

COMOX VALLEY SEWER SERVICE LIQUID WASTE MANAGEMENT PLANNING

Phase 4 Consultation – Summary Report

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020



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Executive Summary

In March 2020, after a year of technical assessment and consultation with community partners, the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) launched Phase 4 of a five-phase public engagement program for the Comox Valley Sewer Service Liquid Waste Management Plan (LWMP). However, a state of emergency was issued for the province soon after and the consultation was put on hold to comply with COVID-19 public health guidelines.

On September 14, the Phase 4 consultation was again launched and continued through October 12, with follow up community consultation in the Lazo area happening in November.

The public health concerns during this period resulted in taking a slightly revised approach, which included using the following key outreach tools:

- **Online Survey and Information Hub:** [ConnectCVRD](#) was designated as the core consultation hub, with all feedback encouraged to be submitted through the online survey and feedback functions.
- **Information Sessions:** Three public open-house style events were created that allowed for reduced attendance to meet public safety protocols. Two were held in Comox and one was held in Courtenay.
- **Online Webinar:** To meet the needs of those who wanted additional information about the options and guided learning as well – but who did not feel comfortable attending an in-person event – an online webinar was created and delivered by CVRD staff with the support of technical and communications consultants.

The results of this outreach phase included a survey completed by 320 people, and approximately 250 comments and questions submitted. Digital ads resulted in 1,018 clicks and reached over 44,000 people, primarily through mobile devices.

The survey results reveal that lower risks and lower costs were seen as the top benefits for Options 1 (Overland Forcemain) and 2 (Tunnel Forcemain). The need to address the urgent environmental risk at Willemar Bluffs was considered a top benefit of Option 3 (Phased Tunnel Forcemain). Groundwater protection was ranked as the top concern or challenge for all three options.

Themes from the feedback included concerns about the potential for increased construction costs in the coming years, as well as community-specific comments from residents who had some personal apprehension about the project, including how it might impact their property or local traffic patterns. Other comments supported removing the forcemain pipe in the foreshore of the Comox estuary as quickly as possible.

While residents were not asked to ‘vote’ on a preferred option, they succeeded in providing valuable feedback that can be considered hand-in-hand with technical evaluations to inform the decisions about next steps.

Introduction

1.1 Project Background

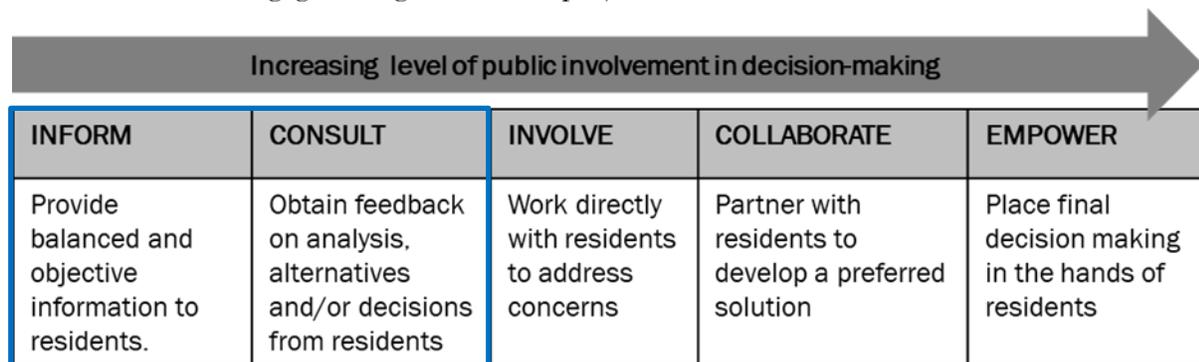
The Comox Valley Sewer Service treats raw sewage (wastewater) from homes and businesses in Courtenay, Comox and K’ómoks First Nation. More than 14,000 cubic metres of wastewater from these communities flows daily through a pipe located along the Willemar Bluffs. This is an exposed section of beach that is vulnerable to damage by waves, rocks and logs and poses an environmental risk to beaches and waters throughout the Comox Estuary, Point Holmes and Goose Spit coastline, as well as Baynes Sound.

