

THE DAILY COURIER

Valley increasingly vulnerable to climate change, forum told



Contributed: Robert Sandford

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Climate change is threatening the Okanagan, a forum on water resources heard this week.

Robert Sandford, Canadian chairman of the UN's Water for Life initiative on water policy, warned an audience at the Water and Biodiversity Research Forum in Kelowna Tuesday the Okanagan is increasingly vulnerable to climate disruption.

People have changed Earth's life-support systems, so it's vital we begin to manage our water resources more carefully, Sandford said. He believes the world is in a new geologic era, one in which humanity is creating changes that are affecting water resources and weather, causing flooding and other disasters.

In the Okanagan, the positive implications include a successful wine industry, but this is balanced against a potential doubling of evaporation in the valley bottom and an increase in fire hazards, even if precipitation increases.

Around the world, we are seeing droughts terminated by floods, he said.

"A lethal combination of factors could lead to a climate disaster," he warned.

Because residents of the Okanagan live in an arid region, yet use more water per person per day than anywhere else in Canada, the impact of changes in climate will be particularly felt here, he said.

Sandford pointed to flooding in Calgary and Toronto this year and said, "Maybe water is trying to tell us something." In the Okanagan, Mission Creek had three high-water events in 2012, and the highest flows on record in 2013.

Sandford urged we get moving on conservation of water and aquatic ecosystems and prevent invasive species such as zebra mussels from getting a toehold, to maintain biodiversity.

“We need to take this seriously,” he said. “By protecting and restoring natural ecosystem processes, we can make a difference at the local level. It’s there that we have the power to make changes — at the watershed/basin scale. There, it’s critical to ensure the resilience of nature is restored because it can slow the effects of hydro-climatic change.

“Preserving our prosperity will depend on us deciding to take steps to manage our land-use activities and change public policy,” he warned.

The forum was organized by UBC’s BRAES Institute and sponsored by the Okanagan Basin Water Board.