

Panel on water offers showers of solutions



A panel discussing solutions to water issues spoke to an overflow crowd Tuesday night. Pictured are (left to right): Anna Warwick Sears, Ted van der Gulik, John Wagner, Javan Bernakevitch, Yehalem Metiku and Michael Nickels.

Judie steeves/Capital News

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Published: **March 21, 2012 11:00 AM**

Updated: **March 21, 2012 11:48 AM**

The Okanagan's concerns about water pale in comparison to those in countries such as Ethiopia, where rain is unpredictable at best.

That was made clear by Yehalem Metiku of Ethiopia, who is a representative of the Kelowna-based Partners in the Horn of Africa, which does volunteer community development work there.

As part of Canada Water Week activities, the Okanagan

Basin Water Board presented a panel of speakers Tuesday night to an overflow crowd at Summerhill

Pyramid Winery, on U.N. World Water Day, to discuss water for food.

Metiku was one of the speakers, along with permaculturists Javan Bernakevitch and Michael Nickels, UBCO anthropology professor John Wagner, Ted van der Gulik of the provincial agriculture ministry and Anna Warwick Sears of the OBWB.

Although there are other water-related concerns as well, Metiku noted, "In our part of the world, it's whether you get it or not that's of most concern."

Although Ethiopia is similar in size to B.C., it has a population of 85 million, compared to four million here.

Bernakevitch believes the solution lies in permaculture which he explains as a combination of two words, permanent and agriculture; a science and design system that is ethical-based, regenerative and based on nature.

He pointed out that people can become rich simply by dropping their needs.

Water is life in permaculture, he noted. It's also important to take care of the planet, and think of it as a bank from which you can only withdraw what you put in; so limits must be set on consumption.

Nickels suggested in water-short areas all water needs to be captured, with such techniques as swales, so it can be used for making food; and clearcutting forest is a sin, because of its impact on the health of the landscape.

Nickels pointed out that water storage could be stocked with fish to provide more protein for people, and in its flow down hill, power could be created. Such storage would also provide firefighting capability in the hills, he added.

Schools should be teaching kids how to grow food, so that they would better value it and the process involved, including the need for water.

wagner pointed out that in B.C. the issue of food security is less critical because of the Agricultural Land Reserve, which prevents farmland from being built over. “Maybe one day we’ll need it for ourselves, not for food we export,” he added.

Van der Gulik warned that it would be challenging for us to increase production as much as would be needed in order for B.C. to be self-reliant. Using figures from 2005, he said B.C. farmers produce 48 per cent of all foods consumed in B.C. and 56 per cent of foods consumed that can be economically grown in B.C.

More than half a hectare of farmland is needed to produce a healthy diet of food for one person for a year. That would mean we must increase the amount of acreage that has access to irrigation by 49 per cent by 2025.

“No water is (necessarily) tied to land in the ALR,” he pointed out.

Providing more upland water storage is one answer to adapting to Climate Change, but the options are limited.

“There aren’t many more places we can store water upland,” commented Sears, so it’s important Okanagan residents conserve water used on lawns so that less additional storage is needed in the future.

She said the good news is that progress is being made, with a new xeriscape website at: www.okanaganxeriscape.org filled with examples of drought-tolerant plants, classes about dryland gardening and those who have had successes in xeriscaping.

As well education programs are being developed for schools.

“We live in a dry place and we need to behave like it,” she concluded.

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