To find a solution, the Comox Valley Sewer Service decided to undertake a liquid waste management plan (LWMP) process that considers conveyance (pipes and pump stations), treatment and resource recovery. LWMPs are used by local governments in BC to develop strategies for managing sewer services. It includes the collection/review of existing information, development of options for future services, identification of a preferred option, completion of required studies and assessments and development of financial and implementation plans. The plan is ultimately submitted to the provincial government for review and consideration for approval.

1.2 LWMP Consultation Overview

The Comox Valley Sewer System LWMP process was kicked off in June 2018. The LWMP is critical to the long-term operational health of the sewer system and protection of the environment. The decisions made as part of the LWMP process will impact residents in Courtenay and Comox through increases to sewer fees and construction disruption. This impact requires continuous and dedicated engagement to allow community input about the options under consideration.

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of public participation was used to define the engagement goals for this project.



Engagement for the LWMP is currently in Phase 4 and includes the following objectives:

1. Provide information about the LWMP process.
2. Offer opportunities for active public involvement.

3. Clearly explain how feedback will be received and considered.
4. Create a record of engagement at the end of the process.
5. Demonstrate how engagement was considered and how input influenced final decisions.

The chart on the next page provides an outline of the consultation process, including engagement goals and tools for each of the five phases.

PHASE 1 EDUCATE/KICK-OFF (MAY-AUG. 2018) ✓ COMPLETE	
OBJECTIVES  <p>INFORM: provide info about the sewer system and LWMP start</p> <p>INVOLVE: connect with public to collect feedback on goals/values in sewer planning</p>	TOOLS  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Webpage: create dedicated pages on regional district + ConnectCVRD websites • Advertisements: Promote online tool and sessions • Public Session #1 • Online Consultation Survey
PHASE 2 KICK OFF & GOALS/OBJECTIVES (SEPT.-DEC. 2018) ✓ COMPLETE	
OBJECTIVES  <p>INFORM: introduce LWMP process</p> <p>COLLABORATE: work with the public advisory committee</p> <p>CONSULT: collect feedback on goals and objectives</p>	TOOLS  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open House #1: including promotional and info materials • Public Session #2 • Online Consultation Survey
PHASE 3 LONGLISTED OPTIONS (JAN-MAR. 2019) ✓ COMPLETE	
OBJECTIVES  <p>COLLABORATE: PAC/TAC meetings, long list established</p> <p>CONSULT: host an information session for public to review long list options, support with online consultation</p>	TOOLS  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Session #3 • Online Consultation Survey
PHASE 4 SHORTLISTED OPTIONS Sept/Oct. 2020	
OBJECTIVES  <p>COLLABORATE: PAC/TAC meetings, short list established</p> <p>CONSULT: host virtual and in person opportunities for public to review short list options and rank benefits and challenges to each, using online survey</p> <p>INFORM: Sewage Commission selection of shortlist of options and next steps</p>	TOOLS  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Session #4 • Webinar #1 • Online Consultation Survey
PHASE 5 PREFERRED OPTION Winter 2020/2021	
OBJECTIVES  <p>COLLABORATE: PAC/TAC meetings, consensus on preferred solution</p> <p>INFORM: Sewage Commission signs off on preferred solution</p> <p>INFORM: Present preferred solution to community and report on feedback obtained from public</p>	TOOLS  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open House #2: including promotional and info materials

