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Water planning workshop a hopeful first step



First Nations spokesperson and doctoral student at UBC Okanagan Marlowe Sam addresses those present at the Similkameen Valley Water Planning Workshop held last week In Princeton.

By [Steve Arstad - Keremeos Review](#)

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The Similkameen Valley Planning Society put together a Similkameen Water Planning Workshop that took place at the Riverside Centre in Princeton on Wednesday, August 25.

The meeting, hosted by Area "H" Director and SVPS member Brad Hope, was mostly informational in nature, seen as a first step towards a comprehensive water plan for the whole Similkameen Valley.

Attending were members of the Upper and Lower Similkameen Indian Bands, politicians from Keremeos, Princeton and regional areas in the Similkameen, as well as the Osoyoos mayor.

A wide variety of issues surrounding water management was discussed, with speakers ranging

from local MLA John Slater (recently appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Water Supply and Allocation to doctoral student Marlowe Sam, who spoke to the assembly about First Nations (Syilux) views on water sustainability.

“Water is the number one restrictor on development in the province,” said Slater. Action is being taken at the provincial level on revamping the Water Act, a document that is 100 years old.

“Things were different then,” Slater noted, adding that changes were coming to the Water Act.

“We’re not trying to over regulate, but we have to make sure water rights are protected,” he told the gathering. He promised that after information had been gathered and options for change outlined, there would be another round of public consultation.

Conrad Pryce, Section Head of Water Allocation, Water Stewardship for the BC Ministry of Environment also spoke at the meeting, providing some statistics and facts regarding the Simikameen Valley.

“The SVPS initiative is similar to what is being undertaken by the Regional District of Kootenay - Boundary,” he told the group.

“One option to developing a water plan would be to add “water chapters” when needed, in order to cover aspects of water management that need further clarification.

“The Similkameen River basin is 200 kilometres long, and most of the water flow occurs during spring freshet,” he said, adding that the Similkameen River has been “fully recorded,” meaning that any new water licenses issued would come with restrictions attached.

The traditional approach to water use - first in time, first in rights (FITFIR) is being assessed as part of the water act revision, and government agencies are lobbying for more measuring stations.

“Fifty-six per cent of Similkameen water use is for agriculture,” Pryce told the meeting. “There are 800 known wells, 440 within the Keremeos - Cawston area.” Pryce noted that studies on the Similkameen indicated that the effects of well drawdown on the Similkameen River flows were not significant, the opposite of which is the case in the Kettle River system.

“Groundwater extraction is having an effect on the Kettle River- it’s not as big an issue in the Similkameen, but this is an issue that must be part of the new regulation,” he said.

In terms of monitoring water licenses and useage, the MOE tended to be reactive to problems, assessing useage issues when a complaint was made. John Slater noted that there was “no

sense putting regulations in place if we are not going to monitor them.”

Ted Van der Gulik, Senior Engineer for BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, told the assembly about the ministry’s efforts to develop a huge database of information that ties the Okanagan Valley’s crops ,and acreage under production and irrigation into a climate model that will provide agriculturalists with acreage specific irrigation information. The database would allow for maximum efficiency in irrigation management in terms of efficiency, uniformity, and scheduling.

“Irrigation consumes 80 - 85 per cent of the Okanagan’s water use,” Van der Gulik told those assembled, “most of which is completely lost to transpiration.”

A model for the Similkameen has also been developed, but is currently lacking necessary climate data. Van der Gulik said the information would be available in the fall.

“The Similkameen is getting a bargain,” he said, “the model for the Okanagan cost \$500,000, and \$100,000 was spent on the Kettle Valley model. The Similkameen is getting a lot of information for very little cost.”

Van der Gulik also noted that a weather station would prove useful in the Similkameen, suggesting that one could be set up for \$4,000, at an annual operating cost of \$300.

Other speakers included Marlowe Sam, a doctoral student at UBC Okanagan who studies indigenous water rights and customary indigenous law.

Quoting a passage from Plato to compare the environmental damage done from an invading army in his time to that in the Similkameen since the white man’s arrival, Sam spoke scathingly of the changes brought about by European incursion.

“It has been 200 years since the European incursion in to the land of the Syilx. The environmental damage has been rapid.

The Syilx people have occupied the Similkameen for at least 9,000 years - the white race continues to ignore this history

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