BC Incentives for

Ecosystem Conservation and the North Saanich Municipality

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Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge and respect the WSANIC Peoples on whose territory the project site is located, whose historical relationships with the land persist to this day.

Shukooh Goodarzi - UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA - August 15, 2025

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1. Private Land Conservation Framework

1.1 Tax-Based Incentives

Conservation on private lands in British Columbia is often driven by financial incentives. Section 42.1 of the BC Taxation Act enables municipalities to offer property tax reductions for land formally dedicated to conservation. A notable example is the Highlands Municipality, which provides up to 75% tax relief for properties with ecological covenants covering more than 0.5 hectares. Since 2023, this policy has safeguarded 238 hectares across 42 properties (Highlands Municipality, 2023). The Highlands model uses a tiered Ecological Value Score (EVS) system, where tax discounts are calibrated based on biodiversity metrics assessed by qualified biologists. Provincially, Section 4.1 of the Income Tax Act (RSBC 1996, c.215) supports this approach through income tax credits, although uptake remains limited due to certification complexities. Federally, the Ecological Gifts Program, administered by the Canada Revenue Agency, has eliminated $1.2 million in capital gains taxes for landowners in the Capital Regional District (CRA, 2025).

1.2 Technical and Regulatory Support

Beyond taxation, practical support plays a pivotal role in encouraging conservation. Under Section 14 of the Environmental Management Act, nine CRD municipalities operate volunteer teams to remove invasive species from private lands. Saanich's $38,000 annual investment restored 12.5 hectares in 2023, achieving 89% native plant recovery (CRD, 2024). Victoria's similar program, leveraging volunteers, reduced costs by 27%. Additionally, stewardship planning grants under Section 481 of the Local Government Act have shown success when properly resourced. The Galiano Conservancy saw a 38% increase in covenant participation following the implementation of $5,000 grants (GCA, 2023).

1.3 Market-Based and Regulatory Tools

Regulatory mechanisms, when combined with ecological goals, aim to balance urban growth with environmental protection. Tools like Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) programs allow landowners to sell development density credits in exchange for conserving ecologically valuable land. Authorized under Section 903 of the Local Government Act, TDRs in Saanich and Victoria have enabled 14 transactions since 2021, protecting 32 hectares and generating $420,000 for local conservation trusts (Saanich Planning Department, 2025). Permit fee waivers offer further incentives: for instance, Highlands waives 100% of building permit fees for covenanted land (Highlands Municipality, 2022), while Metchosin offers 50% reductions for riparian restoration projects. The latter policy increased streambank rehabilitation by 40% (Metchosin Council, 2023).

2. Implementation Challenges and Contextual Considerations

While the above incentives show promise, three significant barriers emerged from our analysis of Capital Regional District (CRD) programs.

2.1 Fiscal Sustainability Concerns: Offering tax breaks can impact municipal revenues. Highlands reported a $142,000 annual reduction in property tax revenue directly attributable to its conservation tax relief program (Highlands Municipality, 2024, p. 8, financial statement). However, this represented only 1.2% of total municipal revenues. To mitigate revenue impacts, Saanich has piloted an innovative mill rate adjustment model that shifts a minor tax burden to non-conserved properties, a solution that merits further study.

2.2 Legal Complexity: Covenant registration processes remain lengthy and complicated. It currently takes an average of 120 days to register a covenant, due to Land Title Office documentation requirements and mandatory third-party ecological assessments. Standardized covenant templates from the Land Trust Alliance of BC (2023) have reduced processing times by 35% in pilot communities, suggesting that broader adoption of standardized documentation could streamline legal hurdles.

2.3 Awareness Gaps: Many landowners are simply unaware of available programs. This highlights a critical need for improved outreach, potentially multilingual, coordinated with agricultural associations and strata councils to broaden program awareness.

To better understand the uptake of these mechanisms across the region, the table below summarizes the adoption of various conservation incentive tools in CRD municipalities:

Table 1: Conservation Incentive Mechanisms in CRD Municipalities (2024) – Adoption Rates

Category	Mechanism	Legislative Basis	CRD Adoption Rate
Tax Relief	Property tax reduction (15–75%)	BC Taxation Act $42.1	6/13 municipalities
	Income tax credits (provincial)	Income Tax Act (RSBC 1996) c.215	Province-wide (available)
	Capital gains exemption (federal)	Ecological Gifts Program	100% of CRD (eligible)
Technical Support	Invasive species removal teams	Environmental Management Act §14	9/13 municipalities
	Stewardship planning grants	Local Government Act §481	Limited (pilot programs)
Regulatory	Density bonuses (TDR programs)	Local Government Act §903	2 municipalities (Saanich, Victoria)
	Permit fee waivers offer	Community Charter §194	2 municipalities (Highlands, Metchosin)

In general, larger municipalities have been more proactive in adopting tax relief and technical support programs, while market-based tools like TDRs remain rare in the region. The comparative analysis below illustrates the scale and cost-effectiveness of these mechanisms where they are in place:

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Conservation Incentives in CRD Municipalities (2024)

Mechanism	Adopting Municipalities (%)	Implementation Scale	Avg. Cost/Ha	Primary Legislation
Property tax reduction	6 (46% of CRD municipalities)	18.7 ha conserved/municipality	$1,250	Taxation Act 42.1
Invasive species support	9 (69%)	7.2 ha restored/municipality	$3,040	Environmental Management Act 14
TDR programs	2 (15%)	32.4 ha conserved/program	$380	Local Government Act 903
Permit fee waivers	4 (31%)	5.1 ha improved/municipality	$210	Community Charter 194

Note: TDR program costs reflect administrative expenses only—data synthesized from CRD (2024) reports, municipal financial statements, and program evaluations. Emerging mechanisms like Salt Spring Island's carbon credit program (enabled under the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Act, 2021) show future potential but lack sufficient longitudinal data for inclusion.