Phase 4 (Conveyance Shortlist) Consultation Overview

1.3 Approach

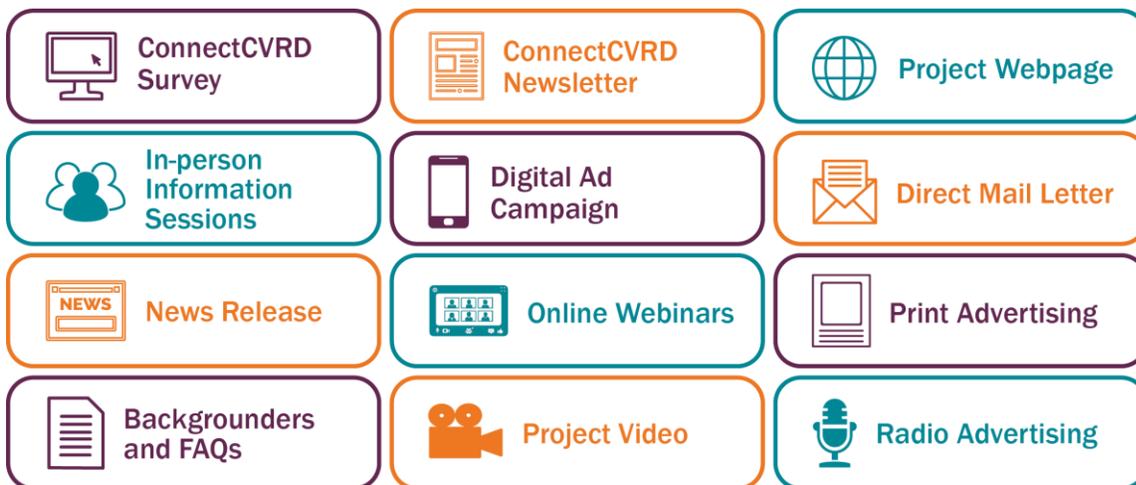
The current fourth stage of public engagement – review/assessment of the short-list conveyance options – was initially kicked off in early March 2020. It was postponed, however because of the COVID-19 public health emergency. Given the re-opening of business in British Columbia and the increasingly urgent environmental risk, the decision was made to relaunch the consultation in September 2020.

This pause allowed the consultation to incorporate subsequent assessment work by project engineers, resulting in more detailed information about traffic impacts and routing for each option, as well as revised cost estimates.

The primary objective of this consultation phase was to gauge community priorities when it came to assessing the three shortlisted options. Because of the technical nature of this assessment and the many-layered assessment that will be required to select a preferred option, participants were not asked to rank their preferred option. Instead, they were asked to provide feedback about the top benefits and risks to each option in order to inform directors, staff, the project team and public and technical advisory committees about what residents feel are the most important considerations in choosing a preferred conveyance option.

1.4 Engagement Tools

The overall success of the Phase 4 engagement was a result of the blend of tools used to promote, inform and encourage participation.



To prevent the spread of COVID-19, the consultation events were adapted to implement health and safety measures, including pre-registration for in-person events to ensure safe occupancy levels. A

Zoom webinar was offered for those uncomfortable with attending an open house in person. Both events were intended to provide more information on the options under consideration and encourage residents to submit their feedback via online surveys.

1.5 By the Numbers

The numbers below highlight key data collected at the end of the consultation.



The graph below shows a further breakdown of survey respondents by area. Participants were invited to fill out the survey without requiring a registration to the site – reducing potential barriers to participation. It should be noted that a review of the survey submissions and user data was completed to ensure there was no evidence of abuse around multiple submissions.

Survey Respondents by Area



While this phase of the LWMP consultation had the strongest engagement, interest in the project has been building over the life of the project with more than 4,700 visitors to the project page from project launch in May 2018 through October 2020.



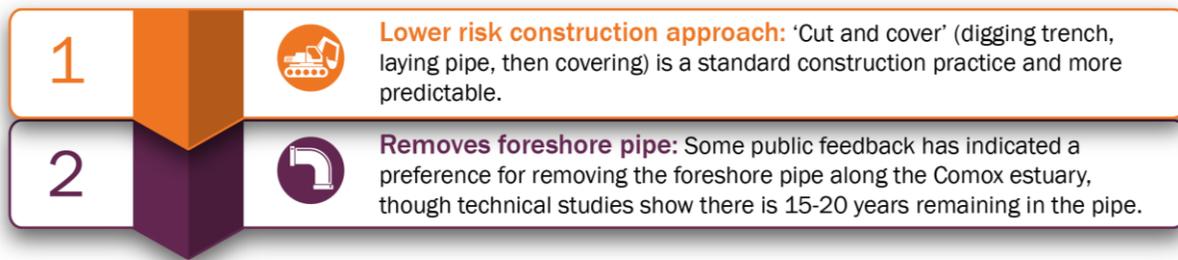
Phase 4 (Conveyance Shortlist) Consultation Results

