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OKANAGAN MAYORS, FIRST NATIONS LEADERS GATHER TO PREPARE FOR CHANGING CLIMATE

Kelowna, B.C. – Weather patterns around the world, and right here in the Okanagan, are becoming increasingly unpredictable. Weather is fluctuating between flooding and drought and our aging infrastructure is being challenged to keep up with demands, often needing costly emergency fixes.

Understanding the need to address these issues, Mayors, First Nations leaders, Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs), and senior engineering and planning staff from throughout the Okanagan, gathered on Friday for a full-day discussion on “Adapting to Climate Change in the Okanagan – Reducing Water Risks.” The peer-to-peer workshop, held at Kelowna’s Best Western Inn, provided a look at what the region can expect from climate change, offered practical solutions to prepare communities, and allowed attendees to make connections with their counterparts in the valley to help develop an effective, coordinated response.

The workshop was co-chaired by Lake Country CAO Alberto De Feo and Peachland CAO Elsie Lemke and sponsored by the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB), the Okanagan Sustainability Institute and Forrex.

“Elected officials and staff are often invited to attend events to talk about climate change, but the talk seems to be at a higher level and the solutions often less tangible,” noted Lemke. “What inspired me to be part of this is that the discussions offer practical solutions.” De Feo agreed, noting community leaders are ready for and need solutions now.

Speakers at the workshop included OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears who presented the latest findings from the Water Board’s Okanagan Water Supply and Demand research. It is clear from the research, she said, that population growth in the valley and greater variability in water supply underlines the need for greater valley-wide management of our water.

“There are things that are out of our power to control, such as climate and population growth. However, there is much we can manage,” noted Warwick Sears. BC Stats projects that the Okanagan’s population is going to grow 30% within the next 22 years (and 45% in the Central Okanagan). Also, it is understood that climate change is going to increase the risk of floods, of drought and summer water shortages, she added. “Recognizing these factors, and understanding the impact they will have on water supply and demand allows us to prepare.”

Among the workshop speakers providing practical solutions to local government officials was Alex Cannon, with University of Victoria’s Pacific Climate Impacts Consortium, speaking on the various planning tools available to prepare communities for climate change. Alyssa Bradley, with Young Anderson Barristers and Solicitors, presented on the legal mechanisms already in place for local governments to address climate change and water conservation in their communities. And Liam Edwards, with B.C.’s Ministry of Community Development, talked on provincial programs available for infrastructure planning and funding.

Putting it all into context was Robert Tremblay with the Insurance Bureau of Canada, who described trends being seen by the insurance industry with a growing number of claims related to aging infrastructure that fails after climate-related disasters.

“We are concerned with the significant increase in insurance claims from extreme weather-related events,” said Tremblay. “There are disturbing trends with more than \$1 billion per year in claims in sewer back-ups, and for the first time in Canada, three consecutive years of over \$1 billion a year in extreme weather-related losses.”

In an attempt to address these concerns, the IBC is developing a municipal risk assessment tool for local government use.

“In a way, these insurance claims, which are showing increasing severity and frequency, are the canary in the coal mine,” Tremblay said. “It shows that the climate is no longer stable and there is an imperative for adaptation. Our infrastructure needs adapting and local government is on the front lines of being able to address this the most effectively. We believe the insurance industry can be part of the solution,” he added.

Warwick Sears agreed, adding that local governments will be in a much better position to prepare their communities when there is a collaborative effort. “That’s what today is all about.”

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