

**REPORT TO REGIONAL PARKS COMMITTEE
MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2026**

SUBJECT **Foodlands Access Service – Bear Hill Farm Pilot Project**

ISSUE SUMMARY

To provide an update on implementation of the Capital Regional District (CRD) Foodlands Access Service (FAS) farm site pilot project at Bear Hill Regional Park and to seek final Board approval for use of the site.

BACKGROUND

In July 2023, the CRD Board granted conditional approval to use a portion of Bear Hill Regional Park (Bear Hill) for a pilot farmer-incubator site under the FAS, following recommendation from the Regional Parks Committee. This conditional approval allowed staff to begin work on service establishment.

The CRD FAS was approved through Bylaw 4602 on February 12, 2025. Implementation of the new service is underway, including a farm site pilot project to explore the activation of under-utilized regional and municipal lands for food production.

The proposed pilot site is located in the eastern portion of Bear Hill Regional Park (5920 Patricia Bay Highway, see Appendix A). The site was identified for the following reasons:

- The site is designated Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) and zoned as A1 Agricultural Lands by the District of Saanich.
- It has historically been used for farming, including more recently as a tree nursery under license agreement with the City of Victoria.
- The existing assets of deer fencing and water systems will save significant program costs.
- The site has limited park value due to challenging terrain and lack of trail connectivity and was acquired after completion of the Bear Hill Regional Park Management Plan.

The site has been fallow for approximately nine years, except for a small portion being used by the Garry Oak Meadow Preservation Society (GOMPS) as a Garry Oak nursery. Staff are now seeking final Board approval for use of the property for the five-year farm site pilot project.

Implementation Update

Farm Site Operator

Following a competitive process, staff selected a partnership between Haliburton Community Organic Farm Society and Lifecycles Project Society to operate the farm site pilot project.

Haliburton brings over 20 years of experience in farm incubation and agricultural land management, with a focus on supporting certified organic farm businesses, regenerative farming practices and biodiversity. LifeCycles has been a regional leader in food literacy and food security

since the 1990s, delivering urban agricultural programming, research, and food recovery initiatives across the capital region. Together, these partners provide complementary expertise in farm operations, farmer training, and community food systems.

Site Preparation

Site preparation work has begun to prepare the land for future farmer access. This work was needed ahead of winter conditions to enable suitable conditions and access later in 2026. The focus of the work included:

- Safe removal of invasive species;
- Brush cutting and mowing;
- Tree and stump excavation and removal;
- Soil sampling and testing;
- Field remediation (subsoiling); and
- Removal and disposal of remnants from the City of Victoria tree nursery.

Garry Oak Meadow Preservation Society

GOMPS is the sole current tenant on the site. Work is underway with GOMPS to integrate its operations on the site within the broader site plan. GOMPS provides a valuable service to the region in their work to support native species and to preserve Garry oak meadows in the region. It has been determined that GOMPS and the farm site pilot project will be able to coexist. A renewed lease under the structure of the Foodlands pilot project is anticipated.

Next Steps

Continued Site Preparation

Work on site preparation will continue through the first half of 2026 with the focus on farm infrastructure build-out, including:

- Construction of dry storage;
- A walk-in cooler for produce storage;
- A wash and pack station;
- A greenhouse tunnel for seedling propagation; and
- Repairs to existing water systems.

This work is anticipated to enable farmers to access the site in summer 2026 to prepare for fall 2026 planting and a full 2027 growing season.

Program Policy Development

The Haliburton-LifeCycles partnership will lead development of key policies that will guide the operations of the pilot project. These policies will include:

- Site remediation and land stewardship;
- Farmer application and selection processes;
- Land agreements and tenancy responsibilities; and
- An operational management plan.

This work will provide the framework for future evaluation and inform potential future expansion of the Foodlands Access Service.

Agreements

City of Victoria

Staff are working with the City of Victoria to mutually terminate the existing License of Use Agreement for the former tree nursery and to complete removal of remaining associated infrastructure and debris.

CRD Regional Parks

A license agreement is being developed for the site to define allowable uses and responsibility for the broader property including site access maintenance, utility management, and general property upkeep. The FAS is specifically seeking approval to use the existing house on the property to support farm operations. The house will require investment from the FAS to make it safe to utilize for farm operations. CRD Regional Parks will be removing the dilapidated barn on the property as identified in their 5-year capital plan.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board: That formal approval be granted for use of the eastern portion of the Bear Hill site (5920 Patricia Bay Highway) by the CRD Foodlands Access Service for a five-year pilot project to explore the activation of under-utilized regional and municipal properties as productive farmland.

Alternative 2

That this report be referred back to staff for additional information based on Regional Parks Committee direction.

IMPLICATIONS

Alignment with Board & Corporate Priorities

CRD Corporate Plan initiative 8b-1 prioritized the establishment of a new Foodlands Access Service. With the service now established and implementation underway, this staff report is intended to formalize the use of the Parks property for the pilot project.

The Board previously expressed support for the establishment of a Foodlands Access Service, including the pilot project to explore the activation of surplus CRD owned land for farming use. Use of this site is an essential component of program delivery to fulfill the service goals as supported by the Board.

Financial Implications

Regional Parks will provide the land, site access, and the house at no cost. The FAS will be fully responsible for ongoing operations, maintenance, and capital upgrades associated with the farm site.

Formal approval of use of the site will allow the program to continue with site preparation activities and shift into the capital investment phase of site development. Approval will allow the project to remain on schedule for project delivery, thus having no project financial implications. The 2026 capital budget is \$175,000 and is a one-time cost. The 2026 operating budget is \$125,000 and is projected to increase \$2,500 each year for the remaining four years.

Regional Growth Strategy and Land Use Implications

The use of the property for the pilot project supports implementation of Regional Growth Strategy objective 6.1, which is focused on fostering a resilient food and agriculture system. It strives to protect the region's food and farmlands, enhances local food security, expands food system economic opportunities, and provides opportunities to new and young farmers to gain access to productive agricultural lands. The site is designated Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) and zoned as A1 Agricultural Lands by the District of Saanich which allows for the intended use of the land in the pilot program.

Service Delivery Implications

Approval of use of the property for the pilot project is a core requirement of service delivery for the Foodlands Access Service. A delay in approval would have significant impacts on the project timeline as numerous capital projects need to be completed prior to farmers gaining access to the land later in 2026.

CONCLUSION

Implementation of the Foodlands Access Service is led by the farm site pilot project, tentatively located at Bear Hill Regional Park with work progressing as planned. The site's agricultural designation, historical farming use, and existing infrastructure make it well suited for this purpose, while its limited park use function minimizes impacts to regional parks objectives. Site preparation is underway, operator considerations have been made, and program and policy development is advancing. Formal Board approval of the use of this property will enable continued implementation of the pilot, support Regional Growth Strategy objectives related to food system resilience, and advance the corporate priority to establish the Foodlands Access Service.

RECOMMENDATION

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:
That formal approval be granted for use of the eastern portion of the Bear Hill site (5920 Patricia Bay Highway) by the CRD Foodlands Access Service for a five-year pilot project to explore the activation of under-utilized regional and municipal properties as productive farmland.

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ATTACHMENT

Appendix A: Foodlands Farm Pilot - Maps and Aerial Imagery