1.6 Benefits Ranking

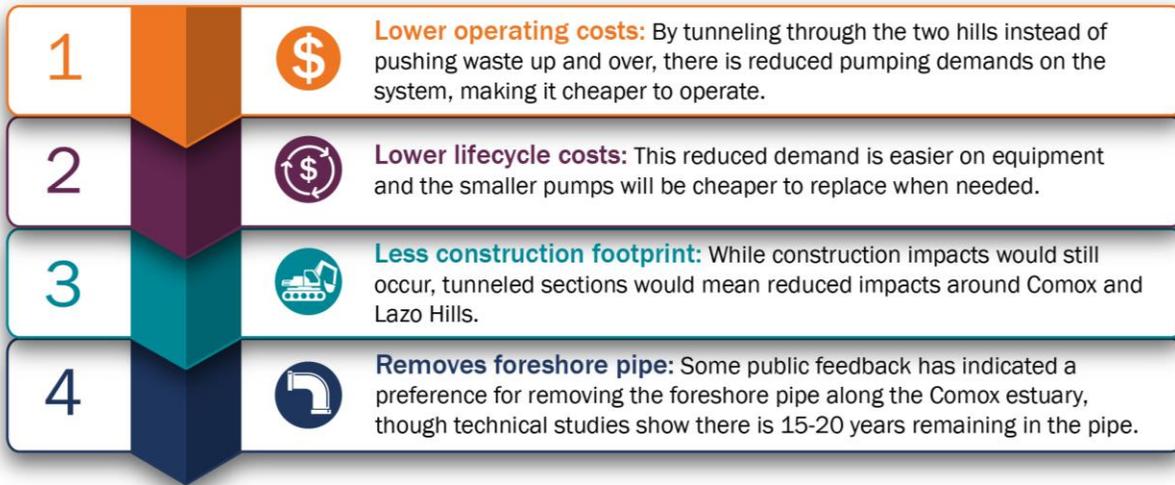
Participants in the survey were asked to rank the presented benefits for each option.

Between 264 - 272 people completed this exercise, resulting in the following rankings. Results were largely similar, regardless of the filtering applied based on where the respondent lives. Exceptions are identified below.

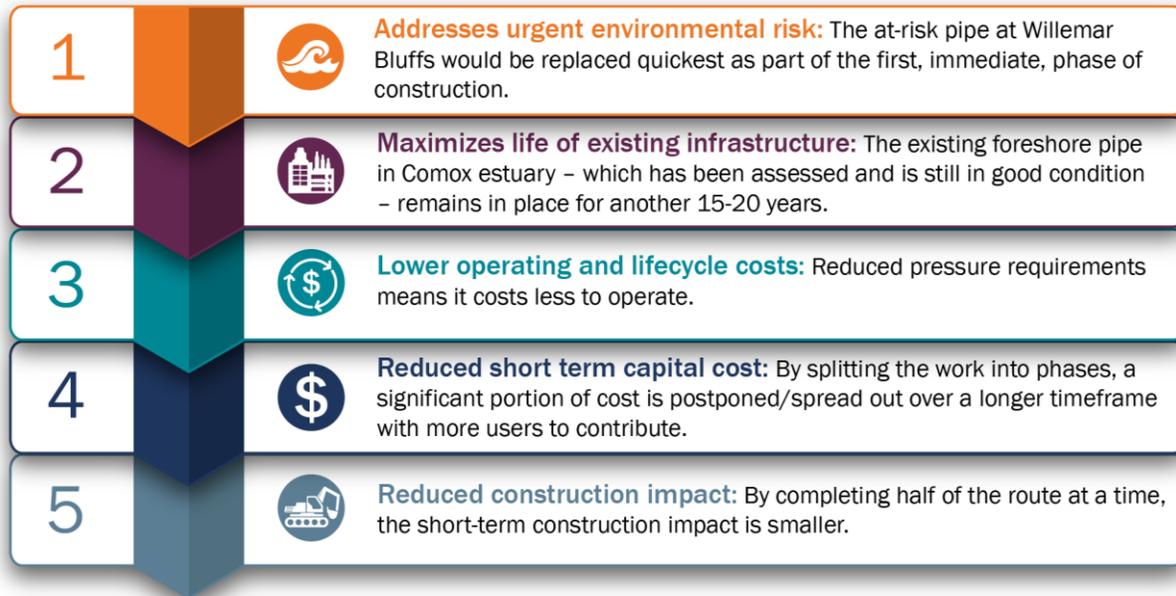
Option 1 – Benefits as Ranked by Survey Respondents



