

Study to map crops in the Okanagan Valley

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It will soon be clear how many growers have turned from tree fruit to grapes, how much water farmers are using and how much water the sector is expected to use in the future.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board and Ministry of Agriculture are mapping crops growing in the North and Central Okanagan this summer in a follow-up effort to the first set of such data collected in 2006.

"It's some of the most valuable kind of information we have," said Anna Warwick-Sears, OBWB executive director, noting the initial maps have been used by everyone from scientists collecting pollen data to farmers.

Agriculture uses 55 per cent of the water extracted and treated in the valley and plants are big water hogs as water evaporates faster from a plant than a water body.

As climate change is expected to increase the duration of Okanagan summers, and the temperatures of the season, the work will include predictive modelling intended to help evaluate how much water individual properties are expected to use in the future, as well as determining what's being used today.

The surveyors are collecting information on the crops grown, soil type, aspect (or the direction the property is facing), slope and elevation.

"If someone's got really sandy soil then you'll need to water it more than if it's clay soil, so with this type of information we can fairly accurately estimate how much water that piece of property or that crop might need—both under the current climate regime and in the future," said Warwick Sears.

The study has been nominated for a 2014 Land Award, an honour bestowed by the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia.

The researchers are collecting visual data on the ground and comparing it to aerial photographs.

They will move on to the South Okanagan next summer.

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