

Water Management Plan recommended for Okanagan

By Kelowna Capital News

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We're approaching a time of more water conflicts in the Okanagan basin warns hydrologist Don Dobson, who has been studying the Okanagan's watersheds for decades.

He was commenting on the need for a Watershed Management Plan to be undertaken here during discussion of it at the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council meeting last Thursday.

Dobson is vice-chairman of the council, on which he represents the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C.

He told council members there has already been a lot of work done at the basin level that could be fed into a WMP. Such plans are sub basin specific, he explained.

He cautioned there can be confusion between a Watershed Management Plan, of which a number have been completed now in the Okanagan, and a Water Management Plan, but he explained that they are quite different, although the one is a critical component of the other.

Water Management Plans can be quite complicated, he noted, and there will be competing interests, however, he said it's important to proceed with one in order to manage water in the Okanagan.

Nelson Jatel, water stewardship director of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, to whom the OWSC reports and makes recommendations, explained that a successful WMP relies on cooperation between different actors within the watershed.

"A strategy of inclusivity and clear commitment throughout the development of the plan will help to ensure its long-term viability," he commented.

The Okanagan Sustainable Water Strategy prepared by the council in 2008 recommended that a WMP for the Okanagan be prepared within three years.

In the interim, such studies as the Water Supply and Demand Study have been completed, and they provide a technical foundation for the WMP.

"The vision of a WMP is to manage the quantity, quality and timing of water in the hydrologic cycle to avoid and reduce future conflicts between water users, and between water users and in-stream (environmental) flow requirements in the Okanagan watershed," said Jatel.

Now, he said, the council must decide what should be included and what excluded from a WMP.

The plan is a comprehensive and integrated watershed plan which is intended to proactively deal with conflicts between water users, conflicts between water users and in-stream flow needs and risks to water quality.

It is a tool introduced in 2004 under the province's Water Act, but so far, only one formal WMP has been submitted to the province and none have been approved.

The first step would be an identification of issues, reasons and purposes for such a plan.

One of the compelling reasons for the Okanagan to consider embarking on the process, is that it is the only available mechanism to protect groundwater in this province, said Jatel.

As well, the WMP can be a structure under which to develop a valley-wide response plan for severe water shortages, he said.

jsteeves@kelownacapnews.com

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