Domtar Crofton and WFP Chemainus

Worker Needs Assessment

Summary Report

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1. Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a Worker Needs Assessment conducted in response to the closure of the Domtar Crofton Pulp Mill and the ongoing curtailment of the Western Forest Products (WFP) Chemainus Sawmill. These events have had significant impacts on workers, their families, and the broader Cowichan Valley economy.

The findings of this report are based on a combination of worker needs survey responses, input from frontline service delivery staff, and over 200 direct interactions with impacted workers through information sessions, job fairs, open houses, and service delivery between February and April 2026. While survey participation was limited, consistent patterns emerged across all sources, providing a strong indication of worker needs and transition challenges. Direct engagement and staff observations formed a primary source of insight, with survey data providing additional context.

Key Insights

Workers are transitioning from long-term, stable employment into a more complex labour market
Many workers spent decades in mill-based roles with limited need to engage in job search or career planning. Transitioning into a labour market with different expectations has required significant adjustment.

Many workers are balancing short-term income needs with longer-term career decisions
Workers are making complex decisions between seeking immediate employment and pursuing retraining. Financial pressures, uncertainty around training access, and unclear pathways all influence these decisions.

Worker needs are diverse and distributed across multiple pathways
Workers are considering a range of next steps, including immediate employment, retraining, certification upgrading, self-employment, and retirement. This diversity means that a single support pathway will not meet all needs.

Employment readiness and labour market navigation are immediate needs
Across engagements, workers frequently expressed or demonstrated a need for support with resume development, job search strategies, and navigating digital application systems. These needs reflect a gap in experience rather than a lack of willingness to work.

Interest in retraining is strong but shaped by system constraints
Many workers view retraining as a proactive step. However, access is affected by program capacity, availability, and timing, which can delay or complicate decision-making.

Worker confidence and progress are closely tied to clarity of next steps
Workers who have identified a clear direction tend to move forward more quickly and with greater confidence. Workers who engaged early with services were generally better positioned to understand available supports and move forward with clearer direction.

Information and system navigation significantly affect outcomes
Workers often received information from multiple sources, which was not always aligned. Where early engagement was clear and coordinated, workers were better able to access supports and make informed decisions.

Impacts extend beyond employment
Workers reported stress related to financial stability, future planning, and family impacts. Transition is being experienced not only as a job loss, but as a broader life disruption.

Across these insights, several interconnected barriers are shaping worker transition experiences. These include financial pressure, limited comparable local employment opportunities, gaps in externally recognized certifications, limited familiarity with current hiring practices, training system constraints, and inconsistent information across programs and services. These barriers often compound one another and influence both the pace and quality of worker transition outcomes.

Recommendations for Supporting Worker Transition

The assessment identifies seven priority recommendations to strengthen worker transition outcomes and support a coordinated, worker-centred response.

Maintain early and accessible worker engagement
Continue providing timely, worker-facing opportunities for impacted workers to ask questions, receive current information, and identify next steps. Early engagement helps reduce uncertainty and supports workers in navigating available services at a critical stage.

Provide structured career transition and pathway information sessions
Design worker-facing sessions that do more than introduce available services. Sessions should present realistic transition pathways, while helping workers understand how different supports, training pathways, and employment services connect. Presenting options in a structured group format can reduce the burden on workers to self-navigate multiple systems and help build clarity, confidence, and momentum.

Strengthen employment readiness and labour market navigation
Ensure workers continue to have access to practical assistance with resumes, interviews, job search strategies, online applications, transferable skills identification, and current hiring expectations. Where appropriate, employment readiness activities could include peer-based elements, such as small-group workshops or facilitated discussion, to help workers share experiences, reduce isolation, build confidence, and learn from others navigating similar transitions.

Align training and credential pathways with worker demand
Work with training providers and relevant partners to align available programming with worker interests, skill profiles, and labour market opportunities. Attention should be given to short-cycle training, externally recognized certifications, trades pathways, industrial skills upgrading, and options that support timely re-entry into sustainable employment.

Develop targeted employer engagement and job matching opportunities

Strengthen connections with employers in sectors that align with impacted workers' skills and interests. This may include sector-specific hiring conversations, employer information sessions, warm referral pathways, and efforts to help employers understand the transferable value of mill-based experience.

Integrate financial transition planning and household supports
Ensure workers are connected to appropriate financial planning, income support navigation, household budgeting resources, and community supports as part of the broader transition response. Financial and household pressures influence whether workers can pursue retraining, accept lower-wage employment, commute, relocate, or wait for suitable opportunities.

Strengthen coordinated partner response and communication
Maintain coordination among employment service providers, government agencies, training institutions, community organizations, sector partners, employers, and union representatives. A coordinated approach can reduce duplication, improve consistency of information, and create clearer entry points for workers navigating multiple systems.

Conclusion

Workers affected by the Domtar Crofton Pulp Mill closure and WFP Chemainus Sawmill curtailment are navigating complex and multi-layered transitions. While supports are available, outcomes are shaped by a combination of individual readiness, labour market conditions, and the clarity and coordination of systems that support transition.

The results of this report show the importance of accessible information, coordinated services, and clear pathways in supporting workers through change. These insights may inform ongoing efforts to strengthen responses to workforce disruption and improve outcomes for workers and communities.

2. Background and Context

2.1 Mill Closure Overview

The closure of Domtar's Crofton Pulp Mill and the indefinite curtailment of Western Forest Products (WFP) Chemainus Sawmill have had significant and immediate impacts on workers, families, and communities throughout the Cowichan Valley with effects extending throughout Central and Southern Vancouver Island. Together, these events disrupted employment for hundreds of workers and created an urgent need for coordinated transition supports.

Available information indicates that approximately 350 workers were directly impacted by the Crofton closure, while the Chemainus curtailment has affected approximately 120–150 workers, depending on reporting sources. These figures reflect only direct employment impacts. Broader effects on subcontractors and other local businesses are widely acknowledged but not yet fully understood.

Both mills have been critical economic anchors in the region for decades. In addition to providing stable employment, they have contributed significantly to the local tax base and supported a wide range of secondary economic activity, including contractors, transportation, and service industries. The Crofton mill alone had historically been one of the municipality's largest taxpayers, contributing millions annually when in operation.

The workforce affected by these events is characterized by long tenure and deep specialization. For many, these are jobs they expected to hold until retirement. Based on engagement and staff input, many workers have spent 20 or more years in mill-based roles, developing strong expertise in specific industrial processes that are not widely replicated in many other local workplaces. While this experience represents a significant asset, it also presents challenges in the context of labour market transition, particularly where job search practices, certification requirements, and industry expectations differ.

Initial worker responses were marked by fear, confusion, and uncertainty about both immediate income stability and longer-term employment prospects. For many, the sudden shift from stable, long-term employment created pressure to quickly understand available supports, retraining options, and employment pathways. These concerns were often compounded by factors such as age and education, with many workers expressing despair about their prospects.

The Crofton and Chemainus events are linked within a broader period of restructuring in the coastal forest sector. Industry conditions, including market pressures, fibre supply challenges, and trade-related factors, have contributed to both decisions, though the nature of each event differs.

In this context, the Worker Needs Assessment was undertaken to support the work of the Community Transition Table, to better understand the experiences, needs, and priorities of affected workers, and to inform coordinated responses across government, training providers, and community organizations.

