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UBCO crowd learns land claims are complicating water planning

By [Jennifer Smith - Kelowna Capital News](#)

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Policy makers and scientists planning for the future of B.C.'s water supply gathered at UBCO this week for a water symposium jointly held on three campuses.

Video conferencing with colleagues at the University of Victoria and UNBC in Prince George, the session was described as the first brainstorming venture needed to build a provincewide strategy for the scientific community as it tries to provide the data needed to manage B.C.'s water supply.

The meeting represents the first stage in plans to make good on commitments from B.C.'s water plan, Living Water Smart, in which the provincial government stated it would provide a science strategy for dealing with water.

"We know we have climate change coming. We know we have uncertainty about the climate and we know, in general, what the trends are going to be," explained Bernie Bauer, UBCO professor in Earth and Environmental Sciences and member of the organizing committee.

"We know there are going to be land-use changes that need to be taken into account.

"We know we're facing changing hydrology and changes to how watersheds are going to work," he said.

Trying to deal with those changes in a cohesive way presents a communication challenge bar none as the scientific community and political bodies try to streamline their approaches so as not to duplicate work.

Even the Okanagan Basin Water Board, for example, is a completely unique entity, a product of the three regional districts involved, that has no counterpart in the Lower Mainland, on the Island or in the north, with which to confer.

There are challenges getting government and university researchers working from the same page. But no challenge seemed as great as the one presented by First Nation's land claims, Bauer admitted.

Land claims have placed legal challenges on water resources at the federal level, those who attended the conference heard.

Though water resources are dealt with provincially, the question of who owns the water became a major talking point.

Aside from the ownership issue, there is also a different cultural approach to navigate.

"The First Nations sort of spoke to the need for traditional knowledge and how that was different to applying scientific knowledge to management," said Nelson Jatel, water stewardship director of the OBWB.

Jatel attended a portion of the conference and said what he took from the discussions was that the approach will have to incorporate both avenues of knowledge.

Protecting streams and riparian habitat has major economic implications, aside from the obvious environmental concerns, and he believes this science strategy will need to incorporate traditional knowledge from the First Nations involved in order to succeed— regardless of who wins out in the court battles.

Bauer's take on the events seemed to concur.

"The time for finger-pointing is over," he said.

"We, the public citizens, can't continue to point to the federal government, the provincial government to say why haven't you done this?"

"Local groups need to partner together to make decisions themselves and then call upon government to achieve those.

"I think that's the correct outcome of a democracy.

"It's not just voting people into place and saying why aren't you doing anything," he added.

The overall tone of the three-day event, Bauer said, was optimistic.

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