

Ranchers follow beavers for water storage solutions

Beavers can mitigate floods, wildfires on the landscape

KATE AYERS

KAMLOOPS – While beavers are often considered a nuisance in agriculture and were nearly hunted to extinction during the fur trade era, the iconic critters can provide a wide range of environmental benefits.

Some producers are realizing those benefits by welcoming beavers on their properties or using beaver dam analogues (BDAs), structures designed to mimic the form and function of natural beaver dams.

“It’s really kind of picked up momentum over the last three or four years,” says BC Cattlemen’s Association general manager Kevin Boon.

For example, early last year the BC Wildlife Federation launched the 10,000 Wetlands project, which is focused on beaver-based restoration. It’s designed to mitigate environmental challenges by installing 100 BDAs across the province.

“There used to be beavers everywhere across the landscape and they really did help shape our rivers and our waterways,” says BC Wildlife Federation beaver restoration assessment lead Jen Rogers. “Then, because of the fur trade and because of that history of trapping, we have since lost a huge driver for maintaining hydrology and hydrological health in our watersheds.”

Most of the federation’s projects are in the Thompson-Okanagan, Kootenay and Cariboo regions.

“We’re generally looking at sites that are higher in the watershed as they have a bit

more of a hydrological impact downstream by capturing and retaining that water higher up,” Rogers says. “[BDAs] are able to supplement those low-flow conditions during drought times [and] slowly release that water and really help to keep water in the creeks and available for wildlife, for fish, for people.”

Where beavers exist, some producers are actively managing populations to restore wetlands, riparian areas and fish habitats.

Beavers can mitigate the impacts of floods and droughts by storing and slowly delivering water throughout the year. Their dams act as speedbumps, slowing the movement of water so it can soak in and recharge the groundwater. This increased water availability in streams and underground can improve forage and water quality for livestock.

“It’s like soaking up a sponge and when it gets hot and dry later in the summer, it’ll be released further downstream as cool ground water,” says Miistakis Institute conservation analyst Holly Kinas. “That provides important drinking water for not only livestock but also wildlife.”

Located in Calgary, the not-for-profit institute has run beaver coexistence projects for the last decade through a partnership with Cows and Fish Riparian Management Society.

Beaver dams can also create refuge habitats for wildlife during wildfires.

“It creates a break when there is a really intense wildfire



Pond levellers help control the depth of water upstream of a beaver dam to prevent flooding. The pipe lies on the pond floor following installation, which is a team effort. | COWS AND FISH

that’s rapidly burning through a landscape,” Rogers says. “The fire will follow that path of least resistance, so it’ll burn through the really dry vegetation. But when it hits this vegetation that’s been saturated because of the water table, it will usually kind of skirt around it and that creates these really vital refuge habitats and pockets within the watershed that aren’t burned.”

However, since beavers are wild animals, ranchers cannot dictate where they build dams. This means they can

inadvertently plug culverts and irrigation intakes or flood roads. As a result, producers must manage expectations, Rogers says, and install coexistence infrastructure such as pond levellers, exclusion fencing and tree wrapping.

If producers want to welcome beavers onto their properties, they can create a metre-deep pool of water to provide sufficient protection from predators. For food, beavers are a generalist species but prefer willow, aspen and cottonwood.

Overall, as ecosystem engineers, beavers can help manage water storage throughout the year but also cause headaches and unintended damage if not carefully managed.

“You’ve got to look at the whole system and build a plan. It’s just one of the tools on that landscape used to help mitigate [water]. It’s not the silver bullet,” Boon says. “We need every tool we can to be able to store and manage water. So that’s just one more way of doing it and it’s nature’s way.”



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