

# Future of Okanagan water use at stake

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

Published: **September 20, 2011 2:00 AM**

The stakes are high: In a valley with the least water per capita of all water basins in Canada, there are many who want their interests to be top priority, including residents of the U.S. and trans-boundary native bands.

For the opening this week's international Water Science Forum in Osoyoos, Osoyoos Band Chief Clarence Louie said: "The Okanagan Nation wants to work with you to ensure we can always swim in these waters and eat the fish in these waters."

But he was blunt as well: "Either you invite us in the door or we're going to kick down the door."

By way of explanation, he pointed to history and warned, "We're not going to just stand on the sidelines again. We won't be silent. We will have as much of a say as anyone else in the future."

He told of the opening in the last century of the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River, where the Indians were invited to don their traditional regalia and attend the opening ceremony, even though they had not been consulted when the white man decided to erect that barrier to fish passage up the river and into the Okanagan Valley, prohibiting the salmon from migrating.

He said that on Thursday, the valley's chiefs will meet in Westbank to discuss the water that flows down the valley and across the border.

He noted that the international boundary is an imaginary line dividing the Okanagan peoples, so that today the Colville Tribes are in the U.S. and the Okanagan Nation are in Canada, where once they were one.

And, when Chuck Brushwood spoke for the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, he added: "We are all salmon people and salmon need water."

Louie explained that the salmon "indicate whether we're doing our job. We have to pay attention. They're an important part of our lives."

Plants and animals require good water and they are the first to suffer, he said. “It all starts with water.”

Okanagan MLA John Slater agreed it’s all about the water, and also that there’s only one water source serving an area from Vernon to Oroville, Wash.

“We need to control it. We need drinkable water to take care of our future. Water is the number one restriction on growth. If we screw this up we’ll be in big trouble,” Slater warned.

From south of the border, Washington Senator Bob Morton noted they’re already having difficulties with water supply in his state.

Some of the challenges include the need for more power production and dams to store B.C.’s spring runoff for agricultural production on the U.S. side of the border, he said.

“By 2050, we’ll need to double agricultural production to feed our own nations and the nations of the world. Fresh water is our greatest asset. It’s more precious than gold,” he added.

The forum concludes today, with scientists and lay people from both sides of the border making presentations on water issues.