2.2 Regional Economic & Labour Market Context

The regional labour market context is a critical factor shaping transition outcomes for workers affected by the closure of the Domtar Crofton Pulp Mill and the curtailment of the WFP Chemainus Sawmill. While employment opportunities exist across Vancouver Island, structural conditions limit the extent to which these opportunities represent viable or comparable alternatives to mill-based employment.

As of March 2026, labour market conditions reflect increased competition for available positions, with unemployment levels rising relative to recent years. Although the Vancouver Island/Coast region continues to perform comparatively better than most economic regions in British Columbia, the unemployment rate still sits as a multiyear high not seen since the impacts of COVID. These conditions affect the accessibility and quality of employment opportunities available to impacted workers. For individuals entering the labour market after long periods of stable employment, even moderate increases in competition can present a meaningful barrier to re-employment.

A defining feature of the local labour market is the gap between available employment and the conditions historically associated with mill work. Forestry operations such as the Crofton and Chemainus mills have provided some of the most stable and well-compensated industrial employment opportunities in the region, attracting workers across a range of skill levels and career stages. As a result, many workers are transitioning from roles that offered long-term stability and relatively high earnings into a labour market where comparable opportunities are limited.

This gap has direct implications for transition pathways. While employment opportunities exist, particularly in trades, construction, and other forms of skilled labour, these roles are not always immediately accessible. Mill-based work is often highly specialized, and workers may require support to identify transferable skills, adapt their experience to new contexts, or obtain additional certifications to meet industry requirements and employer expectations. Without this support, workers may face extended job searches or accept employment that does not align with their skills or financial needs.

Training systems play a central role in bridging this gap, but access does not always match with demand. Workers may encounter a range of constraints, including limited program capacity, scheduling challenges, and rising costs. In some cases, programs are oversubscribed with extended wait times. In others, they may be cancelled due to insufficient enrollment. These inconsistencies create uncertainty and can delay entry into new career pathways, particularly for workers seeking to transition quickly.

The labour market context also influences how workers evaluate available options. Opportunities that involve lower wages, reduced stability, or significant commuting requirements may be less feasible or attractive, particularly for individuals with established financial commitments or family responsibilities. As a result, workers are often required to balance immediate employment needs with longer-term considerations related to income, stability, and career progression.

Beyond individual outcomes, the closure and curtailment of major forestry operations are expected to have broader economic effects. Reduced employment and income levels can affect local businesses, contractors, and service providers, contributing to wider economic impacts across the region.

Taken together, these conditions create a labour market environment in which employment opportunities are present, but not always aligned with the needs, experience, or expectations of affected workers. This misalignment underscores the importance of targeted supports to facilitate effective transitions and to ensure workers can access sustainable employment pathways.

3. Methodology

3.1 Approach

The Worker Needs Assessment was conducted to develop an evidence-based understanding of the experiences, needs, and transition challenges facing workers affected by the closure of the Domtar Crofton Pulp Mill and the curtailment of the WFP Chemainus Sawmill. The approach was designed to capture both immediate impacts and emerging longer-term considerations. The goal of this report is to inform responsive supports, program design, and decision-making within the community.

Data collection took place between February and April 2026 and focused on connection points throughout the Cowichan Valley including Crofton, Chemainus, Ladysmith and Duncan. Given the nature of the workforce and the evolving circumstances surrounding the mill curtailment, a mixed-methods approach was used to capture quantitative and qualitative insights about impacts and needs.

The assessment prioritized direct engagement with impacted workers and frontline service delivery staff to ensure findings reflect real-world experiences and service delivery conditions. In the context of workforce disruption, qualitative insights—particularly those drawn from repeated interactions and observed patterns—are critical to understanding barriers that may not be fully captured through structured survey data alone. Surveys provide point-in-time insights, which can evolve as individuals move through different stages of career transition. In contrast, in-person qualitative interactions offer a deeper understanding of how workers navigate and experience these changes over time.

By combining multiple sources of information, the assessment aims to provide a practical and on-the-ground understanding of worker needs, with a focus on identifying actionable insights that can support effective transition planning and service delivery.

3.2 Data Sources

This assessment draws on three primary sources of information: direct engagement with impacted workers, survey responses, and frontline service delivery staff insights. These sources provide a comprehensive view of worker experiences and allow for the identification of consistent themes across different forms of evidence.

Impacted Worker Engagement

Engagement with impacted workers was conducted through a series of in-person and service-based interactions, including information sessions, open houses, job fairs, and intake appointments delivered through WorkBC services. Although these activities were primarily intended to provide services to impacted workers from both the Domtar Crofton Pulp Mill and the WFP Chemainus Sawmill, they also created opportunities to learn directly from workers themselves. These activities and service delivery resulted in well over 200 direct interactions with workers.

These engagements provided real-time insight into worker experiences, including immediate concerns, questions, and emerging needs. They also offered a practical understanding of how workers were navigating available supports and responding to evolving information about employment, training, and income stability. Insights from these interactions were aggregated and anonymized to inform overall findings while protecting confidentiality.

Partner Engagement and Coordinated Response

Partnerships were an important part of the worker engagement and service response. Throughout the project, WorkBC coordinated with government, training, sector, community, and union partners to support information sharing, event participation, and engagement with impacted workers. Direct service partners included Service Canada, Vancouver Island University, the Construction Foundation of BC, Build Your Own Future, Community Futures Cowichan, and union leadership for impacted workers.

Partner involvement was concentrated in information sessions, job fairs, one-on-one appointments, and communication through union representatives. Vancouver Island University, the Construction Foundation of BC, Build Your Own Future, and Community Futures Cowichan participated in information sessions and job fairs, helping workers access information about retraining, certification pathways, employment options, self-employment, and other transition supports. Service Canada participated in multiple outreach events, including sessions at the WorkBC Ladysmith and WorkBC Duncan centres organized in direct response to worker questions and concerns about Employment Insurance eligibility and income support navigation.

Communication through union representatives from both mills was particularly important as the most reliable way to reach impacted union members. Event information, service updates, and responses to worker questions were shared through established and trusted channels, helping ensure workers received timely information during a period of uncertainty.

Partner input also helped shape the focus of the Worker Needs Assessment survey. Survey questions were developed with consideration of the information community partners needed to better support impacted workers and plan responsive services. This was particularly important for partners involved in training and pathway development, including Vancouver Island University and the Construction Foundation of BC, as well as partners supporting self-employment pathways, including Community Futures Cowichan and Build Your Own Future. Their input helped ensure the survey gathered practical information related to retraining, employment goals, self-employment interest, and the types of supports workers identified as most helpful.

Overall, partnerships strengthened both engagement and response. They helped connect workers to available supports, improved the relevance of the information gathered, and ensured the assessment could inform practical next steps for service providers, training institutions, community partners, and organizations supporting employment and self-employment pathways.

Survey

A voluntary survey was administered to collect structured information on worker experiences and perspectives. It was designed to capture key aspects of workforce transition, including employment history, job search readiness, training interests, perceived barriers to re-employment, and the personal impacts of job loss. Questions were selected based on relevance and impact to keep the survey concise.