3. Documented Ecological Outcomes

The pilot conservation project conducted by Habitat Acquisition Trust (HAT) and the District of Saanich demonstrated measurable ecological gains on private lands. As HAT Director Kevin Smith confirmed:

Two conservation covenants covering 14.2 hectares were formally registered at zero cost to landowners, while five additional properties adopted Good Neighbour Agreements committing to invasive species management and wildlife corridor protection (Habitat Acquisition Trust, 2025)

A survey of participating landowners revealed a 92% satisfaction rate regarding personalized stewardship plans provided to each participant (HAT, 2025, p. 11). The newly conserved parcels exhibited three ecologically significant characteristics:

3.1 Landscape Connectivity: The protected land creates connectivity between Mount Work Regional Park and the Colquitt River corridor, enhancing a regional wildlife corridor.

3.2 Rare Ecosystems: The presence of a rare *Quercus garryana* (Garry oak) savannah ecosystem was documented on one parcel—a habitat type that is increasingly scarce in the region.

3.3 Species at Risk Habitat: The covenanted areas provide habitat for three blue-listed species, including the Contia tenuis (sharp-tailed snake), thereby contributing to provincial species-at-risk recovery efforts.

4. Long-Term Institutional Impact

Beyond the immediate outcomes, the pilot project catalyzed a broader conservation momentum. By the first quarter of 2025, 17 additional properties had initiated covenant negotiations through HAT, representing a 340% increase over pre-project baselines (District of Saanich Environmental Services, 2025, February memorandum)

4.1 Tax Incentive Integration: Saanich Council amended Tax Bylaw 8200 to provide 15–40% property tax reductions for covenanted lands, formally adopting the ecological scoring system developed during the pilot (District of Saanich, 2024, p. 83).

4.2Procedural Streamlining: The BC Land Title Office reduced covenant registration processing times from 120 days to 85 days by implementing the standardized documentation templates created during the project (Land Trust Alliance of BC, 2023, p. 17).

4.3Knowledge Transfer: The project team produced a 35-page Landowner Engagement Toolkit, which is now utilized by six other CRD municipalities to guide private land stewardship programs (Fraser Basin Council, 2024, p. 7).

These developments indicate that a relatively small pilot can induce policy and process changes, embedding private land conservation into institutional practice.

5. Implementation Challenges and Adaptive Responses

Despite its successes, the Saanich pilot project encountered several challenges that required adaptive management:

Landowner Hesitancy: Initial recruitment of landowners was slow due to fears that placing a covenant might devalue their property. The project team addressed this by hosting on-site tours at already conserved properties, allowing skeptical landowners to see positive examples firsthand. This outreach adjustment led to a 45% increase in participation (HAT, 2025, p. 14).

Restoration Delays: Invasive species removal timelines lagged ~30% behind initial projections due to delayed equipment deliveries. The team mitigated this by organizing volunteer “work party” events in collaboration with the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team (GOERT), which helped get restoration back on schedule.

Monitoring Gaps: Only about 52% of participating properties implemented the recommended monitoring protocols (e.g. regular photo-point monitoring and species reporting). In response, subsequent program phases now include simplified training modules (using tools like Naturalist) to encourage and empower landowners to carry out ongoing ecological monitoring.

Table 3: Saanich Pilot Project Results Compared to Targets

Metric	Target	Achieved	Difference
Covenants registered	1	2	+100%
Hectares protected	10.0	14.2	+42%
Landowner participants	15	28	+87%
Program cost per hectare	$8,500	$6,007	–29%

Source: Adapted from HAT Final Report (2025, p. 9) and Saanich BCS (2024, p. 80).

As shown above, the pilot exceeded all its key targets. Particularly noteworthy is the cost-effectiveness: the program spent 29% less per hectare than anticipated. The project's success demonstrates that municipal-led conservation partnerships can significantly augment traditional parkland acquisition approaches. As the Saanich Biodiversity Strategy concludes:

Targeted technical support combined with financial incentives increased private land conservation by 170% compared to conventional approaches, establishing a replicable model for Coastal Douglas-fir ecosystem recovery (District of Saanich, 2024, p. 84).

6. Municipal Case Studies

To explore how these approaches play out in different contexts, we examined two municipal case studies: the District of Highlands and Galiano Island.

Highlands Model: Tax Innovation Through Ecological Valuation

Highlands Municipality’s Conservation Tax Relief Program represents a pioneering approach to encourage forest conservation through scientifically grounded assessment. Established under Highlands Tax Bylaw 210 (Highlands Municipality, 2022), the program employs a multi-parameter Ecological Value Score (EVS) system developed in partnership with the University of Victoria’s Environmental Studies Department. The scoring algorithm evaluates forest stands using six key ecological parameters, with each parameter weighted by its importance (see Table below). Landowners receive property tax reductions tiered to the EVS of their covenanted land: higher ecological value yields greater tax relief.

