

From the desk of the Mayor

Why happy calves must be prepared

▼ COMMENTARY

MAYOR KEITH FIELDING

The "mock" water bills that we have been receiving each quarter during 2009, will soon be replaced by the real thing: quarterly water use charges that reflect actual household consumption, as measured by our water meters.

The rates the municipality charges for water consumption are not designed to generate profit. Neither are they designed to fund water system expansion – that requirement is met through Development Cost Charges and through parcel taxes tied to the Water Master Plan. Rather, the rates are designed to ensure that we recover the

present cost of delivering water to our homes.

Delivering clean, drinkable water involves the municipality in a variety of expenditures: we have pipes, pumping stations and reservoirs to maintain, chlorination procedures to manage, information systems to maintain and monitor, creek flows and reservoir levels to regulate and

adjust, and staffing costs to recover. Our current method for recovering water system costs is to charge a quarterly flat rate fee levied equally to all domestic consumers. This approach yields the required level of cost recovery (approximately \$830,000 per year) but it does not provide an incentive for consumers to conserve because however much water we use, the charge is the same.

Council is currently finalizing the rates that will govern the future quarterly charge to consumers. In doing so it is taking into account the different needs of single family home owners, apartment

owners, and farmers and orchardists, and is attempting to ensure that no one is unfairly penalized for responsible water use. With our water meters installed, and the appropriate rate structures in place, we can pursue our goal of ensuring that those who conserve water pay the same, or less, than they did in the past, while those who are wasteful pay more.

But, you may say, we have all been told that Peachland has plenty of water, so why is it necessary for us to conserve water and be charged for what we use?

The answer is that Peachland's water shed

is not an isolated system. Like all watersheds in the Okanagan it is one element in an inter-connected whole: a whole that is called the Okanagan Basin Water System. And, as with any system, what happens in one part of the system affects what happens in all other parts.

To use an imperfect analogy, it is rather like calves feeding from mother cow: depending upon their feeding point, some calves may be getting a nourishing supply, while others may be getting nothing at all, with the result that each will have a very different view of the world.

I should perhaps point out that I know nothing at all about cows, and I recognize that any sensible calf sucking air would probably move immediately to a different teat. However, the point of course is that there is only one 'cow' and all 'calves' (communities drawing water from the Okanagan Basin) share the total available supply. Furthermore, that supply cannot be taken for granted: it is under threat from high levels of consumption, population growth, and climate change.

Readers wanting to know more about the rationale for all Okanagan communities needing to promote water conservation would do well to visit

the website of the Okanagan Basin Water Board www.obwb.ca. For now, however, I will end with a quote from that website:

"Large seasonal fluctuations in water availability occur naturally. Climate change is expected to bring more intense storms, increased drought cycles, higher lake evaporation rates, greater evapotranspiration in vegetation and crops, and a longer growing season resulting in increasing irrigation demand.

Changes in forest cover (due to mountain pine beetle infestation and associated salvage harvesting operations) will also alter the timing and quantity of runoff of water in the Okanagan Basin. Given climate change, rapid population growth, and the fact that most water in the Basin has already been allocated to some use, conflicts over water are likely to intensify.

Water is one of the most precious and important natural assets in the Okanagan Basin. Even though the Basin is endowed with several large lakes, the supply of clean, reliable water is inherently limited by the semi-arid climate, which produces minimal precipitation and high evaporation. According to Statistics Canada, the Okanagan Basin has the smallest per capita availability of freshwater in Canada. Water shortages have already occurred in some areas of the Basin, and are expected to occur more widely and frequently in the future."

And so, even the happiest of calves must be prepared: the supply is dwindling!