The survey was distributed through engagement events and service interactions, resulting in 25 usable responses. While this represents a small proportion of the total affected workforce, the results provide important directional insight and help validate patterns observed across other data sources. Survey respondents included workers from both Domtar (72%) and Western Forest Products (28%). Responses were broadly consistent across both groups. It should be noted that, based on the distribution approach, respondents were more likely to be workers actively seeking services and supports.

Staff Input

Frontline staff insights formed a critical component of the assessment. Input was collected through structured discussions and follow-up questions with WorkBC staff directly involved in supporting affected workers. Approximately 10 staff members contributed to this process, providing observations based on ongoing service delivery and repeated interactions with clients.

These insights offer important context regarding common challenges, barriers to accessing supports, and system-level considerations. Staff perspectives are particularly valuable in identifying patterns that emerge across multiple clients and in highlighting issues related to service delivery, communication, and program access.

Integration of Data Sources

Using multiple data sources provided a more complete picture of worker experiences. Survey data offered quantitative context, while worker engagement and staff input added depth and helped confirm key themes. Together, these sources strengthen confidence in the findings by showing consistent patterns across different types of information.

3.3 Limitations

A few key limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this assessment.

Survey participation was limited relative to the total number of affected workers. This is consistent with participation patterns observed in previous worker needs assessments conducted in similar contexts. A range of factors likely contributed to lower response rates, including uncertainty regarding the purpose of the assessment, the perception among some workers that they were already receiving sufficient support, and evolving information regarding the status of the mill-focused supports. As a result, survey findings should be interpreted as providing directional insight rather than being statistically representative of the entire workforce.

In addition, engagement with certain segments of the affected workforce was more limited. Participation from exempt or non-union staff was lower, and their experiences may not be fully reflected in the findings.

It is also important to note that labour market conditions and training availability are subject to change. Findings related to employment opportunities, program access, and system capacity reflect conditions at the time of data collection (February to April 2026) and may change over time.

Despite these limitations, the assessment is supported by a substantial volume of direct worker engagement and consistent input from frontline staff. Over 200 worker interactions, combined with observations from multiple service providers, provide a strong foundation for identifying common themes and priority needs. The results of this report reflect patterns observed across multiple sources and are intended to inform practical, evidence-based responses to worker transition challenges

4. Key Findings: Worker Needs

This section represents the analysis of survey responses, frontline staff insights, and over 200 direct interactions with workers affected by the closure of the Domtar Crofton Pulp Mill and the extended curtailment of the WFP Chemainus Sawmill. Together, these sources provide a consistent and practical understanding of the challenges workers are facing as they navigate employment transitions.

As mentioned in earlier sections, workers are entering a labour market that differs significantly from the conditions under which many have spent their careers. At the same time, training systems and service delivery structures present both opportunities and constraints. The findings below describe how these conditions are experienced at the individual level and where gaps exist between available supports and worker needs.

Across all sources, a consistent pattern emerges. Impacted workers are not only seeking employment, but are navigating a transition that requires new skills, new information, and access to systems that are not always easy to understand or access. These findings are organized into five key areas that reflect the most common and impactful challenges identified through the assessment process.

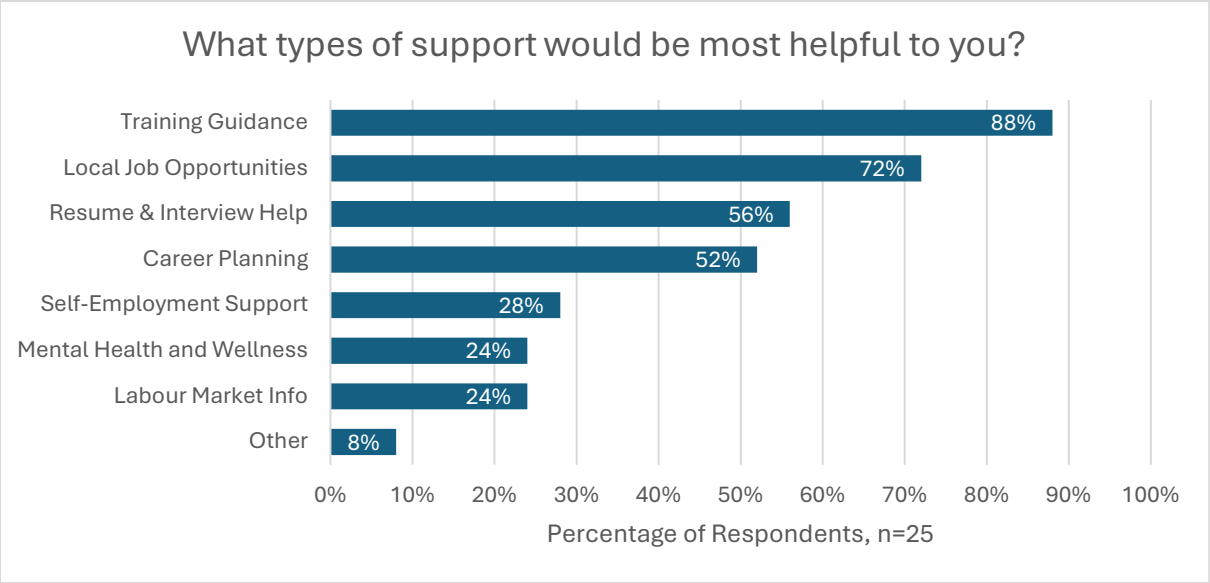
4.1 Transition Readiness and Job Search Capacity

A central finding of this assessment is the extent to which workers require support to re-engage with current labour market practices. Many workers affected by the closures have spent extended periods, often decades, in stable, mill-based employment. As a result, they have had limited need to engage with job search processes such as online applications, resume development, or interview preparation.

Frontline staff and survey results demonstrated that many workers required foundational support in these areas, including understanding where to look for jobs, how to navigate digital application systems, and how to present their experience in a way that aligns with current hiring practices. This need was more significant than initially anticipated and emerged as a consistent theme across multiple service interactions.

Importantly, this gap does not reflect a lack of willingness to work. Most workers surveyed and interacted with were looking to start a job search right away or after a short break. Rather, it reflects a disconnect between conditions in their previous employment and current labour market realities. Without targeted support, this gap can delay re-employment and limit access to available opportunities.