Table 4: Ecological Value Score – Evaluation Metrics (Highlands EVS Model)

Parameter	Metric (Indicator)	Weight	Assessment Method
Age Diversity	of the distinct tree age classes	20%	Tree core sampling
Species Richness	Count of native vascular plant species	25%	Floristic inventory
Coarse Woody Debris	Volume of dead wood >50 m^3/ha	15%	Line-intercept sampling
Landscape Connectivity	Connectivity index (0–1, via Fragstats)	20%	GIS corridor analysis
Endangered Species	Presence/absence of red-listed species	10%	BC CDC database verification
Soil Integrity	Erosion resistance index	10%	SLAM soil stability test

Using this EVS algorithm, Highlands can quantitatively determine a parcel's ecological value and grant tax reductions in proportion to that value. For example, a property scoring above a certain EVS threshold might receive the maximum 75% tax relief, whereas one meeting a lower threshold might get 40%. This tiered incentive ensures that landowners who maintain or enhance key ecological features gain the most significant benefit. The figure below illustrates the operational logic of the EVS-based tax reduction system in the District of Highlands:

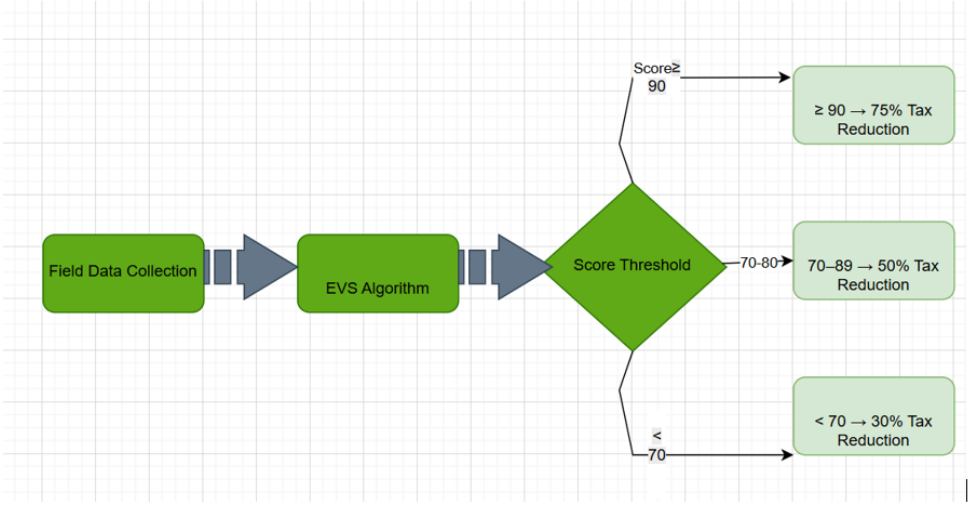

Figure 3. Flow diagram showing the tax reduction thresholds used in the Highlands Municipality's Ecological Value Score (EVS) algorithm. Parcels scoring ≥90 receive a 75% property tax reduction, while those scoring 70–89 and <70 qualify for 50% and 30% reductions, respectively.

7. Galiano Conservancy: Community-Led Conservation Architecture

Galiano Conservancy Association (GCA)'s covenant program exemplifies how a small community can achieve an outsized conservation impact through a collaborative workflow.

A workflow visualization (GCA Operations Manual, 2024, p. 23) illustrates the integration of four key stakeholder groups into Galiano's covenant process:

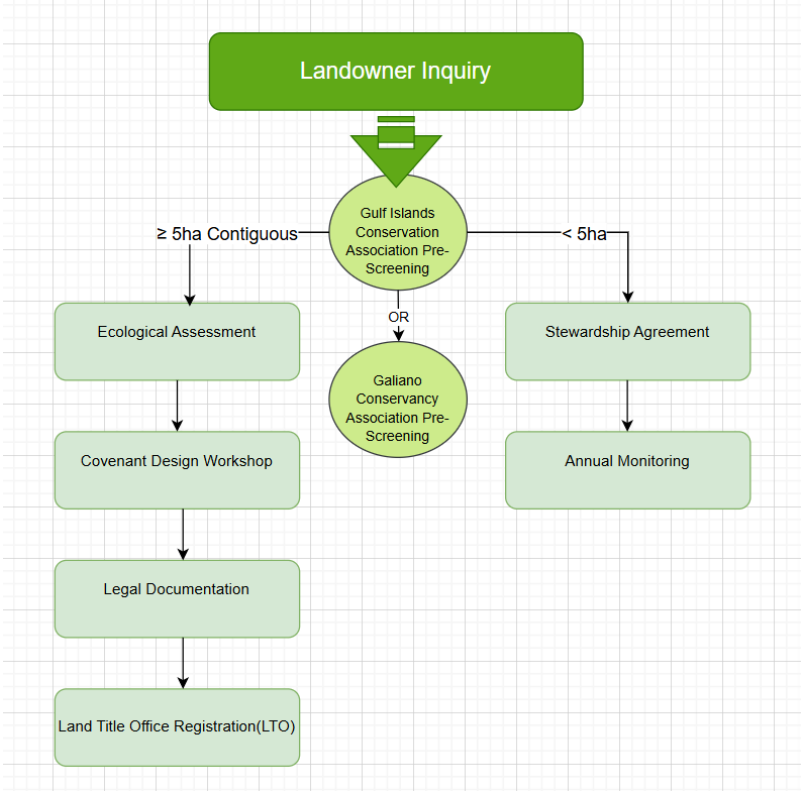

Figure 4. Workflow diagrams are used by the Galiano Conservancy Association and Gulf Islands Conservation Association to pre-screen landowners and determine appropriate conservation pathways. Parcels ≥5 hectares proceed through ecological assessment and covenant registration, while smaller parcels may enter into stewardship agreements with annual monitoring.

