

Okanagan water predicted to be scarce

Westside Weekly

The Okanagan is among the biggest water hogs of Canadian communities, but has one of the lowest supplies.

Every day, 1,500 bottles of water are used per person on average, with top usage during August.

"Higher than expected population growth can increase demand faster than climate change," said Anna Warwick-Sears of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, updating West Kelowna council on water issues.

We operate under a "myth of abundance" because we are a community of lakes, she said. But one of the fundamentals of the OBWB is that we can use only the water that is replenished; we can't drain the lakes dry.

Water supply is extremely variable, said Warwick-Sears, noting that 1997 was the wettest year on record.

"A water supply challenge is expected in 2010 unless weather turns cool and wet pretty darn soon," she added.

An intergovernmental partnership is

behind a study of Okanagan water, and data will be rolled out later this month. Early results of the study show that agriculture uses 54 per cent of the water consumed, but domestic outdoor use sucks up another 24 per cent.

The domestic outdoor use is largely cosmetic, Warwick-Sears said. She noted a changed water ethic may be necessary. Local governments can help by focusing on raising awareness, landscaping requirements and storm-water issues.

A new website offers residents xeriscaping ideas that are customized for the Okanagan. It is www.okanaganxeriscape.org.

Coun. Bryden Wimsby asked if the Okanagan is getting pressure from south of the border for more water.

Warwick-Sears said our obligation is to keep enough water in the channel that heads south to allow salmon passage.

"I've heard there is interest in the population there for dialogue on irrigation. One of our studies will show that

there is little here to share. Everyone has to increase water efficiency—that's the wave of the future," she said.

Snowpack is currently at 89 per cent of normal in the Okanagan, Jim Edgson, regional district area director for Central Okanagan West, takes his own snowpack measurements, and reports that it is as low as he's ever seen it.

Warwick-Sears encouraged West Kelowna council, saying, "You are way ahead of other communities in water management, with such things as your metering program."

The OBWB has jurisdiction over the entire valley from Armstrong to Osoyoos, covering parts of three regional districts. It was put in place 40 years ago to deal with water-use conflicts.

The fundamental principles include that everyone needs water, we are communities connected by lakes, we can only use what is replenished, patchy shortages affect the economy and there is a need to look at the whole system and work together.

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