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Low Okanagan Lake levels continue pattern

Published: **April 20, 2010 7:00 PM**

Because of early melting of the mid to low-elevation snow around the valley this year, the level of Okanagan Lake has flattened off instead of rising as it would normally from now to July.

That's just one indication of an unusual pattern of water levels in the valley this year, according to a panel of experts who made presentations at a monthly webinar co-ordinated by the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

Oleg Ivanov, regional hydrogeologist with the environment ministry, explained that annual runoff from melting snow around the Okanagan Valley is significant because most of the annual inflow to Okanagan Lake occurs between Feb. 1 and July 1 as a result of snowmelt.

Normally the lake's level is managed within a metre between full pool and the low level, but it's at the low end now, even though a portion of this year's runoff is already in the lake.

In addition, there's less than the normal amount of snow in the hills around the valley still to melt and come down, and some of that will be absorbed into the ground this year because of the early melt of low-elevation snow.

"The question is what will happen in the coming months," said Ivanov.

And that was the summary of most of the presenters: whether this summer will be a second drought year in a row for the Okanagan is largely dependent now on weather conditions in the next couple of months.

Meteorologist Doug Lundquist of Environment Canada wouldn't commit himself to a forecast, but did say the outlook is for above-normal temperatures in April, May and June this year, with a fairly good chance (40 per cent) that precipitation would be below normal.

However, even if precipitation is normal, he noted that the outlook for warmer weather means people will want to irrigate more, both agricultural crops and domestic landscapes, so more water than normal would be used.

Allan Chapman, head of the province's river forecast centre, said it's already known that we're in a dry phase of the drought classification, but the severity of it will depend on the rain that typically falls in May and June in the Okanagan.

"If it's dry to the end of May, there will be a higher level of drought recognition."

He also warned that seven of the past 10 years have seen below-normal inflows to Okanagan Lake.

Chapman also warned that we need more snow data in the Okanagan basin.

Today, there are half the measurement stations that there were in the 1980s, and that loss is hampering forecasts.

In particular, he said we're missing low to mid-elevation sites.

Regarding groundwater, Ivanov presented data from monitoring wells in different sites in the valley, which showed, in several instances, wells at record low levels of water.

He noted that groundwater interacts with surface water and low groundwater levels will affect surface water levels as groundwater aquifers recharge.

OBWB executive director Anna Warwick Sears concluded the session with this comment: "It's important for everyone to be thinking about using water more efficiently, whether you're an industrial user or using it to water your lawn."

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