

Westside NEWS

THE ENVIRONMENT

Water board digging into aquifers

B.C. doesn't license groundwater extraction, and OBWB needs more data

By DON PLANT
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Water experts hope to keep track of how much underground water is available in the Okanagan Valley by monitoring a sensitive aquifer in Joe Rich.

Crews broke ground on the fire hall property at Goudie and Sun Valley roads last week and drilled 140 metres deep into an aquifer. Scientists will measure how much water is down there each year to prepare for growing demand as the population rises.

Environment officials are worried several Okanagan sources of groundwater are vulnerable to depletion.

"Groundwater is one of the biggest unknowns in this Valley," said Anna Warwick Sears, who heads the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

Thousands of Valley residents depend on groundwater as their only source. Because B.C. is one of the only provinces that doesn't license extraction, experts lack an accurate measure

of how much is being drawn out.

Meanwhile, recent research suggests several Okanagan aquifers, including Joe Rich's, are vulnerable due to a limited water supply from changing rain and snowfall, and more human use.

"The water of this Valley is all connected," said Warwick Sears. "Knowing where and how much water we have will help ensure a sustainable supply."

The groundwater is supplied by the same source as surface water — snowmelt that flows down the mountains and trickles beneath the surface. Climate scientists fear that as global temperatures rise and more people move into the Valley, less water will be available.

Joe Rich residents are unable to run their dishwashers and washing machines at the same time. Some wonder how the community can withstand greater demand from more people.

The Joe Rich well is one of 15 Okanagan aquifers identified as sensitive. Other monitoring wells have been

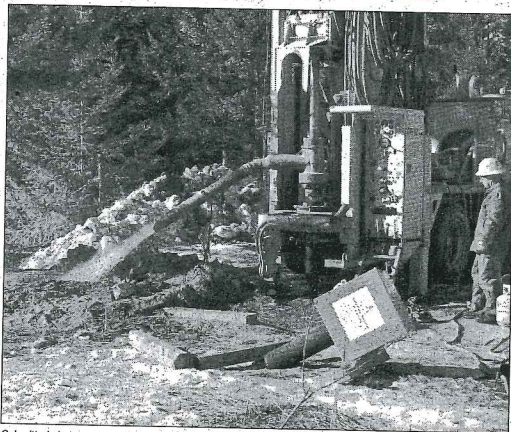
drilled since 2010 on Anarchist Mountain near Osoyoos, two in Oliver, two near Keremeos, and one in Spallumcheen.

Others are proposed on UBC Okanagan land, in Ellison, West Kelowna, Summerland and Penticton.

The monitoring wells will help communities manage their groundwater supplies, and help them plan for subdivisions and developments that will draw more water from adjacent aquifers. The data gathered from the Joe Rich well will provide a better picture of how much underground water is available, said regional district director Patty Hanson.

"Drilling wells into this bedrock aquifer can be a hit-and-miss prospect for water . . . (The data will) help us plan for the future so that we can ensure sustainability of this precious commodity."

The typical cost of building each monitoring well is \$38,000. Several government agencies are contributing



Submitted photo

Water gushes in Joe Rich on Friday after crews drilled 140 metres into an aquifer. Scientists hope to learn more about how sustainable the region's underground water supply is by monitoring aquifers in the Valley.

to the Joe Rich project, including provincial ministries of environment, forests, lands and natural resources, as

well as Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Environment Canada and several Okanagan local governments.