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NEWS

▼ WATER RIGHTS

Trade/sell scheme applauded

JUDIE STEEVES

STAFF REPORTER

Presentations on the controversial question of whether water rights should be traded and sold on the open market received an excited reception at the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council meeting Thursday.

Three guest speakers from three different universities addressed the issue in presentations to the technical advisory committee to the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

Currently, water in B.C. is controlled by the provincial government through the Water Act, which is nearly a century old and being updated.

Ron Griffin, a water resource economist from Texas A&M University, believes water marketing has a big role to play in the future of water management.

First, he said, you set aside water for environmental purposes, then you assign it transferable property rights and allow transactions, overseen by government.

In B.C., he noted, no value is paid for raw water, only for the infrastructure to deliver it and for cleaning it, and that's wrong, he believes.

He was astonished to discover there was no low flow shower head in his hotel here.

In Texas, he said many irrigation water rights are now held by urban users, transferred through a Watermaster's Office.

Sales and leases of water rights are common.

People can pay \$6,000 for an acre-foot of water, but it's then theirs, permanently.

Perhaps the Okanagan isn't ready for such a sys-



Rod Griffin

tem, he said, pointing to flat rate water bills.

And, he said he's shocked at the way groundwater users are permitted to just 'steal' water from surface water users, without paying and without licenses.

Henning Bjornlund, Canada Research Chair, water policy and management at the University of Lethbridge/University of South Australia, warned that the Okanagan's area-based entitlements to water lead to little encouragement to improve efficiency of water use.

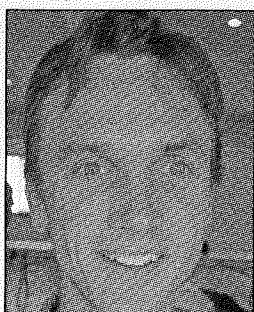
"You have an opportunity to do something now. Don't put it off," he advised.

There's little flexibility with perennial plantings of such agricultural crops as tree fruits and grapes because there can be significant losses under severe low water conditions, he noted.

He warned that the Okanagan could lose its attractiveness if agricultural land is replaced with buildings. Even tourism is dependent on water.

"Conflicts in the medium term are inevitable," he said.

Water markets are the most viable way to take the hard positions on water because it's between the buyer and the seller, and no politicians have to end up with egg



John Janmaat

on their faces.

They're not easy to introduce, he admitted, but they're necessary, he believes.

First, he said you have to define the water that cannot be traded, such as water for the environment and a reserve of water for agriculture, based on the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Land and water rights should be separated. There should be a separate right to own and right to use water.

B.C. Water licenses accompany property, so when land is sold, the licenses go with it.

John Janmaat, an environmental/resource economist at UBC Okanagan, outlined how the province's current system of water allocation, labelled FITFIR, or First in Time, First in Right would play out in the event of a water shortage.

It means a user with senior or older water rights could be downstream of a user with junior or newer rights, in which case that junior user's water could be cut off in order to ensure the senior user got his share.

He said he had B.C.'s comptroller of water rights interpret the Water Act as far as whether the seniority applies to the stream licences are on, or to the whole watershed



Henning Bjornlund

affected, and he was told the whole watershed is connected, so seniority in water licenses applies to the whole watershed.

With FITFIR, he noted, the environment is generally last, because its licences are more recent.

Legally, he suggested a drought management plan could be invalidated by the demands of a downstream user.

Generally in the Okanagan, agricultural licences to water are more senior, he said.

He said the system is a drought management system, even though many water utilities have drought management plans which are not based on it.

"It's probably not what we want," he admitted, but he believes legally, that's what we have currently.

Since household use of water doesn't appear to have any priority, domestic users would be the first to lose their water rights.

To change it, an acceptable alternative must be found, and water marketing is one alternative, he said.

However, a number of council members objected to the idea that water can be privately owned, and they contested assertions that drought management plans could be usurped by FITFIR.

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▼ WATER STEWARDSHIP MEETINGS

Presentations videoed for the Net

Members of the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council found themselves being filmed at Thursday's meeting as a unique pilot project to reach out to the public got underway.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board has begun video-taping presentations made to the council so those videos can be posted to the board's website at www.obwb.ca this summer for public viewing.

The council is the technical advisory committee to the board of politicians so frequently hears presentations from experts in different facets of the water field

on issues of the day.

"The Okanagan is the perfect storm, with its naturally scarce water supply, and with increasing demand and decreasing supply as a result of climate change and population growth," explained Nelson Latel, water stewardship director for the OBWB.

"One question the council is trying to address is how to apply best practices, from throughout North America, to support water management in the Okanagan."

Thursday's presentations on water marketing were the first to be taped.

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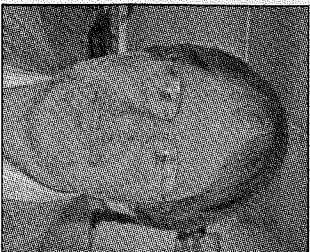
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