

Okanagan water study soaks up accolades

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A massive, three-year study into water supply and demand in the Okanagan valley has earned the Okanagan Basin Water Board, along with 13 partnering agencies who participated in the study, an award from the British Columbia Water and Waste Association.

The water board and other organizations involved in the study have been given the Award for Excellence in the Water and Waste Community. This year's award was the first of the new annual award given out by the association.

While there were a number of other nominations for the award, the nine-person panel, consisting of representatives from government and scientific communities, was unanimous in deciding to give the Okanagan water and supply demand study the award.

Daisy Foster, chief executive officer for the British Columbia Water and Waste Association, said while there were a number of other projects vying for the award, the Okanagan study shone through in its ambition.

"There was the complexity and the scope, and the valuable data collected, and the collaborative effort that was involved," Foster said. "The project laid the groundwork, and it's likely the most valuable initiative that's been undertaken to support sustainable water management in the Okanagan."

The project, which looked at how much water is in the Okanagan valley system and how it is used, created a number of modeling tools that can be used to study things such as water use in different environments, said Anna Warwick Sears, co-chair of the project.

"For example, we can calculate, using the model, how much water would apple trees use during a given year given a set of weather conditions, how much water grapes would use during this set of environment conditions," she said. "Then, it puts it all together and calculates how much they use this year, here's how much they might use during a drought like the 1930s."

"It really helps a lot for people who are making decisions for how much water should be licensed for a creek or a lake. It also helps water utilities plan for the future if they know how much water different sectors are using."

As well as for licensing, Warwick Sears said the study has already found many other uses, such as dam safety training, regional growth strategies and aquifer studies.

However, what Warwick Sears said she found surprising in the study was the amount of water that people living in the Okanagan valley consume.

"I think we calculated it being 675 litres a day per person, and the average in Canada is 329 litres a day per person," she said. "There's reasons for that, and the biggest one is that we like to have green lawns, and we live in a place that has hot, dry summers; basically we live in a place I've jokingly called the irrigation nation."

Foster said that the purpose of the award is two-fold — the recognition of excellence and getting the study known by the public.

"Our mandate is to encourage great practices, and when we see excellent things like this, to raise the profile of it and showcase it to the community out there, and hopefully this will become a model for other regions — not only in B.C. but beyond," she said. "We think this project has the potential to do that."

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