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Okanagan water quality faces increasing user pressure

By [Judie Steeves - Kelowna Capital News](#)

Published: **March 23, 2010 5:00 PM**

Updated: **March 23, 2010 5:35 PM**

Water users in the Black Mountain Irrigation District pay just 50 cents for 200 one-litre bottles of top quality water, says its manager, Bob Hrasko.

Since one person needs two litres of water a day, they only pay a dime for more drinking water than they'll need in a month, he told those at a panel discussion on drinking water on World Water Day Monday.

The price is similar in other areas of the Central Okanagan.

Joining Hrasko on the panel was Okanagan Basin Water Board executive-director Anna Warwick Sears, who pointed out that the valley is an interconnected chain of lakes and waterways, so that whatever happens to water in the north impacts those in the south.

The importance of such chain reactions needs to be better communicated to the public, she said.

Kelowna Museum executive-director Wayne Wilson coined the phrase the Okanagan Urban Region to describe today's valley, following a history lesson on the evolution of water management here from 1860, when it was considered a private resource.

Large-scale, regional development has become the order of the day in the Okanagan, and large volumes of water are now moved over large areas, by public utilities, to serve it, he said.

Gwen Bridge of the Okanagan Nation Alliance said native concerns are that water is alive and it needs to be protected in its quality.

Despite 7,000 to 10,000 years of settlement in the valley, and a policy of 'first in time, first in right' with regard to water licences, she pointed out that lack of water rights has been marginalizing for members of the ONA.

On the other hand, in the U.S. water quality is an aboriginal right, legally, she said.

There are also headwaters issues for First Nations people, she said.

"They have spiritual values in the headwaters; values of solitude and meditation; of prayer and of the importance of gathering plants."

Interior Health drinking water officer Rob Birtles of Interior Health warned that population growth will have an impact on water quality.

It's important that drinking water sources are protected, he concluded.

Environmental impact biologist Vic Jensen with the environment ministry said our water bodies can be contaminated by compounds that don't even originate in the valley, such as dust and atmospheric pollutants that enter the valley from elsewhere.

In addition to those contaminants we know about like mercury and PCBs, there are many which we don't even know much about, such as estrogens.

He also expressed concern about water quantity, pointing out that it's a myth that there is abundant water in the valley. "It's in a small, arid valley and Okanagan Lake only flushes every 50 years or so. We need to ensure that what goes into it doesn't compromise its sustainability."

The Okanagan is at a turning point and vigilance is needed to ensure water is managed in a sustainable way, he warned.

He added that the loss of urban streams needs to be dealt with or they will disappear underground.

Finally, Bob Sandford, Canadian chair of the UN international decade Water for Life, a national partnership initiative, talked about his initial impressions of the Okanagan Basin water issues, since his arrival the previous day.

The Water for Life initiative aims to advance long-term water quality and availability issues in response to climate change in this country and abroad. First, he commended his hosts for the excellent quality of Kelowna's drinking water, but he warned that the valley has a growing

vulnerability to persistent drought.

He warned that nature needs water to supply its biodiversity needs, and it is at our peril that we take from Nature for our own use. Before over-allocating water from lakes and streams, ensure there is first adequate water for nature, or the valley could move to further desertification, he warned.

He also warned about the perils of jurisdictional fragmentation and institutional territoriality, although he did note that multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral bodies like the Okanagan Basin Water Board are critical to help overcome such dangers.

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