Option 2 – Benefits as Ranked by Survey Respondents



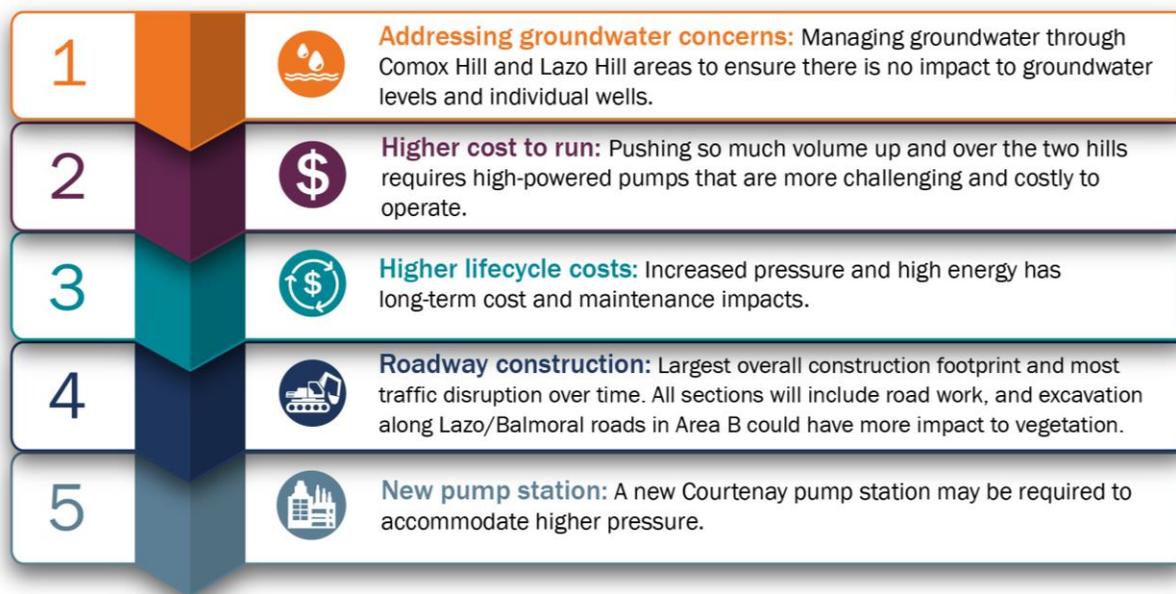
Option 3 – Benefits as Ranked by Survey Respondents



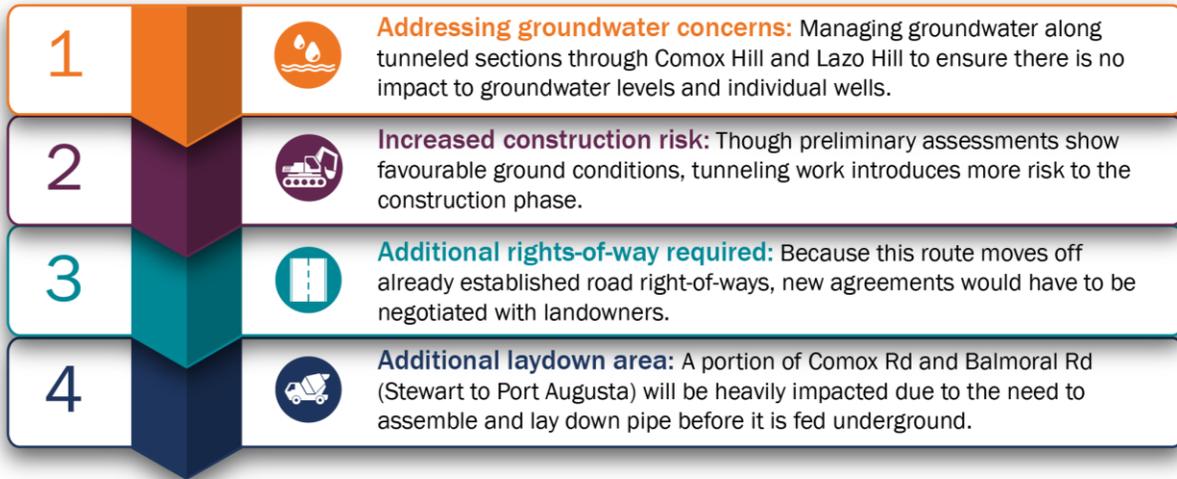
1.7 Challenges Ranking

Challenges and concerns for each option were also presented for ranking, resulting in the following prioritized list. For each of these, 272-273 people completed the ranking, and like the benefits, results were largely similar regardless of where the respondent lives. Exceptions are identified below.

