

Experts share worry for climate change in Penticton



By Penticton Western News

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Extreme weather events like those behind this summer's Alberta floods are the new norm and highlight the need for governments here to take climate change seriously, a water expert warned this week.

Robert Sandford told a public lecture at Okanagan College in Penticton that climate change is most pronounced as "destabilization of historic weather patterns."

"What we're experiencing more and more widely are floods, droughts and fires in the same (water) basin in the same year," said Sandford, who leads Canadian efforts under the United Nations Water for Life initiative and has written several books on the country's water issues.

He also met this week with government officials during his visit organized by the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen in partnership with the Okanagan Basin Water Board and the RBC Blue Water Project.

Sandford said many effects of climate change stem from the shrinking polar ice cap, which has in turn weakened the jet stream that moves weather systems across the continent.

"In the absence of a stronger jet stream, high-pressure systems settle in and don't go away. The temperatures rise, evaporation increases, things dry out and things catch fire," he said.

And warmer air holds more water, Sandford continued, which aids in the creation of "atmospheric rivers" that can dump huge volumes of rain for days at a time as happened in Alberta in June.

"In my view, there is still time, there is still room to move if we wish to preserve what we have ecologically and economically in places like the Okanagan. My caution, however, is it would be wise to get moving," he concluded.

"The thing you want to avoid is ending up having your wealth as a people — as individuals and as governments — taken up by disaster relief and not having that money available to prepare and adapt for the future."

Scott Smith, a soils scientist at the Pacific Agri-Food Research Centre in Summerland, spoke prior to Sandford and said data he's compiled show the Okanagan is trending towards warmer winters with less intense cold.

He agreed that climate change will result in more precipitation, but likely in the form of more extreme events that could put Penticton at risk since much of the city is built on sediment deposited by Ellis and Penticton creeks.

"We are sitting on some pretty active landforms and if we were to get some sort of extreme events, these are the kind of landforms that would really feel those events," Smith said.

Penticton Mayor Garry Litke said the scientists' warnings "affirmed many of the things that we've already been acting on" through the city's climate action committee.

"We've also been very aware of the earlier snowpack melt and the increased need to build our reservoir capacity," he said, adding "that doesn't mean that we're doing everything right."

For example, he's trying to persuade fellow RDOS directors to hire a climate action co-ordinator to develop a response plan for the region.

"We can see that historically there is a chance we could see three or four years of drought, so we need to be planning for all those events," Litke said.

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