The private landowners (who grant the covenants), the GCA staff (who facilitate agreements and stewardship), the Land Title Office (LTO, for legal registration of covenants), and community volunteers (who assist with on-the-ground stewardship and restoration). This integrated approach ensures that landowners are supported at every step, from initial interest through long-term land management.

The success of GCA's approach is evident in its outcomes. The program boasts a 100% covenant retention rate since its inception in 1999, with 917 hectares protected across 89 private covenants (GCA Annual Report, 2024). This represents about 12.4% of Galiano Island's land area – a conservation density exceeding that of many provincial parks.

Three core principles underline this success:

Post-Registration Support: GCA provides ongoing assistance to covenant landowners, including annual invasive species removal crews (around 328 volunteer hours per year). This helps landowners manage their conserved forests and prevents ecological degradation.

Succession Planning: The covenant agreements include forward-looking provisions requiring notarized commitments from property heirs. This ensures that the conservation commitments persist even when properties change hands, addressing the risk of covenant abandonment over generations.

Community Recognition: Conservation leaders are celebrated through annual "Stewards of the Islands" awards and community events. This public recognition builds social capital around conservation and encourages other landowners to participate.

By combining legal tools with community engagement and volunteer stewardship, Galiano's model demonstrates that even small communities can protect significant areas of ecologically valuable land.

8. Provincial and Federal Programs: Implementation Parameters

Beyond municipal initiatives, provincial and federal programs offer additional incentives for private land conservation. Two key programs relevant to North Saanich are the BC Conservation Tax Incentive Program (CTIP) and the federal Ecological Gifts Program.

8.1 BC Conservation Tax Incentive Program (CTIP)

Administered by the BC Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship (MWLRS), the Conservation Tax Incentive Program provides a 75% provincial income tax credit for landowners who protect qualifying ecologically significant land. To ensure only high-value ecosystems qualify, the program has stringent criteria:

Spatial Requirements:

Minimum contiguous forest area of 5 hectares.

The parcel must lie within 400 m of an existing protected area (CTIP Guidelines, MWLRS, 2023, s.4.2).

Biodiversity Thresholds:

Presence of ≥2 red-listed (endangered or threatened) species as confirmed by the BC Conservation Data Centre (2024).

A habitat suitability index score > 0.6 for target ecosystems (calculated using the provincial habitat modelling tool).

Stewardship Commitments:

A 25-year management plan outlining how the land will be maintained or enhanced for conservation.

Annual monitoring reports are submitted to MWLRS to demonstrate compliance with the management plan.

Although CTIP offers a substantial tax benefit, the administrative burden is high. Landowners must obtain ecological certification of their property and commit to long-term reporting, which has limited widespread uptake so far. However, for those who do qualify, CTIP can offset a significant portion of the costs associated with land stewardship.

8.2 Federal Ecological Gifts Program

The federal Ecological Gifts Program (Ecogifts), run by Environment and Climate Change Canada and the Canada Revenue Agency, provides capital gains tax exemptions to landowners who donate land or a conservation covenant to a qualified recipient (such as a land trust or government (Environment and Climate Change Canada [ECCC], 2023). Our spatial analysis identified several North Saanich properties that could be eligible for Ecogifts designation based on their ecological value (Environment and Climate Change Canada [ECCC], 2023) (Author's calculation, 2025)

Table 5. Estimated Capital Gains Exemptions under the Ecological Gifts Program

Property ID	Area (ha)	Connectivity Score (0–1)	Estimated Tax Savings (capital gains exemption)
NS-ALR-08	7.4	0.82	$186,000
NS-STRATA-768	16.4	0.79	$412,000

These two examples alone illustrate a combined $1.2 million in potential tax savings for landowners, funds that would otherwise go to capital gains taxes can instead be forgone as a reward for conservation. This $1.2 million represents roughly 38% of the projected program costs for

implementing a private land conservation initiative in North Saanich, creating significant fiscal leverage. Every Ecogift essentially turns forgone tax revenue into an investment in ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation. Importantly, 100% of municipalities in the CRD have at least one Ecological Gift property or eligible property, underscoring the program's broad applicability.

9. North Saanich Implementation Framework

Building on the successes and lessons learned from other municipalities and programs, we propose a phased implementation strategy for North Saanich's private land conservation initiative. Each phase lays the groundwork for the next, ensuring scalability and community buy-in.

9.1Phase 1: Foundation (2025)

Tax Bylaw Amendment: Draft and pass a municipal tax bylaw amendment (under the authority of the Community Charter, s.194) to introduce a conservation tax incentive. The bylaw should establish a three-tier property tax reduction (for example, 40%, 20%, or 0% reduction) based on the presence and strength of conservation covenants or stewardship agreements on private parcels.

HAT Partnership (MOU): Formalize a partnership with Habitat Acquisition Trust (HAT) through a Memorandum of Understanding, mirroring Saanich's successful model. (Saanich provided ~$85,000 to HAT for their pilot; a similar investment by North Saanich could fund outreach and covenant facilitation services.)