Figure 1: Reported Employment and Job Search Support Needs



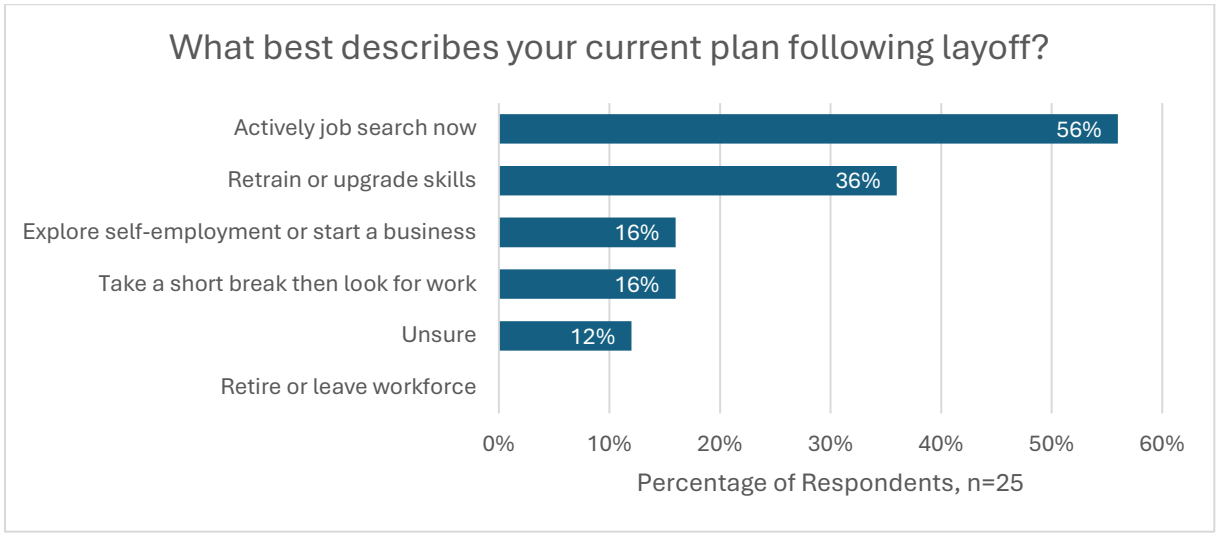
Workers require substantial support in navigating job search processes, particularly in resume development, identifying opportunities, and applying for jobs.

4.2 Employment Expectations and Training Pathways

Across engagements, a consistent priority for workers was securing employment that meets their financial needs. This influenced how workers evaluated both immediate job opportunities and longer-term training pathways.

Given the wage differential between mill employment and many available roles in the local labour market, this represents a significant challenge. Workers are often balancing the need for immediate income with the desire to secure longer-term, stable employment.

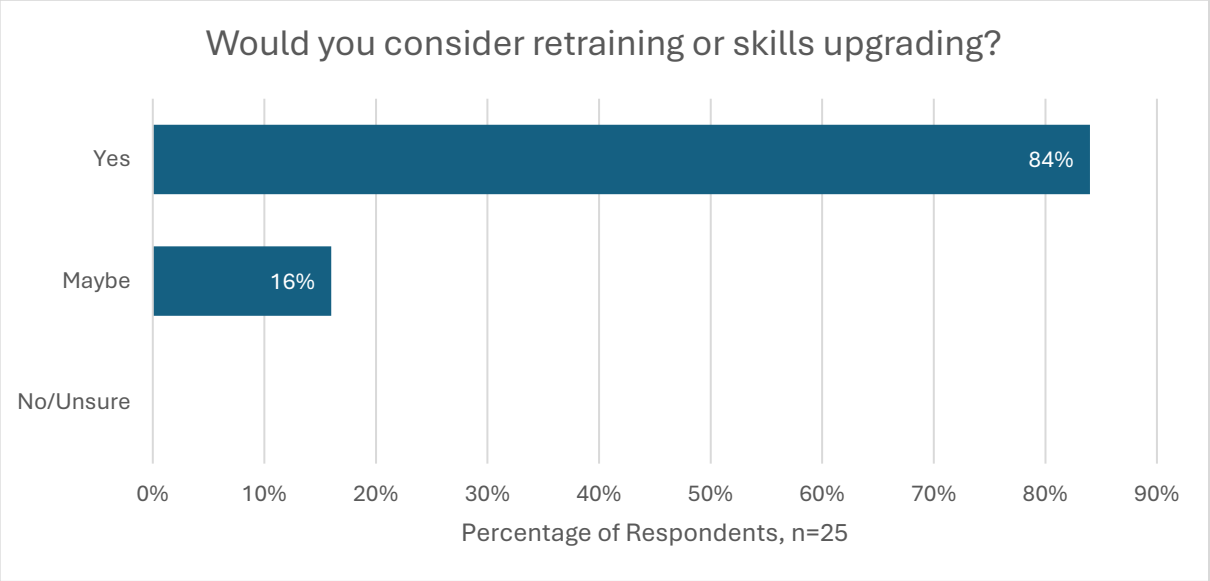
Figure 2: Planned Next Steps Following Mill Closure or Curtailment



There is also strong interest in retraining and upskilling as a pathway forward. However, this interest is shaped by uncertainty regarding training availability, timelines, and outcomes. Staff noted that training programs frequently reach capacity, and workers may face delays in accessing the supports required to transition effectively.

The level of interest in self-employment is notable and suggests that some workers are considering alternative pathways outside traditional employment models.

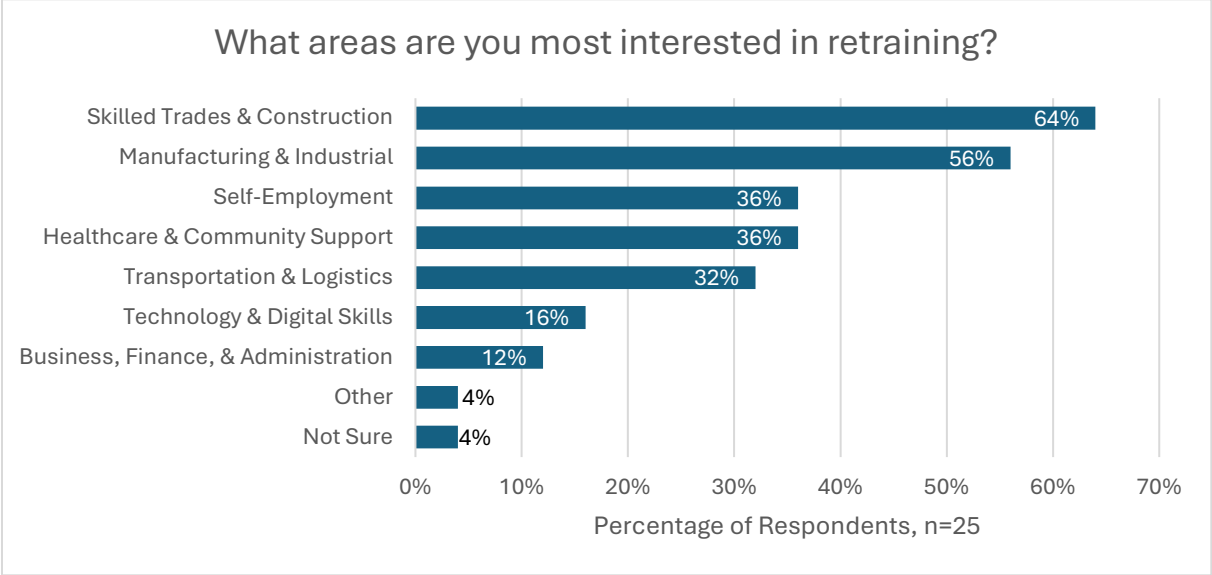
Figure 3: Interest in Retraining or Upskilling



Workers were asked to identify the areas they would be most interested in pursuing for retraining or skills upgrading. Interest in retraining is strongest in skilled trades and industrial-related fields, reflecting alignment with workers' existing experience and transferable skills. There is also notable interest in self-employment and community-based sectors such as healthcare and support services.

