

# Drinking water source protection open for discussion

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

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A workshop on source water protection will be organized by the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council to involve all watershed users, in a bid to have them all work together to protect drinking water in the Okanagan.

The decision followed an afternoon of discussion by council members from around the valley on issues affecting the protection of water quality at its source.

That source is in the hills around the Okanagan, where springs and melting snow flow into streams, wetlands, ponds, lakes, reservoirs and rivers before continuing its downhill journey into the mainstem lakes in the bottom of the Okanagan Valley.

It is throughout that journey that grazing and wallowing cattle; timber cutting and hauling operations; people on motorized recreation vehicles; developers and builders; boaters and swimmers and wildfire all affect the ultimate quality of the water that comes out of your tap.

The Okanagan's watersheds are multi-use watersheds, not closed to other uses, and all these activities, plus many more, affect the source of drinking water for thousands of people in the bottom of the valley.

Valerie Cameron chairs the Southern Interior Drinking Water Team and is regional manager for water stewardship for the Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations ministry. She told council members that B.C. is unique in that sweeping changes to drinking water legislation in 2003 left the health ministry running the show as far as water quality is concerned.

Despite that, the health ministry does not have an army of staff on the land base, she pointed out.

"This is a big region with a lot of complex issues," she noted.

"There's little legislation governing water quality in the other ministries."

However, there are lots of other agencies that impact water quality, including the ministries of tourism, agriculture, transportation, forests, highways and environment.

As well, she is concerned there is a weak link between local government and the provincial government on water issues.

In a presentation to the council, aquatic biologist Heather Larratt said the true cost of forested landscape in a watershed as filtration is enormous. "It's worth billions," she said.

In other parts of the world, watersheds are being bought back by water purveyors at a cost of billions of dollars because that's the most cost-effective way to protect their water sources.

There are significant economic losses to disease outbreaks carried by water systems, so it makes economic sense to protect the watersheds, she explained. As well, she said land values increase with buffer zones around water sources, and tourism benefits as well, she said.

She recommended 85-metre vegetated zones be protected around water reservoir lakes and transmission streams, with no build, no disturb, no machine restrictions.

As well, she recommended intake protection zones be designated within the distance a contaminant could travel in two hours under 80 per cent of the wind events in a year, from such activities as new storm water outfalls, multi-slip marinas, houseboat book-docking and floating commercial operations.

Solvej Patschke, source water protection hydrologist with public safety and protection in the new FLNRO ministry, emphasized that the source is the first barrier in a multi-barrier approach to protecting drinking water, so it's very important.

The discussion on source water protection and a workshop on the issue will continue at the next monthly meeting of the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council, which is a technical liaison committee of the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

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