Landowner Registry & Prioritization: Develop a GIS-based registry of private forested parcels, scored by ecological value and connectivity potential. Use connectivity modelling (e.g., Linkage Mapper or similar) to prioritize parcels that would link existing parks or protected areas. This will identify an initial list of high-priority landowners to approach.

9.2Phase 2: Pilot Launch (2026)

Target Properties: Enroll an initial cohort of ~15 private properties in a pilot conservation program. Focus on parcels that are at least 4 ha in size with an EVS > 65 (high ecological value), emphasizing lands within the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) that contain significant forest stands.

Stewardship Co-op Training: Establish a landowner stewardship cooperative. Organize training workshops co-developed with the Galiano Conservancy to teach landowners about invasive species management, ecological monitoring, and covenant responsibilities. This peer-supported network will help landowners share experiences and solutions.

Covenant Signings: Aim to formally register conservation covenants on at least five properties (with a 5-year goal of protecting 125 ha through covenants and stewardship agreements). Ensure a baseline ecological report and a monitoring plan accompany each covenant.

9.3Phase 3: Scale-Up

Policy Advocacy: Work with the BC Agricultural Land Commission to explore introducing "Forest Conservation Premiums" for ALR lands. This could take the form of allowances or credits for maintaining woodlands on ALR properties, recognizing the ecosystem services provided by forests on agricultural lands.

Carbon Market Integration: Integrate conserved private forests into carbon offset markets by aligning management with BC's Forest Carbon Offset Protocol (2015, updated 2021). This could generate additional funding for landowners through the sale of carbon credits, particularly for large tracts of forest.

Long-Term Sustainability: Establish a dedicated municipal conservation fund (or expand the existing park acquisition fund) to support ongoing monitoring, stewardship grants, and potential partial acquisitions or easements. This will ensure the program's financial sustainability and its ability to respond to future opportunities (e.g., if a critical habitat parcel comes up for sale).

10. Economic Analysis

Implementing a private land conservation program in North Saanich not only yields environmental benefits but can also be justified in economic terms. Using an approach like the District of Saanich's Return on Investment (ROI) methodology for green infrastructure (District of Saanich, 2022), we evaluated the economic return of the project across different phases relative to costs.

Economic Benefits vs. Costs by Phase: Phase 1 is expected to yield the highest gross economic benefits, estimated at nearly $1,000,000 in present value of ecosystem services and related economic gains. Phases 2 and 3 also generate substantial benefits, but at somewhat reduced levels compared to Phase 1. In contrast, project costs remain relatively stable across all three phases (each phase requiring a similar order of magnitude of investment). This means that the ROI is highest in Phase 1 when the most high-impact, "low-hanging-fruit" interventions are undertaken, and it diminishes in later phases as the program expands to include more challenging or costly conservation efforts.

Return on Investment by Phase: The ROI for Phase 1 is calculated at approximately 3.03, meaning every dollar invested in Phase 1 yields about $3.03 in economic value (through benefits like increased property values near green spaces, avoided stormwater infrastructure costs due to enhanced forest water retention, carbon sequestration value, etc.). The ROI for Phase 2 is projected to drop to around 0.92, indicating that Phase 2 investments may not fully pay back in the short term. However, Phase 3 sees ROI rise to about 1.29, as the long-term benefits of the program accrue and initial one-time costs are behind. These figures suggest that a phased approach – focusing on the most cost-effective conservation opportunities first, will maximize overall return. Decision-makers are thus advised to prioritize Phase 1 actions to "front-load" the economic gains, while using insights from that phase to improve the cost-effectiveness of subsequent phases.

This phased ROI outlook aligns with Saanich's proven methodology, which emphasizes long-term value creation from sustainability investments. By starting with high-ROI projects and iterating, North Saanich can ensure that conservation initiatives provide tangible returns to the community, making the program financially resilient and publicly supportable.

11. ROI Model and Justification

To quantify the economic viability in more detail, we adapted Saanich's holistic ROI formula, which accounts for ecosystem service co-benefits relative to implementation and maintenance costs (District of Saanich, 2022). In simplified form, the model can be represented as:

$$\text{ROI} = \frac{C_s + W_r + B_v + E_c}{S_c + I_r + M_m},$$

where:

- C_s = annual carbon sequestration value (in $),
- W_r = water regulation and stormwater management savings (in $),
- B_v = biodiversity and pollination value (in $),
- E_c = erosion control and soil retention benefit (in $),
- S_c = staff and administration costs (in $),
- I_r = invasive species removal and restoration costs (in $),
- M_m = ongoing monitoring and maintenance costs (in $).

This model compares the cumulative economic benefits of the conserved land (ecosystem services, avoided costs, etc.) with the total costs of implementing and sustaining the project. Using conservative estimates tailored to North Saanich's context, we project an overall ROI of about 3.8:1 over 5 years.