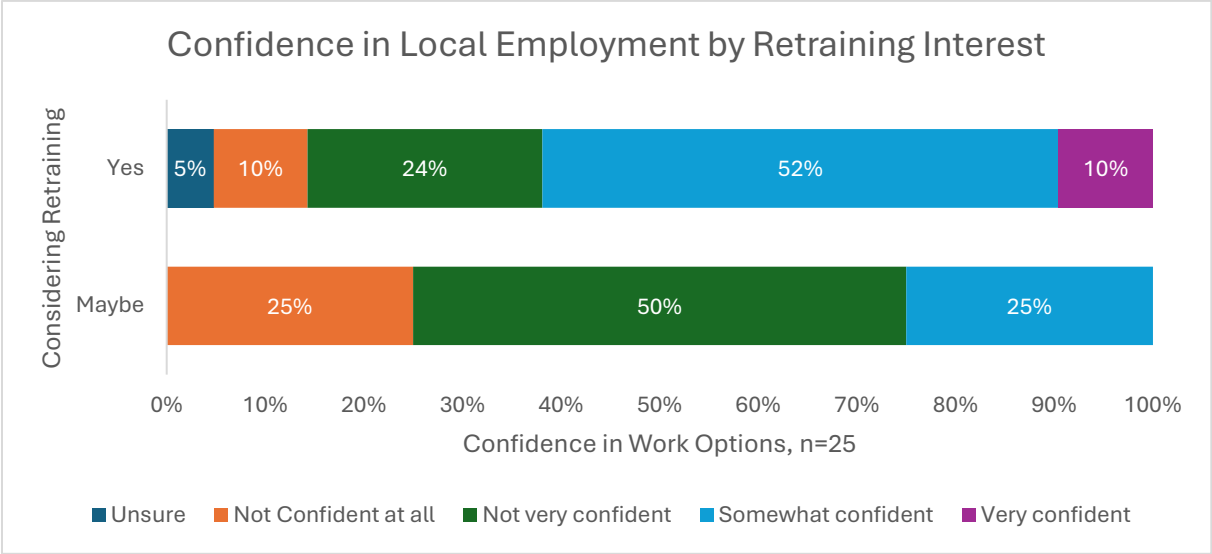
Interest in retraining is not concentrated in a single field. Workers identified a range of sectors, including trades, industrial roles, self-employment, and community-based services, reflecting both transferable skills and openness to new career directions.

Figure 4: Areas of Interest for Retraining or Skills Upgrading



The relationship between retraining interest and confidence in local employment provides additional insight into how workers are evaluating their options.

Figure 5: Confidence in Local Employment by Retraining Interest

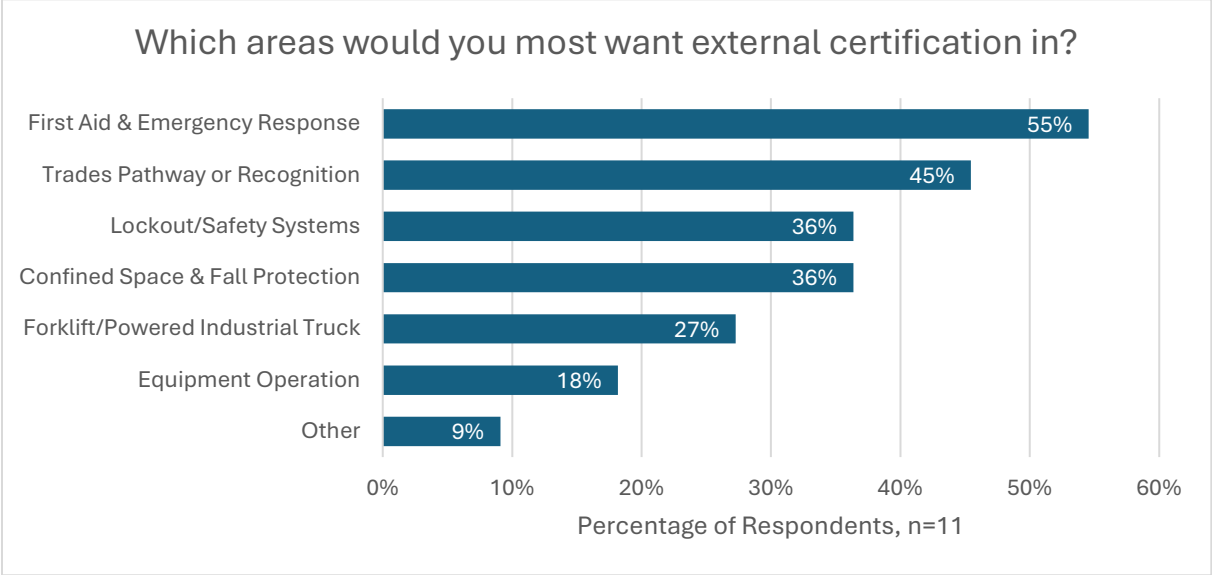


Many seeking retraining report moderate to high confidence levels, indicating that retraining may be viewed as a proactive strategy. In contrast, workers who are uncertain about retraining tend to report lower confidence, suggesting broader uncertainty about career planning.

Taken together, these results indicate that employment and training decisions are not driven solely by labour market conditions, but also by the amount of clarity workers have regarding their options.

Many respondents indicated they had in-house training or certifications and would be interested in upgrading or challenging these to obtain externally recognized credentials.

Figure 6: Areas of Interest for External Certification



Responses show strong interest in short-term, employment-ready certifications, particularly in first aid, safety systems, and trades-related recognition. These areas align closely with workers' existing industrial experience and represent practical pathways back into the labour market. The level of interest in certifications also suggests that many workers are looking for immediate, achievable steps to improve employability while considering longer-term training options.

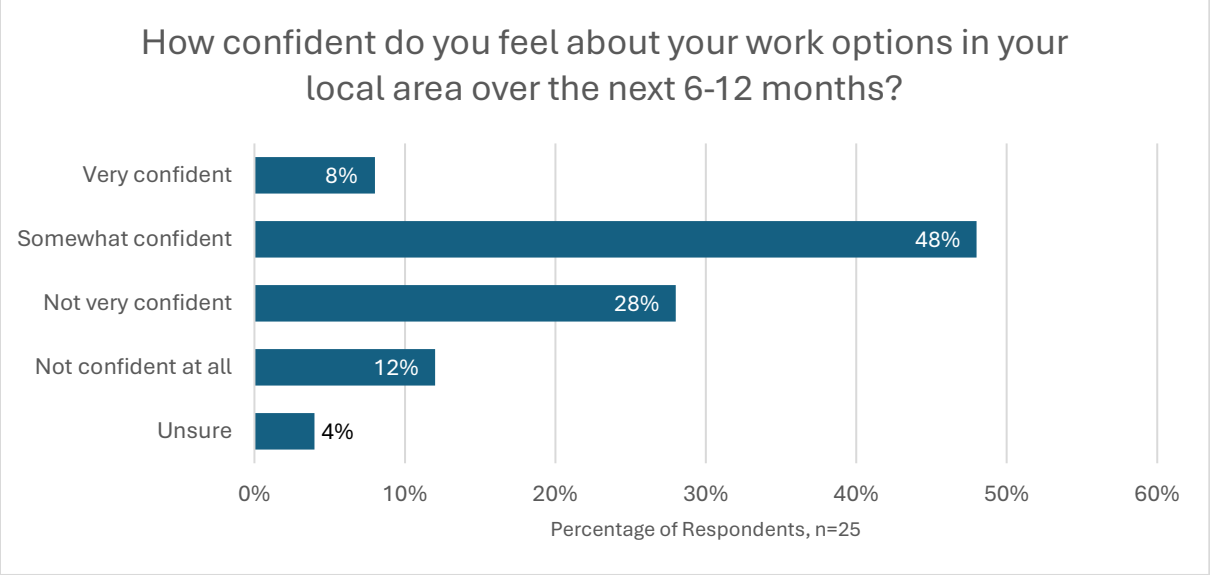
4.3 Barriers to Re-employment and Transition Clarity

Barriers to re-employment are multi-layered and reflect both individual challenges and broader labour market conditions. Workers are not facing a single obstacle, but rather a combination of factors that interact to shape their transition experience.

