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OKANAGAN BASIN WATER BOARD ANNUAL MEETING FOCUSES ON VALUE OF WATER

Kelowna, B.C. – The value of clean and abundant water – and our tendency to undervalue it – was in the spotlight today as the Okanagan Basin Water Board held its Annual Meeting today at Rotary Centre for the Arts in Kelowna, just a short distance from perhaps the valley’s most iconic image, Okanagan Lake.

“When we take a moment to think about the importance of water, people get it. Life can’t exist without it,” notes OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears. “But we also take it for granted here in the Okanagan. We have less water here than anywhere in Canada, but we use more. This year’s Annual Report ‘Recognizing the Value of Water,’ focuses on the value and importance of water – to our economy and to our way of life – and the value of water management.

“There are many changes happening in the world and we need to be ready,” adds Warwick Sears. The Water Board spent the past year building partnerships and focusing on projects that improve our understanding of water in the valley. In addition to its work in milfoil control and assisting local governments with sewage facility upgrades, projects included drilling groundwater wells to monitor water supplies in sensitive aquifers. Buoys were launched on Okanagan Lake to monitor evaporation, the Osoyoos Lake Water Science Forum was held to ensure Okanagan voices were heard as a new Canada/U.S. treaty for water is negotiated, and Make Water Work – a valley-wide campaign was launched, encouraging outdoor water conservation.

“We have a lot of tools and information to prepare us for a changing world, where we have a growing population and are fluctuating between extreme rains and drought. We are working to get these tools into the hands of local government to help prepare our communities. We also need the public to recognize the value of the water we have, the real cost to protect and deliver clean water, and their role in helping conserve and keep costs down,” says Warwick Sears.

“We’re really entering a new kind of world,” echoes Chris Wood, author and guest speaker at the Annual Meeting. Wood, an award-winning journalist with a specific interest in the critical role water plays in the economy, was invited to speak to the value of water and the challenges facing us locally and globally.

“This new world is what is behind climate change, food shortages, and changes to our planet’s natural systems – its animals, plants and the places where they live. While this can be worrisome, it also presents great opportunities to Canada and the Okanagan,” explains Wood.

While traditional food baskets of the world, for example parts of Europe, Asia and even parts of the U.S., start to empty for lack of proper water, the rest of Canada and the Okanagan will fill that void. But with changes in water supply around the world and the ability to grow food, come changes in population centres and where people choose to live, he adds.

BC Stats estimates that the Central Okanagan’s population will increase up to 45% by 2036. Similar increases are likely in the valley’s other urban centres. But Wood and Warwick Sears explain that this is

conservative and could be higher. “A lot of places are going to become less desirable to live in the next 10 to 15 years,” says Wood. “People are going to follow the water. I think the Okanagan will attract many migrants. But you are also in a position to attract the highest value of migrants – people who have technology backgrounds, etc.

“If you can maintain the water supply you have today, if you can stop watering your lawns, you’ll be fine. But you can’t do both,” notes Wood. “Hats off to the OBWB for the work it has already done, but there’s lots more that needs doing and it’s going to take everyone, those working in government, in businesses, and residents to do their part.”

Warwick Sears agrees. Looking at the year ahead, she says that there are several projects on the horizon that will go a long way in helping the Okanagan address its water issues. For example, she points to today’s presentation about funding to Okanagan Nation Alliance from the RBC Blue Water Project. The funding will be used to create a water strategy that brings together the Syilx community and all of the communities within their traditional territory.

Also, she notes, today’s announcement of UBC economics professor John Janmaat as the Leading Edge Endowment Fund (LEEF) BC Regional Innovation Chair in Water Resources and Ecosystem Sustainability is an important step. This position, funded in part with an endowment from the OBWB on behalf of the three Okanagan regional districts, will facilitate research to help address Okanagan water challenges while becoming a centre of expertise to help address global water issues.

“We are facing serious challenges in the Okanagan. We are also better equipped today than ever before to address these issues, but we need everyone at the table. Learn more - check out our websites at www.obwb.ca and www.okwaterwise.ca. Join the conversation on our Facebook and Twitter pages, attend our events. Join a group that promotes water conservation and protection. We invite everyone to get involved.”

The Water Board’s 2012 Annual Report can be found at www.obwb.ca/annual_reports.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) was established in 1970 as a collaboration of the three Okanagan regional districts – North, Central and Okanagan-Similkameen. The board’s purpose is to provide leadership for sustainable water management by protecting and enhancing the quality of life and environment in the Okanagan Basin, from Armstrong to Osoyoos.

- 30 -

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