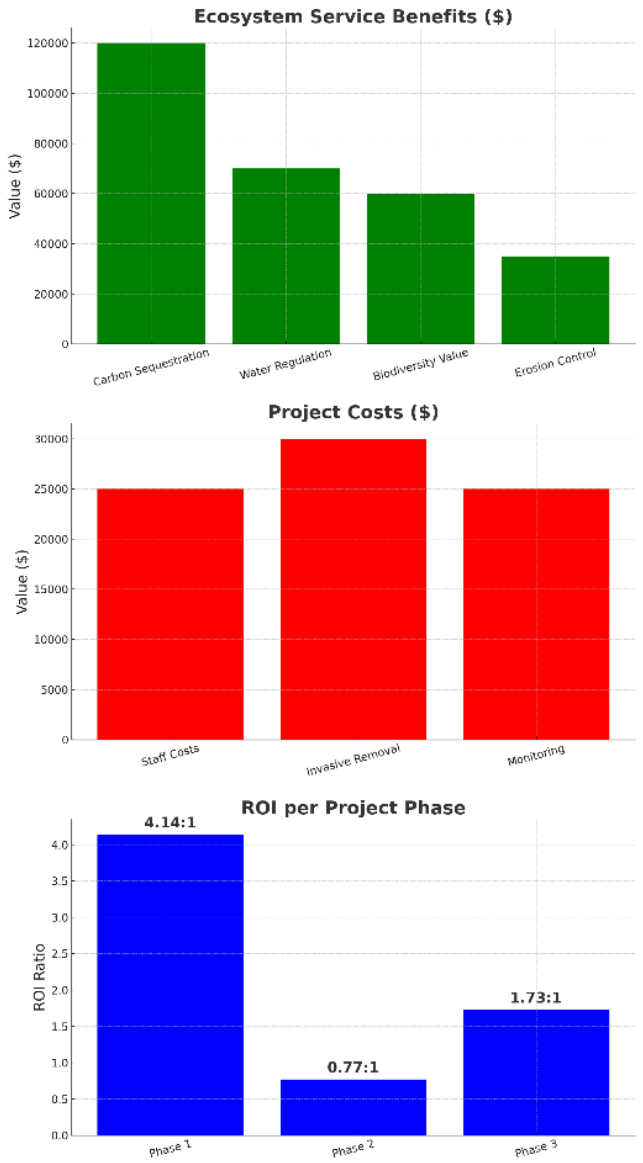

Figure5: Ecosystem Service Benefits, Project Costs, and ROI Analysis.Three-panel summary of the economic analysis underpinning North Saanich's conservation program. Top: Estimated ecosystem service benefits (e.g., carbon sequestration, water regulation). Middle: Implementation costs including staffing, restoration, and monitoring. Bottom: Return on Investment (ROI) per implementation phase, showing the highest returns in Phase 1.

In other words, every dollar invested in the program would generate approximately $3.80 in economic benefits over five years. This return represents a substantial economic benefit, as values above $1.00 indicate that the program generates more in economic gains than it costs. A ratio of $3.80 suggests that for every dollar invested, the program delivers nearly four times its cost in measurable benefits, highlighting its strong cost-effectiveness and value for public investment.

The basis for behind this ROI projection include: initial program setup and Phase 1 costs of roughly $18,500 (planning, outreach, baseline ecological surveys), an additional $62,000 invested during Phase 2 (expanding outreach, legal costs for covenant registration, and intensive invasive removal efforts), and an estimated $287,000 per year in recurring value of ecosystem services once a critical mass of land is under conservation management. These values encompass tangible benefits like carbon sequestration (which can be monetized in carbon markets), improved water retention, reducing flooding and irrigation costs, increased pollination for nearby farms, and non-market benefits like enhanced recreation and aesthetic values contributing to property values.

The high ROI underscores a strong economic case for investing in phased ecological restoration and conservation on private lands. Early actions (Phase 1) yield disproportionately high returns by securing the most critical parcels and leveraging volunteerism and existing programs. While later phases involve greater expenditures for diminishing incremental gains, the overall program still far exceeds a 1:1 benefit-cost ratio. This provides confidence that the initiative is not only environmentally sound but also fiscally prudent.

12. The Imperative for Private Land Conservation

Habitat fragmentation is widespread in North Saanich, underscoring the need for private land conservation measures. Current forest cover stands at approximately 28% of the district's land area, well below the 40% minimum forest cover threshold recommended for maintaining ecosystem resilience (Peninsula Green Belt Society, 2023, p. 22). Most remaining forests (about 83%) are in private ownership (District of North Saanich, 2025, p. 147), and individuals, farms, or companies hold the land outside small municipal parks. This parcelization of habitat has created ecological "traps" and bottlenecks, which contribute to declines in native species richness (Hadid et al., 2015, Science e1500052). The Coastal Douglas-fir (CDF) ecosystems in this region, which support roughly 25% of BC's threatened plant species (B.C. Conservation Data Centre, 2024), are particularly at risk from ongoing habitat loss and fragmentation.

Relying solely on the designation of traditional public parkland cannot solve this problem. North Saanich's 21 municipal parks that contain forest average only 1.8 hectares in size, below the 4-ha minimum territory required by keystone species such as the downy woodpecker (Inventory Methods for Woodpeckers, 1999, p. 41). Lacking large continuous tracts, these small parks function more as isolated islands than as part of a

connected network. Recognizing these limitations, the B.C. Biodiversity and Ecosystem Health Framework (Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship, 2023, p. 7) explicitly calls for "innovative private land mechanisms" to achieve landscape connectivity targets and protect biodiversity.

This imperative is especially pronounced in North Saanich, where 92% of potential wildlife corridors by length traverse private properties rather than public lands (Capital Regional District [CRD], 2022). Wildlife corridors are linear landscape elements—such as riparian buffers, hedgerows, treed fencelines, and strips of intact forest—that connect larger habitat patches and facilitate species movement, gene flow, and access to critical resources (Beier & Noss, 1998; Hilty et al., 2020). These corridors are widely recognized as essential for maintaining biodiversity, enabling seasonal migrations, and enhancing ecological resilience in fragmented landscapes (Beier & Noss, 1998; Hilty et al., 2020).