At the individual level, staff identified gaps in certifications, limited familiarity with current job search processes, lack of diverse, relevant, or transferable experience, and anticipated ageism as expected barriers in their return to employment. These challenges are particularly pronounced among workers with long tenure in mill-based roles.

At the same time, structural conditions influence how these barriers are experienced. The availability of employment that aligns with previous wages and working conditions is limited, and competition for these roles is high. As a result, even workers who feel capable of finding employment may face constraints in securing positions that meet their expectations or financial needs.

Figure 7: Worker Confidence in Securing Local Employment



This indicates that confidence in finding local employment varies across workers, with a significant portion expressing uncertainty or lower confidence. This reinforces the challenges associated with transitioning into available roles within the current local labour market.

A key insight is that barriers are not only related to skills or experience, but to the level of clarity workers have about their next steps. Workers who have identified a direction such as retraining tend to demonstrate greater confidence and momentum in their transition. In contrast, those who remain uncertain about their options are more likely to have trouble navigating both employment opportunities and support systems and experience greater uncertainty and lower confidence as a result.

Across engagements, workers who had identified a clear next step tended to report greater confidence and progress in their transition.

Workers also expressed frustration regarding the perceived availability of opportunities within the local community. In some cases, there was a sentiment that available work was limited or not accessible. Others expressed concern that wages attached to available jobs would not be sufficient to maintain their current living situation, including housing costs or the ability to maintain a single-income household. Addressing barriers to re-employment therefore requires more than jobs and training alone. Workers may also need targeted support to identify, evaluate, and pursue viable pathways while adjusting household plans and financial expectations.

4.4 Information Gaps and System Navigation Challenges

A significant finding of this assessment is the extent to which perceived information gaps and system navigation challenges have affected workers' ability to make informed decisions. Across staff input and worker engagement, inconsistent and incomplete information emerged as a major barrier in the early stages of transition.

Workers frequently received information from multiple sources regarding training programs, funding sources, eligibility requirements, and timelines. In many cases, this information was not always consistent across sources, leading to misunderstandings about how and when supports could be accessed.

Importantly, these experiences also influenced how workers perceived the supports being offered. Where expectations did not align with actual processes, some workers interpreted delays or requirements as barriers rather than as part of standard program design. In some cases, this contributed to hesitation and required additional clarification during service interactions.

Staff emphasized that early engagement plays a critical role in shaping worker understanding and expectations. When initial interactions were clear and accurate, workers were better able to navigate supports. Where early information was unclear or inconsistent, misunderstandings often persisted.

Workers who received clear and consistent information early in the process were generally better positioned to access supports and make informed decisions.

4.5 Psychosocial and Household Impacts

The impacts of the mill closure and curtailment extend beyond employment and have been experienced at the household level. Across staff input and worker engagement, a consistent theme was the level of stress and uncertainty workers are facing as they navigate their transition.

For many workers, the loss of employment represents a significant shift following long-term, stable careers. This transition affects not only income, but also routine, identity, and long-term planning. Staff frequently described workers as feeling overwhelmed and uncertain about their next steps, particularly in the early stages following the closure and curtailment.

Survey responses reinforce these observations, with workers reporting concerns related to financial stability, employment prospects, and the ability to maintain their current standard of living. These concerns are often compounded by uncertainty related to retraining timelines, job availability, and broader economic conditions.

At the household level, these pressures can influence decision-making related to housing, transportation, and long-term financial commitments. While many workers reported having support from family or personal networks, awareness of broader community-based supports appeared more limited.

These findings highlight that workforce transition is not solely an employment issue, but a broader life transition affecting both individuals and their households. While not the most frequently identified need, 24% of survey respondents indicated that mental health and wellness support would be helpful in their transition. Effective responses must consider not only employment and training pathways, but also the broader context in which workers are making decisions, managing uncertainty, and adapting to change.

5. Transition Considerations and Labour Market Realities

The findings of this report must be understood within the broader context of the regional labour market and the realities facing workers transitioning from mill-based employment.

This gap between previous employment conditions and available opportunities is a central factor shaping worker decision-making and transition timelines. Many workers are moving from stable, well-compensated roles into a labour market where comparable positions are limited. This creates immediate pressure to secure income while also considering longer-term options such as retraining.

The specialized nature of industrial mill work further shapes transition pathways. While workers bring significant experience, it is not always directly transferable without additional certification or support. As a result, many workers are navigating multi-step transitions that include identifying transferable skills, accessing training, and adapting to new industries.

Timing is a consistent constraint as well. Training opportunities are not always available when workers are ready to pursue them, and employment opportunities often require immediate readiness. This misalignment can delay progress by months in some cases and contribute to uncertainty.

Across all data sources, one of the strongest patterns observed is the role of pathway clarity. Workers who have identified a direction, whether employment or retraining, tend to demonstrate greater confidence and momentum. Those who remain uncertain are more likely to have trouble navigating both opportunities and supports.

Geographic and personal factors also influence transition options. While some workers are open to commuting or relocation, many are not, due to family, financial, or community ties. As a result, local labour market conditions remain a critical factor in determining outcomes.

6. Recommendations for Supporting Worker Transition

The findings of this assessment point to several areas where future response efforts can strengthen worker transition outcomes. These recommendations build on the needs identified through worker engagement, survey responses, frontline staff input, and partner involvement. They are intended to support practical, coordinated action that reflects the realities facing workers as they move from long-term mill employment into new employment, training, or retirement pathways.

6.1 Maintain early and accessible worker engagement

Early engagement plays an important role in the first stages following a major workforce disruption. It helps fill the information gap, reduces uncertainty, and gives workers a place to ask questions before confusion, assumptions, or incomplete information take hold. Workers who can access clear information and connect with services early are better positioned to understand available supports and begin identifying next steps.

Future response efforts should continue to prioritize accessible, worker-facing engagement opportunities, including information sessions, open houses, job fairs, service appointments, and communication through trusted channels such as union representatives. These approaches help reduce uncertainty, build trust, and support workers in moving from initial disruption toward practical action.

6.2 Provide structured career transition and pathway information sessions

After news of the closure and curtailment, many workers were focused on understanding the immediate consequences while also trying to determine what a realistic path forward could look like. For workers leaving long-term mill employment, this may involve weighing several different options, including immediate employment, relocating, retraining, certification upgrading, self-employment, retirement, or semi-retirement.

Future information sessions should be structured to help workers make sense of these options and understand how different supports, training pathways, employment services, income supports, and community resources connect. Presenting this information in a clear group format can reduce the burden on workers to navigate multiple systems on their own, while helping build clarity, confidence, and momentum. Sessions may include examples of possible pathways, discussion of transferable skills, labour market information, and opportunities for workers to ask questions in a supportive setting.

