

OKANAGAN WATERWISE: Water conservation aids local food security



Kevin Day inspects a microjet sprinkler. He uses microjets as well as drip irrigation to conserve and be efficient with water use.

corrine jackson photo

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Summer is perhaps the best time of year in the Okanagan.

The sun is shining. People seem more relaxed and friendly, happy to pick up local fresh fruits and vegetables at small fruit stands, farmers markets and in the local grocery stores.

The food tastes better – having fully ripened before being picked. It’s healthier – with Canada having some of the strongest regulations on sprays farmers can use. And, it’s better for the environment, both with controls on spraying but also not having been shipped and trucked 1,000s of kilometres, or more.

Of course, none of this is possible without the hot Okanagan sun, and water.

“Food grows where water flows,” quips long-time Okanagan farmer Domenic Rampone, quoting a bumper sticker he once saw.

“It’s true. Without water, we don’t eat.”

But for the farmer, the summer, especially August, can also be one of the most difficult times. After months of tending to their land and crops, and as they begin to see the fruits of their labour – literally – they also see the competition for water ramping up.

First, there’s the need to ensure there’s enough water for fish to successfully return to our creeks and spawn. But then, residents are also looking to keep their lawns green, their flowers alive and perhaps ensure any food crops they’re growing, also don’t wither.

There’s only a finite amount of water available. And, when we use water for one purpose, there’s less available to use elsewhere.

The significance of local food production can be seen in a 2006 B.C. Ministry of Agriculture report that found 48 per cent of all foods consumed in B.C. are B.C. grown.

The benefits of local food production are many, as outlined above. But in addition, there’s the added benefit of food security.

In the short-term, we can continue to buy our food from elsewhere, but the fact is that other regions are facing the same – or worse – water issues. It makes sense then to ensure healthy food production in the Okanagan.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture report, as B.C.’s population grows, the amount of irrigated farm land needed to continue to meet that 48 per cent of locally grown food production will have to increase as well.

According to Rampone, farmers in the Okanagan are moving more towards the use of water meters, drip irrigation and micro-jet sprinklers, and soil moisture sensors to ensure they are only using as much as their crops require. Changing over to these new systems is costly and government rebates to assist in these efforts would be appreciated. But, he adds, “we all need to do more to save water.”

Ultimately, it comes down to a need for us to recognize the food-water connection and our need to seriously consider what the best use of our water is, ensuring we use it as efficiently and effectively as possible, adds Rampone.

“Our food tastes better, it’s healthier, it’s better for the environment, and it’s better for our economy. And, it’s better for our water.”

“Society has to recognize the importance of local food production and support it, buy it. And, by saving water, ensure it’s sustainable.”

For more on Okanagan WaterWise, visit www.okwaterwise.ca.

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