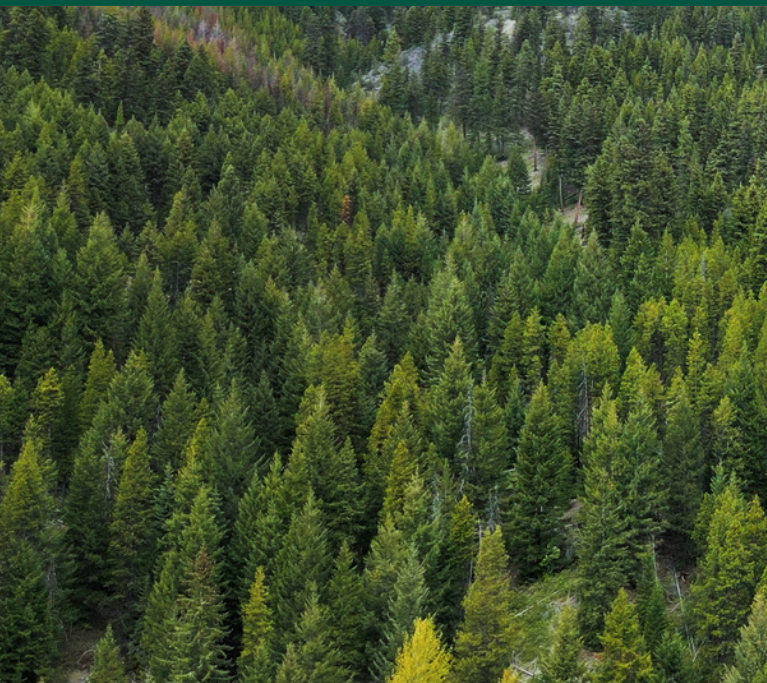
- Global disruption (tariffs, shifting manufacturing hubs, infrastructure growth in the Middle East) is creating new export opportunities.
- Market diversification is essential to reduce reliance on single regions and manage volatility.
- First Nations partnerships strengthen ESG credibility, supply chain legitimacy, and local employment.
- Certification (PEFC, FSC, chain-of-custody) is now a baseline requirement for premium global markets.
- Indigenous-managed forestry is emerging as a premium category, positioning BC wood as trusted and sustainable.
- Co-branded and coordinated export strategies can expand First Nations participation in global trade.
- Stewardship-based forestry and international trade are complementary, creating long-term shared value.



[VIEW SESSION SLIDES](#)

"Everything starts with place. Our lands are incredibly rich in natural capital that is basically our superpower. Community-owned business, including forestry, only works when it's rooted in the realities of place - not imposed external models."

Gary Wilson



BusinessConnect STAGE

Burning Bright: Developing a Local First Nations Fire Crew

Speakers



Klay Tindall

General Manager
Forestry Operations
Lil'wat Forestry Ventures



Jordon Gabriel

Community Relations and
Forestry Manager
Lil'wat Forestry Ventures

This case study from Lil'wat Forestry Ventures traced the development of a local First Nations Type 3 fire crew and the parallel reintroduction of cultural burning practices. Speakers described how the wildfire response and cultural burning initiatives originally emerged from a desire to create local employment, increase community capacity, and strengthen Indigenous stewardship practices on the territory. The panel was candid about the operational challenges encountered along the way, equipment acquisition, financing, operational logistics, training requirements, and certification systems, and the discipline required to build credibility. Professionalism, strong operational standards, and patient long-term relationship building with BC Wildfire Service and operational partners were named as the foundation for the crew's growth. Cultural burning was presented as both a wildfire risk-reduction tool and a practice of ecological and cultural restoration: opening forest canopies and reducing fuel loads has supported wildlife habitat, huckleberry regeneration, ecosystem health, and reduced wildfire risk near communities. The session closed with a clear call to pass this knowledge to younger generations, support other Nations in building fire crews, and continue restoring Indigenous fire stewardship across the land.