6.3 Strengthen employment readiness and labour market navigation

The assessment found that many workers have strong work histories and valuable experience, but limited recent exposure to current job search practices. For these workers, access to services alone is not always enough. They also need practical support to engage effectively with today's labour market and present their experience in ways that align with employer expectations.

Employment readiness supports should continue to include resume development, interview preparation, job search strategies, online applications, transferable skills identification, and current hiring expectations. Where appropriate, these activities could include peer-based elements, such as small-group workshops or facilitated discussion. Peer-based approaches can help workers share experiences, reduce isolation, build confidence, and learn from others navigating similar transitions.

6.4 Align training and credential pathways with worker demand

Retraining and certification upgrading are important pathways for many impacted workers, particularly where existing skills can be built upon or translated into externally recognized credentials. However, training pathways need to be practical, timely, and connected to realistic employment opportunities if they are to support successful transition.

Because no single retraining target emerged, training responses should emphasize flexible, modular, and short-cycle options rather than relying on one cohort-based pathway. Response efforts should continue to involve training providers and relevant partners in aligning programming with worker interests, existing skill profiles, and labour market opportunities. In the short and medium term, attention should be given to short-cycle training, externally recognized certifications, trades pathways, industrial skills upgrading, and options that support timely re-entry into sustainable employment. Program capacity, scheduling, enrollment thresholds, and availability should also be considered, as both over-capacity and under-enrollment can delay or disrupt worker transition plans.

6.5 Develop targeted employer engagement and job matching opportunities

Worker transition requires helping employers recognize the value of workers' existing skills and experience. Many impacted workers bring strong industrial experience, reliability, safety awareness, equipment knowledge, and problem-solving skills, but these strengths may not always be immediately visible to employers outside mill-based settings. For workers considering self-employment, similar pathway connections may be needed to entrepreneurship supports and business planning resources.

Targeted employer engagement can help bridge this gap. This may include sector-specific hiring events, employer information sessions, warm referral pathways, and efforts to help employers understand how mill-based experience can transfer into other roles. Strengthening these connections can reduce reliance on general job postings and improve access to suitable employment opportunities.

6.6 Integrate financial transition planning and household supports

Employment decisions are shaped by more than job availability or training interest. For many workers, decisions about retraining, commuting, accepting lower-wage work, relocating, or waiting for a suitable opportunity are closely tied to household finances and family responsibilities.

Transition responses can address these challenges by recognizing the broader pressures and connecting workers to appropriate financial planning, income support navigation, household

budgeting resources, and community supports. This is particularly important where workers are moving from stable, long-term employment into a period of uncertainty. Supporting financial and household stability can improve workers' ability to make informed decisions about their next steps.

6.7 Strengthen coordinated partner response and communication

The assessment shows that a coordinated approach is essential during workforce disruption. Workers may receive information from multiple sources, including employment services, government agencies, training providers, community organizations, unions, and employers. When information is not aligned, workers can experience confusion about eligibility, timelines, service pathways, and available options.

A coordinated partner response, supported by a clear communication plan, can reduce duplication, improve consistency, and create clearer entry points for workers navigating multiple systems. Ongoing communication among partners can also help ensure that services, training options, and employment responses remain aligned with the needs identified through the assessment.

7. Conclusion

The closure of the Domtar Crofton Pulp Mill and the curtailment of the WFP Chemainus Sawmill have created significant transition challenges for workers and the surrounding communities.

Findings indicate that workers are navigating not only job loss, but a shift into a labour market with different expectations, structures, and pathways. Many require support in understanding available options, developing employment readiness skills, and accessing training or employment opportunities.

At the same time, system-level factors—including training capacity, timing, and the consistency of information—play a critical role in shaping outcomes. Where services are accessible, coordinated, and clearly communicated, workers are better able to move forward. Where gaps exist, confusion and delays can slow transition progress.

A key insight across all data sources is the importance of pathway clarity. Workers who can identify a direction tend to demonstrate greater confidence and momentum, while those who remain uncertain face greater challenges navigating both opportunities and supports.

These findings highlight the importance of clear, accessible, and well-aligned supports to workforce disruption. The recommendations outlined in this report are intended to support coordinated action among employment service providers, training institutions, government agencies, community organizations, sector partners, employers, and union representatives. Supporting effective transition requires not only the availability of services, but alignment across systems and clear pathways that reflect the realities workers face.

8. Appendices

Appendix A – Survey Questions

Crofton and Chemainus Mill Impacted Worker Survey

Purpose

This 5-minute anonymous survey helps service providers and partners understand what supports may be most helpful following the mill closure. Responses will be used only in aggregate to inform planning.

Age

☐ Under 18 ☐ 18-34 ☐ 25-34 ☐ 35-44 ☐ 45-54 ☐ 55-64 ☐ 65+

1. Which mill did you most recently work for?

☐ Domtar

☐ Western Forest Products

2. What best describes your current plan following the layoff?

☐ Actively look for another job right away

☐ Take a short break, then look for work

☐ Retrain or upgrade skills before looking for work

☐ Explore self-employment or starting a business

☐ Retire or leave the workforce

☐ Unsure at this time

3. How confident do you feel about your work options in your local area over the next 6–12 months?

Very confident	Somewhat confident	Not very confident	Not confident at all	Unsure
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

4. Would relocating for work be an option for you or your household?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No ☐ Unsure

5. How would you describe your current tickets/certifications? (Choose one)

☐ Mostly in-house certifications (not externally recognized)

☐ Mix of in-house and externally recognized certifications

☐ Mostly externally recognized tickets/certifications

☐ Not sure/prefer not to say

6. Would you be interested in converting in-house training into externally recognized credentials?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No ☐ Unsure

6a. If Yes or Maybe, which areas would you most want external certification in? (Up to three)

☐ Forklift/powered industrial truck
☐ Confined space/fall protection
☐ Lockout/safety systems
☐ First aid/emergency response
☐ Trades Pathway or recognition

☐ Equipment operation: _____

☐ Other: _____

7. Is retraining or skills upgrading something you would consider?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No ☐ Unsure

7a. If "Yes","Maybe", or "Unsure", choose up to three areas below:

☐ Skilled trades & construction
☐ Business, finance & administration
☐ Transportation & logistics
☐ Technology & digital skills
☐ Manufacturing & industrial operations
☐ Entrepreneurship / self-employment training
☐ Healthcare & community support roles
☐ Not sure yet

☐ Other: _____

8. Have you ever considered self-employment or working for yourself?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No ☐ Unsure

9. What types of support would be most helpful to you right now? (Select up to three)

☐ Local job opportunities
☐ Resume and interview support
☐ Training or retraining guidance
☐ Career planning / advising
☐ What industries are hiring
☐ Self-Employment or business start-up info
☐ Mental health and wellness supports

☐ Other: _____

10. Is there anything else you would like planners to understand about your situation or needs right now?

Appendix B – Key Tables

1. **Age**

Support Type	% of Respondents (n=11)
25-34	9%
35-44	18%
45-54	55%
55-64	18%

2. **Which have you most recently worked for?**

Mill Location	% of Respondents (n=25)
Domtar Crofton	72%
WFP Chemainus	28%

3. **How confident do you feel about your work options in your local area over the next 6-12 months?**

Confidence Level	% of Respondents (n=25)
Very confident	8%
Somewhat confident	48%
Not very confident	28%
Not confident at all	12%
Unsure	28%

4. **Would relocating for work be an option for you or your household?**

Response	% of Respondents (n=25)
Yes	20%
Maybe	16%
No	56%
Unsure	8%

5. **How would you describe your current tickets/certifications?**

Response	% of Respondents (n=11)
Mostly in-house	55%
Mix of in-house and externally recognized	27%
Mostly externally recognized	18%

Not sure/Prefer not to say	0%

6. Would you be interested in converting in-house training into externally recognized credentials?

Response	% of Respondents (n=11)
Yes	64%
Maybe	27%
No	0%
Unsure	9%

6a. If Yes or Maybe, which areas would you most want external certification in?