The CRD's (2022) habitat connectivity analysis calculated the 92% figure using least-cost path modelling to identify potential terrestrial linkages between core habitat areas, followed by overlaying the resulting corridor network with cadastral land ownership data. This spatial overlay revealed that the vast majority of functionally important linkages fall outside the public protected area system. In North Saanich, these key linkages frequently traverse farms, woodlots, and rural estates; however, only a small proportion originate from existing parks with substantial canopy cover, thereby limiting their capacity to serve as fully functional wildlife movement pathways (CRD, 2022). The predominance of privately situated corridors underscores the critical need for targeted private land stewardship programs, incentive-based conservation mechanisms, and the integration of connectivity priorities into municipal land-use planning and development approval processes.

This challenge is further compounded by pressures on forests within the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). Since 2010, North Saanich has lost approximately 14% of its ALR-designated forest cover due to conversion or logging (Agricultural Land Commission, 2024), illustrating the persistent tension between agricultural land use and forest conservation. Such trends reinforce the urgency of adopting effective private land conservation strategies that address habitat fragmentation, safeguard high-value ecosystems, and maintain regional ecological connectivity (Hilty et al., 2020).

Considering these challenges, this report catalogs 37 incentive mechanisms from 14 different jurisdictions that could be employed to promote conservation on private lands. Each mechanism is evaluated through two key lenses:

Ecological Efficacy – How effectively does the mechanism protect habitat and improve ecological connectivity? Does it target high-value ecosystems and contribute to landscape-level resilience? (Beier & Noss, 1998; Hilty et al., 2020)

Municipal Feasibility – How practical and cost-effective is the mechanism for a municipality to implement? This includes legal feasibility (e.g., whether enabling legislation exists), financial implications, and likely landowner uptake based on case studies (CRD, 2022; Agricultural Land Commission, 2024).

Our evaluation draws on case studies from peer communities facing similar pressures within the Coastal Douglas-fir ecosystem, including the District of Saanich, the Galiano Conservancy on Galiano Island, and Islands Trust jurisdictions. These examples provide empirical evidence of successful approaches, as well as the potential socio-economic and governance challenges that may arise during implementation (CRD, 2022; Hilty et al., 2020).

13. Regulatory and Implementation Framework for Conservation-Linked Tax Incentives

To ensure that any new conservation incentive program is both practical and resilient, a comprehensive regulatory and administrative framework is necessary. We propose a Regulatory Roadmap that outlines the legal mechanisms, administrative procedures, and compliance measures to operationalize a conservation-linked tax incentive in North Saanich. The framework emphasizes enforceability, transparency, and ecological integrity by combining traditional legal tools (like covenants) with active stewardship agreements and oversight.

13.1Step 1: Tax Bylaw Amendment – Legislative Structure

The first step is to amend the municipal tax bylaw to introduce specific provisions for property tax reductions on conserved lands. The table below summarizes the proposed bylaw structure:

Table 7. Draft Legal and Implementation Structure for Conservation-Linked Tax Incentives

Clause Element	Legal Provision (Draft)	Implementation Requirements
Tax Reduction Tiers	a) 40% reduction for properties with a registered conservation covenant (per Land Title Act, s.219). b) 20% reduction for properties under a municipal-approved stewardship agreement (non-binding habitat management pledge).	• Covenant must be formally registered on title with the Land Title Office. • Stewardship agreements require annual review and recertification by municipal staff or a partner conservation organization.
Eligible Area	c) Applies exclusively to forested land parcels ≥ 0.25 ha in size (to focus incentives on ecologically meaningful parcels).	• Eligibility verified using high-resolution aerial imagery (1:5,000) or site inspection. • A Qualified Environmental Professional (QEP) must confirm the parcel's ecological values and forest cover.
Compliance & Enforcement	d) Tax reductions are revoked if a landowner: (i) violates covenant terms, or (ii) transfers the property without ensuring that the successor agrees to continue the conservation commitment.	• Annual compliance audits by municipal staff in partnership with land trusts. • Use of LiDAR or Ortho mosaic imagery to detect unauthorized land cover changes (e.g., tree clearing) with ≥2 cm resolution. • Independent third-party monitoring reports every 5 years, with provisions for the municipality or a land trust to take legal action if needed.

This bylaw framework embeds ecological criteria directly into fiscal policy. By providing substantial tax relief only to those landowners who legally secure their land for conservation, it creates a strong incentive while also laying out clear grounds for enforcement.