Key Takeaways / Actions

- Lil'wat's fire crew was built around local employment, community capacity, and Indigenous stewardship, not just emergency response.
- Equipment, financing, training, and certification systems are persistent barriers to standing up Indigenous fire crews.
- Professionalism and long-term relationships with BC Wildfire Service have been central to credibility and growth.
- Cultural burning delivers both wildfire risk reduction and ecological/cultural restoration outcomes.
- Knowledge transfer to youth and peer support to other Nations are critical for restoring Indigenous fire stewardship at scale.



Roots to Revenue, Economic Opportunities in Standing Forests

Moderator



Linda Coady
Board Member
Nature United

Speakers



Dan Slavik
Conservation
Portfolio Manager
Nature United



Daniel O'Brien
Principal
O'Brien Sustainability
Services Inc.

This session explored how standing forests can support alternative revenue streams through carbon markets, biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration, water values, and other forms of nature-based finance. Speakers discussed how forests are increasingly being valued for more than timber alone, creating opportunities for First Nations to diversify local economies while maintaining ecological integrity and stewardship responsibilities.

The conversation highlighted the growing role of First Nations leadership in conservation initiatives, natural capital accounting, and emerging "working landscape" approaches that seek to balance economic development, cultural values, and long-term environmental outcomes. Discussion also explored how nature-based finance can complement traditional forestry activities and support sustainable, community-driven economic development.

Key Takeaways / Actions

- Standing forests can generate economic value through carbon, biodiversity, water, and ecosystem service opportunities.
- First Nations leadership is helping shape emerging conservation finance and stewardship economy models across BC.
- A multi-value approach to forests can support both long-term stewardship objectives and sustainable economic development.
- Stewardship and economic development do not have to be competing priorities; standing forests can create value while supporting long-term ecological and cultural outcomes.



The Next Generation: A Call to Action

Moderator



Hyla McQuaid

IFSP Scholarship
Student
Kitsumkalum First
Nation

Speakers



Illyana Christian

IFSP Scholarship
Student
Splatshin First Nation



Molly Akerman

IFSP Scholarship
Student
Quw'utsun First
Nation

The Indigenous Forestry Scholarship Program (IFSP) Student Panel brought together current scholarship recipients to share their educational journeys, career aspirations, and experiences navigating pathways into forestry and natural resource careers. Through personal stories and discussion, the panel highlighted the importance of community, support, mentorship, and hands-on learning opportunities.

The panel reflected on their experiences pursuing post-secondary education and careers related to forestry, stewardship, and natural resources. The youth speakers discussed the challenges and opportunities they have encountered while balancing education, career development, and connections to community and culture. Throughout the discussion, students emphasized the value of programs such as the Indigenous Forestry Scholarship Program in helping reduce barriers to education and employment. Financial support, summer work placements, mentorship opportunities, professional networking, and participation in conferences and industry events were all identified as important factors contributing to student success.

The panel also explored perceptions of forestry among youth and highlighted a growing interest in stewardship-focused careers that combine environmental responsibility, Indigenous values, and meaningful work on the land. Students spoke about the importance of representation within the sector and the need for Indigenous youth to see themselves reflected in forestry leadership, technical roles, and decision-making positions. The discussion reinforced that there is no single pathway into forestry and action needs to be taken from industry to continue making the forest sector a stronger community.



Key Takeaways / Actions

- Create meaningful pathways for Indigenous youth through mentorship, education, paid work experience, and leadership opportunities.
- Move beyond conversations about reconciliation and commit to tangible actions that create space for Indigenous youth within the forest sector.
- Recognize that Indigenous youth are not only the future workforce, but future leaders, decision-makers, and stewards of the land.
- Invest in long-term relationships and support systems that help Indigenous youth enter, remain, and thrive within forestry and environmental careers.



"Just know that there is a place for you, and it's important to recognize that and take up space."

Illyana Christian

YOUTH CONFERENCE

Inspiring the next generation of forestry professionals

The 2026 Youth Conference welcomed 161 students from School Districts 22, 23, 53, 58, 67, and 83 across the Thompson-Okanagan region, with many travelling more than an hour to explore careers in forestry and land stewardship.

