



## MEDIA RELEASE



**Investment  
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### Comox Valley Farmers Out-Foxing Fowl

**January 4, 2006, Comox Valley, B.C.** – The Comox Valley is the winter host to more than 10% of the world's Trumpeter Swan population, tripling from 1,000 birds in the valley in 1990 to 3,000 today. Local farmers welcome the increased numbers, though the return of larger and larger flocks is having an economic and emotional impact.

Damage caused by these fowl could include loss of forage for livestock, reduced drainage in fields, removal of newly-seeded forages, craters the size of bathtubs in vegetable fields and weed growth in bare areas.

“Often up to 700 acres of cover crops are planted each year and each year there is very little left in the spring for the farmer to garner the benefits of planting these crops” says Graeme Fowler, program coordinator and with Ducks Unlimited Canada. “Waterfowl consume these lure crops and then move on to the more abundant perennial forage fields.”

To address this problem, the Comox Valley Farmers’ Institute is implementing a multi-stepped strategy to help farmers manage the impact of waterfowl in their fields via their Wildlife Mitigation and Compensation Program. With funding support from the Agriculture Environment Partnership Initiative, the program utilizes the planting of cover or lure crops on otherwise fallow fields to keep waterfowl from perennial forage fields between January and March. Other potential mitigation techniques could include improving field drainage to deter swans – which prefer saturated field conditions – or planting forage species that are less palatable to the waterfowl. In addition, “hazing” techniques are utilized when possible and could include: dogs, electronic avian deterrents, noise devices, flags, barrels and decoys to keep swans away from sensitive fields. The success of these techniques varies by field size, location, drainage and surrounding tree cover.

Partial reimbursement is available to farmers who plant these lure crops prior to a fall cut-off date. Farmers can recoup approximately half of their planting costs. This project, which works cooperatively with Ducks Unlimited Canada’s Comox Valley Waterfowl Management Program, has just completed its first year and represents the first time Comox Valley farmers have initiated a major project with funding assistance to help address forage losses due to waterfowl.

“Farmers in the valley have been frustrated every fall and winter watching ever increasing numbers of waterfowl devouring their perennial forages and nobody had a solution,” says Jill Hatfield, regional agrologist with the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands. “This program puts the control in the farmer’s hands through their farm organization and, maybe more importantly, acknowledges the financial losses farmers have sustained year after year.”

This project – an undertaking of the Comox Valley Farmers’ Institute and funding partners including Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Agriculture Environment Partnership Initiative (AEPI) – is an example of how working together can bring awareness, understanding and improvement of issues to both farmers and their communities.

*Funding provided by:*



The AEPI provides funding assistance for farmers in B.C. to address environmental issues, enhance environmental sustainability and reduce the impacts of wildlife on agriculture. Funding for the AEPI is provided through the Agri-Food Futures Fund, a joint program of the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture and Lands and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. AEPI funds are held in trust with the Investment Agriculture Foundation of B.C., an industry-led, non-profit organization established in 1996 whose mandate is to support innovative projects that place the BC agri-food industry at the leading edge, enabling it to seize new opportunities and deal with emerging issues. The B.C. Agriculture Council (BCAC), who represent the majority of agricultural commodities in BC, seeks to foster cooperation and a collective response to matters affecting the future of agriculture in the province and facilitates programs and service delivery for a number of programs that benefit the industry. BCAC manages this program.

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Images available upon request.

*Funding provided by:*



## Comox Valley Waterfowl Mitigation Project (CVWMP) Background

The Comox Valley consists of over 20,000 hectares of farmland on Vancouver Islands' eastern coastal plain. This farmland is adjacent to nearly 1,000 hectares of estuary habitat. The combination of natural estuaries and assessable farmland has made this area prime waterfowl habitat.

Trumpeter Swans and other waterfowl species find suitable winter habitat in many of the estuaries along the coast of British Columbia. However, the Courtenay River estuary over the years has lost the abundance of aquatic vegetation which supported these birds throughout the winter. The agricultural lands adjacent to the estuary have become critical to the survival of the swans and other waterfowl species. The waterfowl primarily use the estuary for roosting purposes and as a minor source of food when the agricultural fields are covered with snow.

Trumpeter swans, once on the brink of extinction, were scarce in the Comox Valley. Prior to 1963 no Trumpeter swans had been recorded. Since then however, over wintering swan populations have doubled from 1991 until 2002. The Comox Valley is now home to 13% of the Pacific Coast swan population and 30% of the wintering Swans along the BC Coast. <sup>[1]</sup>

In the initial stages of the CVWMP swan feeding behavior was observed. It was noted that in October to December the Swans feed predominantly on the fallow vegetable fields. In December – January as the crop residues decrease the swans move on to perennial forages and winter cereal crops

Populations of Canada Geese and widgeons are also increasing in the Comox Valley. Feeding habits of these species give cause for concern. Canada geese that reside in the area marshes and wetlands feed on agricultural crops later in the spring and can have significant impact on the spring corn plantings. Flocks of widgeon that can number as high as 500 concentrate their grazing in wet areas of the fields and can cause significant concentrated damage.

Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Canadian Wildlife Service have been carrying out mitigation work for the past 15 years. Mitigation, although very important, does not reduce the damage to crops to an acceptable level from the farmers' perspective – hence the need for a compensation program.

The Mitigation program includes reimbursement to farmers' carrying out mitigative techniques to 50% where the compensation is at 80% of calculated loss. Ducks Unlimited's contribution for reimbursement to farmers for mitigation is \$15,000. AEI has increased their contribution in this category to \$12,500 in 2006 from the \$10,000 in 2005

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<sup>[1]</sup> Comox Valley Waterfowl Management Project 1991-2002 Evaluation prepared by Dan Buffett, Ducks Unlimited Canada

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