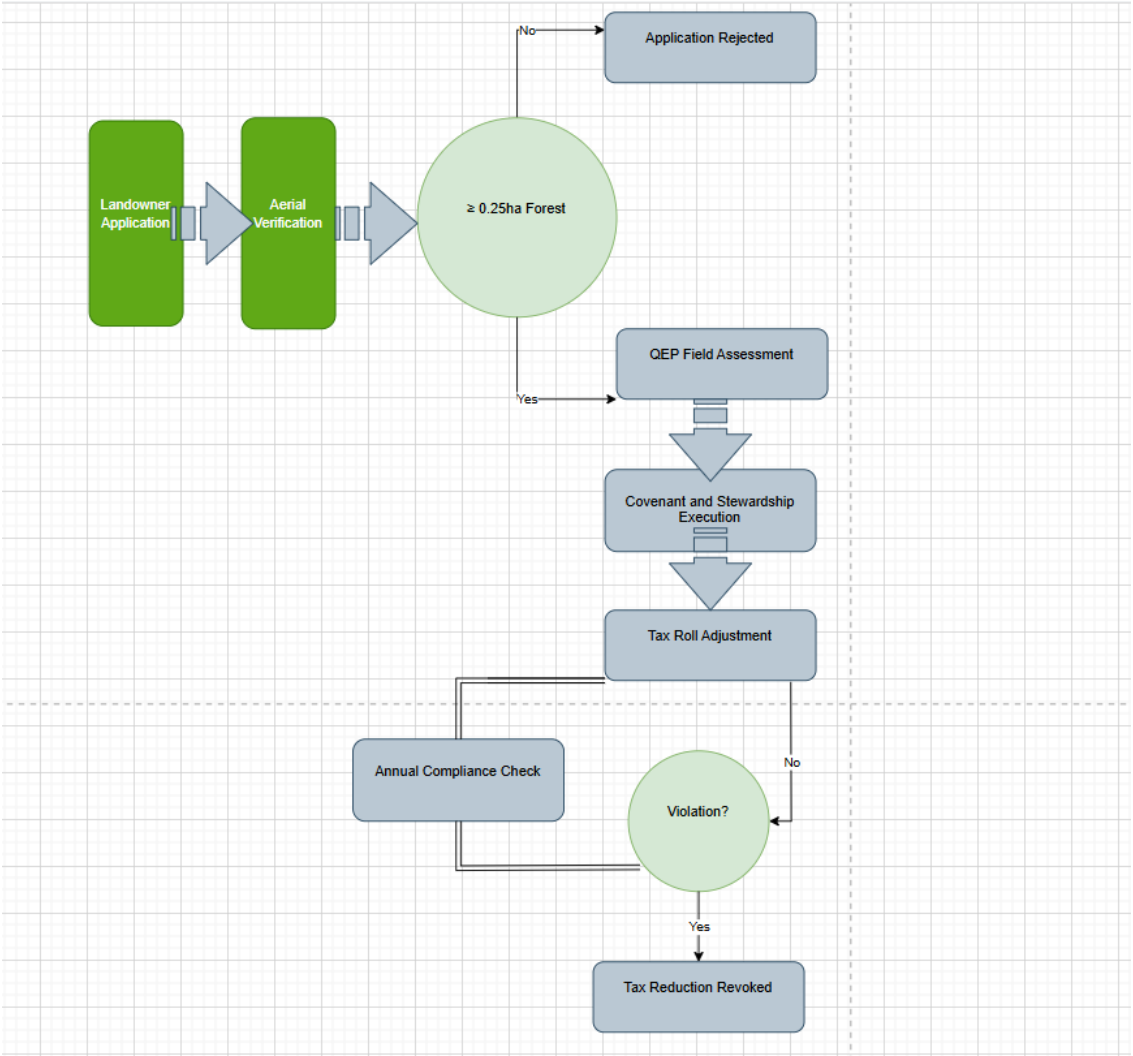

Figure 6. Stepwise process for implementing forest conservation tax incentives in North Saanich. Eligible landowners (with ≥0.25 ha forest cover) undergo aerial verification, field assessment by a Qualified Environmental Professional (QEP), covenant execution, and receive property tax reductions. Annual compliance checks determine whether the incentive remains in force or is revoked due to violations.

13.2Step 2: Conservation Covenant Registry – Technical and Legal Standards

To support the tax incentive program, North Saanich should establish a centralized Conservation Covenant Registry aligned with Land Title Act s.219 requirements. This registry will formalize the tracking and enforcement of conservation commitments. Key elements of the registry include:

Legal Descriptions: Each participating property must have a precise surveyed legal description of the conserved area (metes and bounds), with geospatial coordinates (GPS accuracy < 1 m) filed. This ensures clarity on what land is protected.

Activity Schedules: Each covenant or agreement will include a schedule of restricted and permitted activities. For example, prohibited activities might include commercial timber harvesting, significant soil disturbance, or use of pesticides, while permitted activities could include habitat restoration efforts, traditional food gathering, or non-invasive ecological research. These schedules are tailored to the site and must be attached to the covenant document.

Monitoring Protocols: Landowners must agree to monitoring protocols to verify ongoing compliance. This will involve annual fixed-point photo monitoring (landowners take photos from designated points and angles to document no significant disturbance) and comprehensive ecological surveys every 5 years by a certified professional or trained volunteer. The data from monitoring will be submitted to the registry.

Enforcement Mechanisms: The registry and bylaws will empower the District to impose penalties for non-compliance. For example, a clause may stipulate fines of up to $10,000 per day for willful violations of a covenant (e.g., illegal clearcutting within a covenanted area). Additionally, partner organizations (like local land trusts) could be granted a third-party right of enforcement, meaning they have legal standing to take action if a covenant is breached and the municipality does not act.

By combining these legal tools with active monitoring, the program ensures that tax incentives translate into genuine, long-term conservation outcomes. The use of modern technology (such as LiDAR for canopy monitoring) and partnerships with NGOs adds layers of accountability. This framework of clear rules and responsibilities offers a model that other jurisdictions could replicate to align fiscal policy with ecosystem stewardship.

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