

Partners powerful for Okanagan Basin Water Board

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The importance of partnerships highlighted the Okanagan Basin Water Board's annual meeting in Kelowna.

As the Okanagan faces increasing challenges to its water supply – with aging infrastructure and stronger rainstorms, a growing population and increasing demand for water, uncertain water supplies due to climate change and drought, potential for invasive species – partnerships will be critical in addressing these issues.

"It's through collaboration that we have done the science to understand what we're facing, and it's through working with others that we need to develop and implement the strategies to make sure our communities are prepared," noted OBWB executive director Anna Warwick Sears.

Fittingly, the agency released its annual report entitled "Working Together to Protect our Watershed."

"Partnerships are key in everything we do," explained Warwick Sears, naming some of the highlights from the past year.

The OBWB's Okanagan Water Stewardship Council – presented this year with an Award of Excellence in Water Stewardship by Canada's premiers – is a great example of working together, she noted.

The council is the technical advisory body to the OBWB's board of directors and is made up of representatives from 26 agencies concerned with water (e.g. First Nations, farmers, ranchers, realtors, planners, academics, and many more).

"It was through collaboration that we worked with Okanagan water utilities to develop and then set them up on the online 'B.C. Water Use Reporting Centre' to help keep track of our water supplies," said Warwick Sears, "and through partnerships with local, the B.C. and federal government that we installed groundwater monitoring wells."

By collecting public input and working with several other agencies, the OBWB provided meaningful feedback to the International Joint Commission in its drafting of new Operating Orders for Osoyoos Lake, helping protect the water needs of this valley.

And the partnerships are expanding, she added, noting that working with the business community the OBWB has successfully launched a valley-wide "Make Water Work" water conservation campaign, as well as the "Don't Move a Mussel" initiative to prevent the spread of invasive mussels.

According to Bob Sandford, an internationally respected expert on water and climate policy, the Okanagan is well-positioned to address the issues it's facing. Sandford was this year's special guest speaker and is EPCOR Chair of the Canadian Partnership Initiative in support of the UN's "Water for Life" Decade.

Sandford, a resident of Canmore, told his own personal story about the impact of the floods in Alberta this past June – the impact to him, his friends and neighbours, and a sister who lost her home and everything in it.

"The extreme weather patterns we are seeing globally – extreme rain, and extreme drought – is the new reality," he explained. "We need to start understanding and managing the hydrological cycle – preparing our communities to be resilient. Start restoring our ecosystems and take carbon emission reductions seriously."

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