



JUDIE STEEVES

Early warnings, careful scheduling of irrigation seen as key strategies for growers to cope with dry years.

By Judie Steeves

Politicians and water purveyors attending a day-long workshop on drought planning this summer heard about the importance of maintaining a “survival” level of water for perennial plants such as fruit trees and grapevines.

Since agriculture is the single largest user of water in the Okanagan basin, some look to agriculture for significant reductions

in water use during dry years.

However, Ted Van der Gulik, senior engineer in sustainable agriculture management for the agriculture ministry, told participants a fruit tree needs more than 50 per cent of the normal amount of water before production will be impacted.

With less than 50 per cent of normal, there might not be a problem the first year, but there won't be a good crop the next year.

At 25 per cent and less the tree can't survive and there won't be a crop.

Amounts of water required vary from 20 inches a year in the north of the valley, to 25 in the central and 36 in the south.

In years when predictions are that water will be in short supply farmers should irrigate early to fill up the soil with moisture which it will hold

to help later in the year.

Rather than irrigating heavily in September, when spawning fish need the water in streams, farmers should irrigate later in the season to improve over-wintering and to fill up ground reservoirs.

He noted that it's vital that water management planning include allowing for water where the land is fallow, because water must still be available for when that land is needed for food production.

When installing irrigation, it's important to use Certified Irrigation Designers, even though it's not yet required by local government or water purveyors, he advised. That's a drought strategy that he believes could be put to use now.

Irrigation scheduling, ensuring the right amount of water goes where and when it's needed, is another important tool farmers should be

using, he said. Go to www.Farmwest.com for evapotranspiration rates and use the irrigation scheduling calculator. It's free and it will store your information for you, so you can go back to it without inputting the same information each time.

As part of the environmental farm plan process, he says system performance can be assessed; crop and soil evaluated and a schedule drawn up for when to irrigate and how much.

Golf courses require more than double the amount of water grapes need, while apples' needs are somewhere in-between the two, he said.

The workshop, which drew more than 100 and was put on by the Okanagan Basin Water Board, concluded that local water utilities need earlier warnings in years when it looks like water will be in particularly short supply.

Early alerts from the province would help utilities take measures to amend their water budget for more efficient use by consumers, while there's still time to preserve water stocks in high-elevation storage reservoirs for later in the year.

However, by the end of July, it's too late into the peak use period for utilities to make significant changes to how much water is used during the irrigation season.

OBWB water stewardship director Nelson Jatel said trigger graphs on Okanagan Lake would help utilities plan for drought years, early on in the year.

A basin-wide, science-based approach is needed, he said.

Utilities should also all have detailed drought management plans in place and kept up to date.

Bob Hrasko, vice-chairman of the Water Supply Association of B.C. called Okanagan Lake the barometer for the basin and said it's important to control usage so that only the 1.5-metre top layer of the lake is used each year, so the lake isn't mined.

Since the valley has a semi-desert climate, there's not really a lot of usable water in the mainstem valley lakes. "It's flow-through water," he said.

However, the watershed is 8,000 square kilometres and most of the precipitation falls in the hills.

Agriculture uses 58 per cent of the valley's water supply, most of which is stored in upland reservoirs during spring snowmelt for gradual release during the irrigation season, he noted.

Denise MacDonald, chair of the B.C. Fruit Growers' Association water and environment committee, advises growers to work with water purveyors to be proactive and help minimize the impact of a dry spell such as this year.

She suggested using this guide when irrigating:

- keep an eye on the district's water supply;
- look for ways to cut water use without affecting crop yield, quality or plant health:
- keep within the water allotment for agriculture;
- keep equipment in good repair; and
- learn and practice irrigation scheduling.

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