



Okanagan Basin Water Board proposes new B.C. water commission

May 14, 2014 - 9:21 AM

A new B.C. water commission to streamline water use reporting and connect water licence rental fees with water management needs is being proposed by the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB). Such a commission would be self-funded and would also be able to provide grants for water projects with only slight increase in current water license fees, according to an independent business case prepared by accounting firm Grant Thornton. According to provincial figures, these fees are currently so low they would add less than a dollar a year to residential water bills.

At Tuesday's meeting of the OBWB, board members voted to send a letter to Steve Thomson, B.C. Minister of Forest, Land and Natural Resource Operations, along with three background papers: the business case for such an agency, an overview of a Water Use Reporting Centre similar to what's in operation in the Okanagan, and case studies of water use reporting in other jurisdictions around the world.

The letter refers to the new Water Sustainability Act introduced in the B.C. legislature in March, and the type of new services that will be required to carry out some of the provisions in the new act. A water commission would be ideally suited to ensure new groundwater regulations and other new provisions can be carried out, said Nelson Jatel, the OBWB's Water Stewardship Director.

"Currently, reporting of licensed water use in B.C. is collected ineffectively if at all," noted Jatel, "However, this new water use reporting software developed by the OBWB in partnership with the province, and now used in the Okanagan and Nanaimo, would allow information on major groundwater and surface water extractions to be gathered efficiently from all over B.C. The software also allows utilities and others involved in water management to use the data for planning and managing the resource." With a new commission operating the web-based Water Use Reporting Centre province-wide, current data on water use in B.C. would always be up-to-date and available, he added.

Looking at the finer details, a staff of 10 could provide these core services. Not only would licence fees cover the cost of the commission's operation without loss of general revenue to the province, but there would be enough left over for a sustainable water management grant program of about \$5 million a year to help with water sustainability planning, strategic water research and support for water license enforcement.

The ministry currently does not have the management framework to meet the new needs of the Water Sustainability Act, OBWB chair Doug Findlater wrote to Thomson, but such a commission, using the water use reporting software developed in the Okanagan, would provide that.

"Building on previous senior and local government investments to develop the Water Use Reporting Centre in the Okanagan, we are in a unique situation to develop a new model that supports sustainable water management, economic development and provides a world-class system for British Columbia," Findlater added.

This proposal is the result of a suggestion made last year to the minister, which he requested the OBWB flesh out for his consideration, noted board member Don Dobson, who also chairs the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council which spearheaded development of the water use reporting tool. "The water utilities have been very supportive," he added. "This approach will streamline fee payments and give much greater value to communities at very little additional cost."

News from © InfoTel News Ltd, 2014