Response	% of Respondents (n=11)
First Aid & Emergency Response	55%
Trades Pathway or Recognition	45%
Confined Space & Fall Protection	36%
Lockout/Safety Systems	36%
Forklift/Powered Industrial Truck	27%
Equipment Operation	18%
Other	9%

7. Is retraining or skills upgrading something you would consider?

Response	% of Respondents (n=25)
Yes	84%
Maybe	16%
No	0%
Unsure	0%

7a. If "Yes", "Maybe", or "Unsure", choose up to three areas

Response	% of Respondents (n=25)
Skilled Trades & Construction	64%
Manufacturing & Industrial	56%
Healthcare & Community Support	36%
Self-Employment	36%
Transportation & Logistics	32%
Technology & Digital Skills	16%
Business, Finance, & Administration	12%
Not Sure	4%
Other	4%

8. Have you considered self-employment or working for yourself?

Response	% of Respondents (n=25)
Yes	52%
Maybe	20%
No	12%
Unsure	16%

9. What types of support would be most helpful to you right now?

Support Type	% of Respondents (n=25)
Training guidance	88%
Local job opportunities	72%
Resume & interview help	56%
Career planning	52%
Self-employment support	28%
Mental health and wellness	24%
Labour market information	24%
Other	8%

KEY INSIGHTS

Domtar Crofton and WFP Chemainus Worker Needs Assessment

April 2026

Prepared by:

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BRITISH COLUMBIA

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This document summarizes key insights from the Worker Needs Assessment conducted in response to the closure of the Domtar Crofton Pulp Mill and the curtailment of the Western Forest Products Chemainus Sawmill.

The assessment was undertaken to better understand the experiences, needs, and priorities of impacted workers and to inform supports, training options, employment responses, and service coordination across the Cowichan Valley.

Engagement Overview

Insights are drawn from multiple sources collected between February and April 2026, including:

- Over 200 direct interactions with impacted workers through information sessions, job fairs, open houses, and service delivery
- 25 worker survey responses
- Input from frontline service delivery staff
- Partner involvement through information sessions, job fairs, one-on-one appointments, communication through union representatives, and input into survey development

Direct service partners included Service Canada, Vancouver Island University, the Construction Foundation of BC, Build Your Own Future, Community Futures Cowichan, and union leadership. Partner involvement helped workers access information about Employment Insurance eligibility, income support navigation, retraining, certification pathways, employment options, self-employment, and other transition supports. Partner input also helped shape survey questions, so the assessment gathered information useful for service planning and response.

While survey participation was limited, consistent patterns were observed across all sources. Direct engagement and staff observations provide a strong foundation for understanding worker needs and transition challenges, while survey responses add structured context.

Key Insights

1. Workers are transitioning into a more complex labour market
Many impacted workers are entering a labour market that differs significantly from the conditions in which they spent much of their careers. Long-term mill employment often required limited engagement with job search, career planning, or changing labour market expectations.

2. Financial stability is central to decision-making
Workers are focused on securing employment that meets their financial needs. The gap between mill wages and available local opportunities is shaping decisions about immediate employment, retraining, commuting, relocation, and longer-term planning.

3. Worker needs are diverse and distributed across multiple pathways
Workers are considering a range of next steps, including immediate employment, retraining, certification upgrading, self-employment, and retirement. This diversity means that a single support pathway will not meet all needs.

4. Strong interest in retraining, shaped by system access
Workers expressed interest in retraining and skills upgrading across several sectors, including trades, industrial work, and community-based roles. Because no single retraining target emerged, flexible, modular, and short-cycle options may be more appropriate than a single cohort-based training pathway.

5. Many workers require support to re-engage with job search
Many workers require support with resume development, job search strategies, transferable skills identification, and digital application systems. This reflects a gap in recent job search experience rather than a lack of willingness to work.

6. Clarity of next steps strongly influences confidence and progress
Workers who have identified a clear direction tend to demonstrate greater confidence and momentum. Those who remain uncertain are more likely to experience delays, lower confidence, and difficulty navigating available supports.

7. Information and system navigation affect outcomes
Workers often receive information from multiple sources that is not always consistent. Clear, coordinated communication helps workers understand eligibility, timelines, training pathways, and available supports.

8. Impacts extend beyond employment
The closure and curtailment have affected workers at the household level. Workers reported stress related to financial stability, future planning, and maintaining their standard of living, making transition a broader life disruption.

Key Barriers Identified

Several interconnected barriers are shaping worker transition experiences:

- Financial pressure affecting the ability to pursue training, accept lower-wage opportunities, commute, relocate, or wait for suitable employment
- Training system constraints, including limited capacity, scheduling challenges, enrollment thresholds, and inconsistent program availability
- Labour market mismatch between available jobs and previous conditions
- Gaps in externally recognized certifications or credentials
- Limited familiarity with job search processes and current hiring practices

Recommendations for Supporting Worker Transition

The assessment highlights several factors that appear to support more effective transition and inform future planning:

Maintain early and accessible worker engagement
Timely access to accurate information and services helps workers navigate initial uncertainty and identify next steps.

Provide structured career transition and pathway information sessions
Information sessions should help workers understand realistic transition pathways and how training options, employment services, income supports, and community resources connect.

Strengthen employment readiness and labour market navigation
Workers benefit from help adapting to current labour market expectations, navigating digital job search processes, and presenting transferable skills.

Align training and credential pathways with worker demand
Training responses should reflect worker interests, existing skill profiles, credential needs, and realistic labour market opportunities.

Develop targeted employer engagement and job matching opportunities
Targeted employer engagement can help employers understand the transferable value of mill-based experience and improve connections to suitable employment opportunities.

Integrate financial transition planning and household supports
Financial and household pressures should be considered in transition planning, including decisions about retraining, lower-wage employment, commuting, relocation, or waiting for suitable opportunities.

Strengthen coordinated partner response and communication
Aligned communication across organizations can reduce confusion, improve access to supports, and create clearer entry points for workers navigating multiple systems.

Conclusion

Workers affected by the Crofton and Chemainus mill disruptions are navigating complex transitions shaped by labour market conditions, financial realities, individual circumstances, and access to clear information and supports.

Across all findings, alignment between worker needs and the labour and economic realities of the Cowichan Valley appears to play a significant role in shaping outcomes. The recommendations outlined in this document are intended to support coordinated action among employment service providers, training institutions, government agencies, community organizations, sector partners, employers, and union representatives. These insights may support ongoing efforts to improve coordination, access, and outcomes for impacted workers and communities.