

BUSINESS: Campbell River flight company unveils its new electric aircraft, B1

Time to deliver food and a budget



Finance Minister Katrine Conroy, second from right, is joined by Taylor Chalupka, left, Aaren Toplay and Jesse Wallis as they pack groceries for a subscription-based program made up of volunteers called Good Food Box during a pre-budget visit to the Fernwood Community Centre in Victoria on Wednesday. Conroy will table the B.C. budget at the legislature today. Deficit to rise, A3. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

All oil and gas permits in B.C. waters relinquished

DARRON KLOSTER
Times Colonist

There won't be any oil and gas drilling rigs off British Columbia's coast — at least not in the near future.

The last of 227 oil and gas exploration permits that once blanketed British Columbia's coast from the entrance to Juan de Fuca Strait to Alaska over the past 50 years have been relinquished to the federal government.

Chevron Canada turned in 23 offshore permits on Feb. 9, reverting ownership to the Crown and leaving "zero permits" off the Pacific coast, Energy and Natural Resources Minister Jonathan Wilkinson said Wednesday at a news conference about salmon-habitat restoration.

In April 2023, Chevron Canada voluntarily relinquished 19 offshore oil and gas permits within protected wildlife areas on B.C.'s west coast. The permitting area surrendered by Chevron last year was estimated at 5,700 square kilometres and overlapped parts of federal marine protection areas off B.C.

Wilkinson said Chevron has not been compensated for relinquishing the latest 23 permits, which comprise an estimated 5,900 square kilometres off north Vancouver Island and in Hecate Strait.

A provincial moratorium on offshore drilling has been in place since 1989, though it wasn't considered legally binding.

"I think Chevron came to the conclusion there are other places in the world to do this kind of development and this wasn't the most appropriate place," Wilkinson said.

"We welcome that decision by Chevron. I think most British Columbians are of the view that this is not the most appropriate place to do that kind of development and today we're saying that will not happen."

Ian Morin, a lawyer for Ecojustice Canada, called Chevron's decision to relinquish the last of the permits "great news." "It significantly reduces the [environmental] risks that oil and gas drilling can have on the coast, particularly on environmentally significant areas."

Environmental groups were celebrating last March when ExxonMobil gave up offshore oil and gas permits the company had held for more than 50 years.

Morin said ExxonMobil had been dropped from a federal court lawsuit filed by the David Suzuki Foundation and World Wildlife Fund in 2022 challenging the federal government's continual renewal of the permits. The case was settled out of court.

The groups' similar legal challenge against Chevron Canada had remained active, but now will likely be dropped, said Morin.

Calgary-based Chevron Canada said in a statement that

Scrapping of proposed changes to Land Act labelled a step back

The Canadian Press

The British Columbia government is scrapping a plan that was to allow shared decision-making with First Nations about the use of public land, a move one Indigenous leader describes as a step back for reconciliation.

Terry Teegee, regional chief of the B.C. Assembly of First Nations, said Wednesday that he knows the province wants to make the changes to the Land Act, as part of its work to align B.C. laws with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

But Teegee said there has been mounting pressure from people strongly opposed to the plan, including political rivals of the NDP government.

The backlash and backpedalling have "taken us back in terms of reconciliation," he said shortly after the province's announcement. "It's disappointing to say the least."

A statement from Nathan Cullen, B.C.'s minister of water, land and resource stewardship, said the province had decided not to proceed with proposed amendments after holding a series of meetings with stakeholders.

Cullen said he spoke with about 650 people representing sectors including mining, forestry, oil and gas, tourism,

hunting and agriculture, and the "vast majority" told him they want to be part of making reconciliation "work."

But he said officials also heard they need to "take the time to further engage with people and demonstrate the real benefits of shared decision-making in action."

The minister said some people "have gone to extremes to knowingly mislead the public" about the proposed changes and many at the meetings were "surprised" to learn the claims were not true, adding there would have been "no impacts to tenures, renewals, private properties or access to Crown land."

Still, the province is reversing course, and Cullen said officials "want to get this right and move forward together."

"We will continue to engage with people and businesses, and do the work to show how working together, First Nations and non-First Nations, can help bring stability and predictability, and move us all forward," he said in the statement.

BC United Leader Kevin Falcon said this month his party could not "support giving veto power to five per cent of the population with impacts to over 95 per cent of public land," referring to First Nations people.

That followed a statement

from B.C. Conservative Leader John Rustad calling the government's plan "an assault on private property rights."

The provincial web page for the now-discarded proposal says the changes would not have provided First Nations with "veto" power. Rather, they aimed to provide "durability" in public land decisions to "help unlock B.C.'s economic potential," it says.

The government said the amendments would update the Land Act to "legally recognize" the ability to create shared decision-making agreements with First Nations, something that has already been done with the Environmental Assessment Act and the Forest and Range Practices Act.

Teegee said the changes would have created "space" to allow First Nations and the B.C. government to negotiate agreements around shared decision-making. "That's all it was, is just beginning to create that process," he said. "This wasn't any veto power."

Teegee pointed to landmark cases in which Canada's High Court ruled that Indigenous Peoples must be consulted about decisions in their territories.

"Far too often we end up in court," he said. "And then the judge says: 'You, the government, you the First Nations have to go back to the table to negoti-

ate something.' So, we end up in the same place."

The B.C. government's proposed amendments would have helped avoid those court battles and provide certainty for resource industries, Teegee said.