Option 1 – Challenges as Ranked by Survey Respondents



Option 2 – Challenges as Ranked by Survey Respondents



Option 3 – Challenges as Ranked by Survey Respondents



1.8 Themes of Comments

Along with the ranking, participants were asked to list further benefits, challenges or feedback that they would like the project team and sewage commission to consider as the options are assessed. On average, 44 comments were posted in each section, with 65, the most, in the first comment section. This equals about 16 per cent of those who completed the ranking questions.

These comments were wide-ranging, encompassing opinions, questions, and concerns about specific issues. The collection is valuable input for planners and decision-makers. While there were limited groupings of topics, a few clusters of comments did emerge:



Priority of foreshore pipe removal: The importance of removing both the environmental risk at the Willemar Bluffs, as well as proceeding with the removal of the estuary pipe, generated a cluster of supportive comments.



Concern about rising construction costs or unforeseen circumstances: Respondents felt the cost estimate for Option 3's Phase 2 would likely be higher and there was concern that there could be changes to regulations or priorities that prevent that phase from proceeding on time. There were some balancing comments about the value of having additional ratepayers in 20 years, and potential for new technologies then, but the concern outweighed the support when reviewing written comments.



Groundwater: The project team heard at open houses and via emails/letters that groundwater for residents in the Lazo area was a concern. This is especially important for those who rely on wells. To provide additional information, a webinar specifically on groundwater and tunneling was hosted on Nov. 5. Questions were focused on safeguards against possible breaks/leaks and methods of detection and repair. People living in the area had concerns about the impacts of right-of-ways through property in the long-term and sought additional information about alternatives that had been considered. Any questions that could not be addressed in the webinar were responded to online, with a notice going to attendees about the update.



Area-specific concerns and issues: Residents had a wide range of comments that were personal and specific to their circumstances, including the protection of important trees, protecting groundwater, preferring traffic on main roads rather than Balmoral, and Jane Place pump station construction concerns. Each of these clusters of comments were much smaller – between four and eight each – but represent good information and highlight the importance of follow up communication, particularly as the project approaches the construction phase.

Conclusion

Assessing the shortlist of options requires both critical technical evaluation as well as consideration of public input. The engagement plan was successful in drawing out the key concerns and benefits for each option so that they can be considered in relation to the technical analysis.

Environmental concerns, particularly around the protection of water (foreshore/ocean and groundwater) emerged as a top priority. Residents remain concerned about how the work will impact their specific areas – the water, trees, traffic etc. near them. Their varied comments will provide valuable considerations for the project team to consider as a preferred option is determined.

Participation in this stage was higher than any other phase of public consultation during the LWMP process, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The direct community outreach in Comox drew a new audience and the online webinar offered a new and valuable tool that can support future engagement by the CVRD, across a wide range of regional projects and initiatives.

Next Steps

A commitment was made by the CVRD to follow up with the outcome of the consultation and decision regarding the preferred option.

- **Announce preferred option, share the consultation report and communicate next steps:** Direct outreach to residents who participated in open houses, webinars or signed up for more information about the project. The decision and the report will be posted online and a press release will be distributed to media and shared via social media for the general public.
- **Prepare for next phase of engagement:** Additional engagement is planned during the public assent period to obtain borrowing approval for the conveyance portion of the LWMP.
- **Present the plan to the public:** Open houses will be held later in 2021 to present the draft LWMP, including the proposed solution for conveyance, treatment and resource recovery to the public before it is submitted to the Ministry of Environment.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Event Display Boards

Appendix 2 – Advertisement Samples

Appendix 3 – Digital Ad Campaign Report

Appendix 4 – Direct Mail

Appendix 5 – Groundwater Webinar – Letter, Map and Info Sheet

Appendix 6 – Online Survey

Appendix 7 – Online Survey Responses