Through interactive experiences—including wildfire response demonstrations, drone technology, heavy equipment simulators, forestry career activities, and exhibits from First Nations organizations, industry, and educational partners—students gained firsthand insight into the diverse opportunities shaping the future of the forest sector.

The Forestry Council extends its sincere thanks to the exhibitors and partners who invested their time and creativity into delivering hands-on, engaging activities that inspired curiosity and meaningful learning. By connecting youth directly with professionals and real-world experiences, the conference helped inspire the next generation of Indigenous leaders while reinforcing that stewardship, innovation, and strong relationships will continue to shape the future of forestry in British Columbia.



Conference Closing



Lennard Joe

CEO

BC First Nations Forestry Council

CEO Lennard Joe closed the 2026 conference by thanking attendees, speakers, sponsors, partners, and the Forestry Council team for two days of meaningful dialogue and shared learning under the theme Forest Nations Rising: From Strong Roots to Global Horizons. The closing remarks reflected on the strength of relationships built and renewed across the two days, the growing leadership of First Nations across every part of the forest sector, and the collective responsibility carried by Nations, industry, government, and partners in shaping what comes next. The Silent Auction wrapped up alongside the closing, with proceeds supporting the Forestry Council's ongoing work to advance Nation-led forestry, youth opportunity, and stewardship across British Columbia.



“First Nations in forestry are in a really good place right now. We’re very strong, we’re very passionate, we’re very tied to our past and we really understand the responsibilities we have for our future generations.”

Lennard Joe



Polar Dip

Wood Lake

Before the conference officially began, 15 attendees gathered for an early morning Polar Dip at Wood Lake, embracing a refreshing start to the week and an opportunity to connect outside the conference setting. The location provided a fitting reminder of the conference's connection to forests, water, and the lands that continue to shape First Nations stewardship.

More than a fun activity, the Polar Dip served as a memorable "icebreaker," bringing participants together through a shared experience before opening sessions began. It set the tone for the conference, one grounded in community, relationship building, and a shared commitment to learning and collaboration.

VIP Winemaker's Dinner

50th Parallel Estate winery

As the sun set over the Okanagan Valley, approximately 160 guests gathered to begin the conference with an evening centred on connection, culture, and shared purpose. Conversations unfolded during an outdoor cocktail reception before guests enjoyed a thoughtfully curated dinner celebrating Indigenous foods, including Arctic Char sustainably harvested in Tahik Lake, Taloyoak, Nunavut, longline-caught Turbot from an Indigenous fishing co-operative, and desserts featuring locally sourced haskap and Saskatoon berries. A captivating performance by Hayley Wallis of the Kitasoo/Xai'Xais Nation carried the evening into the winery's tank room for coffee and dessert, setting the tone for guests that some of the strongest partnerships begin by sharing stories, food, and culture together.





Golf Tournament

Okanagan Golf Club

Sponsors



Ratcliff

The 2026 Golf Tournament brought attendees together for an evening of laughter, friendly competition, and time on the land at the Bear Course at the Okanagan Golf Club. Attendees took on nine holes of golf packed with fun, including a Beat the Pro hole shot, a Closest to the Pin competition, and a Happy Gilmore challenge that had everyone laughing and smiling all afternoon. The evening wrapped up with a sit-down dinner, more stories, and plenty of celebration. A sincere thank you to our golf sponsors, Ecora and Ratcliff, whose support made the evening possible.



Cultural Land Tour

Mission Creek Regional Park

Facilitator



Elliot Tonasket

Syilx Knowledge Keeper

The Cultural Land Tour invited attendees to step outdoors and learn directly from the land, gaining a deeper understanding of the history, cultural heritage, and ongoing realities of the Okanagan people. The experience grounded the conference theme in lived place and reminded participants that meaningful work in the forest sector must always be rooted in respect for the land, the people, and the knowledge that has shaped it for generations.



SEE YOU NEXT YEAR!



BC FIRST NATIONS FORESTRY COUNCIL

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

"First Nations leadership in forestry remains essential to the future of this sector."

Lennard Joe | CEO