Teegee expects the province will come up with another "iteration" of the proposal "because it's going to happen, there's just no two ways about it."

The statement from Cullen similarly said opponents misleading the public about the proposal "wish to cling to an approach that leads only to the division, court battles and uncertainty that have held us back."

Falcon said Wednesday the pause "does not mark the end of the NDP's hidden agenda, as their own statement suggests they plan to resume these changes at the next opportunity."

The B.C. government passed legislation in 2019 requiring the province to align its laws with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The declaration requires governments to obtain free, prior and informed consent before taking actions that affect Indigenous Peoples and their lands, and B.C.'s law set provisions for the province to negotiate agreements with First Nations to establish shared, consent-based decision-making in their territories.



THE CAPITAL AND VANCOUVER ISLAND

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No cuts to people or services, but B.C. budget deficit to rise, minister says

The Canadian Press

British Columbia Finance Minister Katrine Conroy says the province should prepare for a fiscal deficit in the upcoming budget — but there won't be cuts that result in a "deficit of services."

Speaking Wednesday, the day before she tables the 2024 budget in the legislature, Conroy promised not to raise taxes, while protecting services for residents struggling to make ends meet.

She said the economy is slowing in British Columbia and around the world, making it the right time to "support people."

"It's not the right time to say to people, 'well, we're going to start cutting the hospital services, we're going to start cutting schools.' It's just not the right thing to do. We don't need a deficit of services in this province."

Conroy held a press conference at a Fernwood community centre that serves as a daycare and gives out low-cost food.

She said the budget will address health care, middle-class housing, a clean economy and incentives for small business.

She said the budget will touch on discussions about Translink, the transit authority covering Metro Vancouver, as well as transit across the province.

"You will see an investment in a number of initiatives including education. We will continue to support school districts to hire the teachers they need, to hire the teaching assistants they need, because that's critically important to the kids in this province," she said.

Conroy said she couldn't



Pedestrians walk on the upper causeway in front of the B.C. legislature domes at the Inner Harbour on Tuesday. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

pinpoint the size of the deficit, which was projected to reach \$5.6 billion late last year, but the budget's long-term outlook forecasts deficit declines.

A report issued this month by the Business Council of British Columbia predicts that "lacklustre" growth globally, high

interest rates and weak private-sector job and investment numbers will add up to "a drag on prosperity" this year.

The report says B.C.'s economy grew just 0.9 per cent in 2023 and is forecast to grow only 0.7 per cent in 2024.

The government's budget

comes less than nine months before a provincial election and the same week Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was in Vancouver to announce a \$2-billion federal financing contribution to the provincial NDP's BC Builds plan. That sum tops up \$2 billion in low-cost provincial financing

for developers and \$950 million to build homes that would be available at below-market rates.

Conroy, who describes herself as a frugal person, said she would be breaking with tradition for the second year in a row by not wearing a new pair of shoes when she delivers the budget.

Tofino Bus intercity service to resume Easter weekend

DARRON KLOSTER
Times Colonist

A Vancouver Island intercity bus service is scheduled to hit the road again on Easter weekend.

Tofino Bus, connecting Victoria, Nanaimo, Parksville, Port Alberni, Ucluelet and Tofino, will start regular service on March 29, said the Wilson Group of Companies, which is operating the route.

The service will use two full-sized 56-seat motor coaches equipped with seatbelts, individual reclining seats, luggage space and washrooms.

John Wilson, CEO of the Wilson's Group, said service will grow throughout the spring and summer, with Victoria-to-Tofino travel from Thursday to Sunday, and southbound routes Friday to Monday.

The northbound buses will also carry weekend editions of the *Times Colonist*.

"We believe this is a vital link to bridging Vancouver Island for residents and visitors,"



Wilson's Transportation Ltd. brand manager Samantha Wilson stands next to one of the company's buses. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

said Wilson. The company has no immediate plans to operate the service year-round or link to more communities, such as Campbell River and Port Hardy,

as it recovers from losses incurred since the pandemic, he said.

While Tofino Bus provides the same essential service as public

transit, it operates without any government subsidies that can offset high operating costs, and ridership is higher in the spring and summer months, said Wilson.

"Our team continues to work with all levels of governments to find increased supports toward vital year-round service," Wilson said.

In 2019, Wilson's provided 82,500 trips to 29 communities and 21 First Nations and organizations on Vancouver Island. But COVID-19 travel restrictions saw revenue on those routes drop dramatically, and financial losses for the company started to mount.

Wilson said the company lost \$250,000 on the Nanaimo-to-Campbell River route alone, and without government subsidies of some sort, unprofitable routes can't continue.

He said compounding losses are the main reason Greyhound Canada got out of the intercity routes in 2018.

Wilson said the Tofino Bus

service is well used in the peak months by campers and tourism workers in the Tofino and Ucluelet areas, and by others who rely on it for medical appointments and connections to their families.

But he said any revenue gained during the peak months isn't enough to sustain the service throughout the year.

"I'm born and raised on the Island and to me it's a special place that I care deeply for ... but as a private company we can't keep taking losses."

Wilson said the price of coaches has increased by up to \$200,000 since the pandemic, and any new orders have to be filled a year or two in advance.

Besides the escalating price of fuel, other expenses like parts, tires and oil have increased between 30% and 50%, he said.

Wilson said ticket prices will increase by about 3% this year.

For schedules and booking, see viconnector.com/tofino-bus/ or dkloster@timescolonist.com