

# ELEMENTS

## The Local Politics of Liquidity The Okanagan Water Situation is Critical

*“Water water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.”* – Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Samuel Taylor Coleridge

**We cannot live without water. It’s the most vital part of our being. The average adult body is made up of 70 per cent water, and experts continually remind us to drink up to eight glasses a day to keep ourselves hydrated.**

Water is essential to humans, but it’s easy to be caught in the illusion that it is abundant, or that all water is good water. And what defines “good” has become highly political. Even what water can and should be used for has come under fierce debate – and perhaps no more so in this province than in the Okanagan. One can argue that the politicization of water dates back to the agricultural development of this region. In very real terms, access to water defined wealth. Even today, water permits are granted on a first-come, first-serve basis, and it was the orchardists who received the first permits and continue to hold them today – even in the midst



of massive pressure for land development.

The very nature of those permits meant Okanagan water was first and foremost a commodity, rather than something that required consideration for public health and safety. But as our communities increased in population, people started to make demands on the quality of that water.

The Okanagan Basin Waterscape Poster outlines topics of major importance to water resources in the Okanagan – such as groundwater processes, domestic water use, climate change effects and population growth. It is available free from the Okanagan Basin Water Board [www.obwb.ca](http://www.obwb.ca)

Westbank Irrigation District offers a perfect illustration of the problem. Set up in 1922, the district was designed to service the orchards. But by the late 1990s, residential customers made up

70 per cent of the users – and they weren’t happy. Brown water wasn’t pleasant to bathe in, and it certainly wasn’t pleasant to drink. At a recent event put on by the Okanagan Institute in Kelowna, Westbank Irrigation District general manager Brian Jamieson recalled that the situation was so bad that the local water purveyor was one of the least respected in the Okanagan.

The irrigation district responded by building a \$19 million treatment plant, but it wasn’t easy. Once again, politics played a role. Unlike municipalities, irrigation districts are ineligible for federal or provincial government funding. If users wanted something better, they’d have to pay for it.

And they did. The water of Westbank Irrigation District is now among the best in the region, and it couldn’t have come at a better time. It happened just when B.C. increased its pressure to improve drinking water quality in the wake of the Walkerton, Ontario incident of 2000 when seven died and 2300 became ill from water contaminated with manure.

But once again, what appears to be a straightforward question of safe access to drinking water has become bogged down in conflicting policies that play out in various ways throughout the

Okanagan. In recent months, Lake Country's mayor James Baker has sounded the alarm about the province's proposal to sell off recreational lots on Crown land – even when those lots abut the local community's water supplies.

On the one hand, cottage owners want to own their property, and the provincial government seems willing to pass it on for a price. The fear, of course, is that this opens the door to further development in some of the most sensitive parts of our region. And as Baker pointed out at the Okanagan Institute event, there are no assurances that the provincial government would even monitor any sewage systems. That job, apparently, is now in the hands of private companies. If someone complains, it's no longer clear who would investigate. Public health inspectors were taken off that detail in May 2005.

So where does all this leave a community like Lake Country that is being told by the Ministry of Health (as is every other community) that it should provide safe drinking water?

Meanwhile, experts like Anna Warwick Sears from the Okanagan Basin Water Board argue that we don't even have enough water right now to get our existing population

through our worst fear – a lengthy period of drought. In 2003, the entire Valley suffered through its driest season on record, aggravated even further by massive forest fires. The drought hit Summerland, and its primary water source, Trout Creek, particularly hard. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans got involved because they feared the loss of fish stocks when the community called for more water. Orchardists in the region were asked to cut back by their use by a quarter of their usage.

It's these kinds of competing political interests that makes for what should be a simple situation – safe access to clean water – so challenging. Add to the equation the fact that more and more people are arriving here – and they need water. Good water. And preferably a supply that doesn't come from bottles.

### A United Water Front is Necessary

**The future of the Okanagan water situation is critical.** And one thing is for certain – it has to be tackled from a regionally united angle, not from a series of single entities.

What we do with water will make or break our economic future. We run the risk of depleting our resources if we answer developer demand. We also run the risk of crippling our agricultural base, which forms so much of the Okanagan character. To this day, the Okanagan Basin is one of BC's fastest growing areas and arguably the heart of agriculture in the province. But this industry has an insatiable thirst, accounting for 70 per cent of water use in the Basin.

This is an Okanagan problem. There are solutions, at the private and public level:

- Reduce consumption, and provide incentives for users to do so through such measures as metering – not only for residential but agricultural users.
- Lobby provincial and federal governments to provide financial assistance to irrigation districts and small water purveyors so that they can reliably treat their water.
- Ensure public awareness of water quality by making the information easily accessible on the Interior Health website, as recommended by the B.C. Ombudsman.
- Make low-flow toilets mandatory for every new development in the region.

- Prohibit the use of boats on any lake that provides drinking water.
- Reinstate public health inspection of any and all septic systems abutting a domestic water reservoir.
- Establish a phase-in period for communities to purchase recreational lots located near water reservoirs once leases come up for renewal.
- Place restrictive covenants on any recreational property located next to domestic water reservoirs to guard against increased development.
- Ensure that the Okanagan Nation is part of the process, its various members included as equal participants on any and all boards that have jurisdiction over water.
- Work towards creating a single regional district for the Okanagan that will deal with our common interests with a powerful voice.

We may be separate communities in the Okanagan, but our lakes define us all. A unified Valley voice can make a huge difference in addressing this water issue. ■ KARIN WILSON

#### Resources:

Water Sustainability Action Plan BC:  
[www.waterbucket.ca](http://www.waterbucket.ca)  
 Okanagan Basin Water Board:  
[www.obwb.ca](http://www.obwb.ca)

**Critical  
ISSUES**

The forgoing essay is based on a presentation on water issues hosted by the Okanagan Institute featuring Brian Jamieson, James Baker and Anna Warwick Sears.

The presentation is one of a series addressing critical issues of design, ecology and sustainability. For information on other events: [www.okanaganinstitute.com](http://www.okanaganinstitute.com)