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Canada-U.S. commission strikes agreement on Okanagan water flows

Okanagan water board cautiously optimistic over renewed deal

BY GORDON HOEKSTRA, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 31, 2013



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“We are cautiously optimistic, although you never know what the unintended consequences might be,” Okanagan Basin Water Board executive director Anna Warwick Sears said of the agreement, announced Thursday by the International Joint Commission, a Canadian-U.S. entity.

In late 2011, fears surfaced in the Okanagan over water supply after a U.S. study, one of several submitted to the joint commission, recommended guaranteeing water flows through the Zosel Dam in Washington state.

That could have meant less water for the Okanagan, a concern because water is not only a critical resource for the growing population and tourism, but also for fruit and grape growers and a re-emerging sockeye salmon run.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board — whose members are drawn from the Okanagan's three regional districts and first nations tribal council, the Okanagan Nation Alliance — had argued there was not enough robust information about what climate change will mean to the future water supply to guarantee flows to the U.S.

The renewed agreement does not guarantee flows to the U.S., although it does call for consideration of fisheries during drought years when setting water levels in Osoyoos Lake.

The new agreement does not have an expiry date, but it must be reviewed within the next 25 years.

The previous agreement lasted 25 years.

Warwick Sears said they hope to see continued opportunity for public engagement in water levels resulting from the agreement.

International Joint Committee commissioner Rich Moy promised to engage watershed stakeholders and keep them informed of reservoir operations and water levels.

“Cooperation is an ongoing process,” Moy said in a news release.

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