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World Water Day in Kelowna - Is Our Water Supply Limitless?

by Ben Gumienny

Today is World Water Day, and here in the Okanagan, we tend to think that water is an ample natural resource that we often take for granted. Will our clean water supply be unlimited and easy to access? It's probably not something that the average citizen thinks about every day. When we turn on the tap or the hose, we simply expect it to work – but there's a lot more that goes into the sanitation and distribution of water than you might think.

On a global scale, water is a precious commodity. The need for drinking water is obvious but perhaps just as important, is the use of water in irrigation for the sake of agriculture. Will there be enough food to supply the ever-increasing world population? A big part of the answer to that question lies in the ability to supply the necessary water.

Speaking with several of the key figures at the different water utilities in the Okanagan, one quickly gets the impression that there is more scarcity and challenges facing the Okanagan's water supply than is widely known.

“(Water) Utilities struggle with knowing that many individuals have the illusion that there is water abundance in the Okanagan, and with growth projections that have no upper limit,” said Darwyn Kutney, General Manager of Glenmore Ellison Improvement District.

Kutney went on to say that, “While Okanagan Lake is very large, it would take around 80 years to fill. Continuous effort is required on the Okanagan Sustainable Water Strategy, prepared by the Okanagan Basin Water Board, to ensure that our water future is not one of endless shortages. People have to come to understand the true value of water. “

“Many people in BC do not realize that it costs a considerable amount to treat raw water to Canadian drinking water standards,” said Toby Pike of South East Kelowna Irrigation District, “The infrastructure needed to distribute the water is aging and very expensive to replace. The arid nature of the Okanagan Valley will require water suppliers to have progressive demand management programs and infrastructure to adapt to the increasing variability expected as a result of climate change.”



Anna Warwick Sears, the Executive Director of Okanagan Basin Water Board, agreed, feeling that awareness needed to be raised amongst Okanagan citizens about the value of water.

“On a certain level, I think it's very intuitive how precious water is. Everyone drinks it all the time, they bathe in it, they're grateful that we have access to clean water in this great country,” Sears said. “The problem is that great lengths have been taken to make people feel secure about their water so they don't worry about it. This isn't bad in itself, but they don't realize the thousands of people behind the scenes in the Okanagan that work to make sure the water is clean. In a way, clean water supply is something that we want people to be able to take for granted, but there is also a necessary personal responsibility.”



Photo by [Savanna Ferguson](#)

This personal responsibility is especially important when it comes to keeping the lake and streams clean. Most people are good citizens who wouldn't dump pollutants into the lake. However, they may not realize that something as simple as over-fertilizing their lawn can inadvertently cause pollution as well. When they water their lawn, the excess water runs into the curb and gutter system and carries that fertilizer into larger bodies of water, like the lake.

Warwick Sears suggests a few simple ideas to take care of our water sources:

1. Picking up after your pet
2. Reducing chemical use
3. Taking care not to tear up hillsides around streams with bicycles and dirt bikes

On a global scale, increasing attention has been paid to water scarcity over the past decade. However, many aquifers continue to be depleted or damaged from overconsumption, improper well construction, or fracking, which has led to problems like ground subsidence, reduced aquifer storage, saltwater intrusion, and chemical contamination. Surface water continues to be treated as a limitless resource, with forest clearing in the headwaters of major river systems affecting everyone downstream.

“Too many people only look upstream to see how much they can take, and view downstream as a place to dump wastewater.” said Darwyn Kutney. “Ultimately, we are all downstream of each other, and we need to start treating our water resources with that thought in mind.”

With the importance of healthy agriculture so dependent on proper irrigation, many developing countries are finding that it can be a significant challenge to marshal the resources needed to develop reliable water supplies. This greatly affects global food security in the long term.

This puts even more emphasis on local supply of food, as it can be expected that many places that we source food from, like Mexico, California and South America, may eventually channel their food supply to meet their own needs and those of the nations around them.

“This is why the water board focuses so much on supporting agriculture, making sure there is water for irrigation and protecting agricultural land,” said Warwick Sears. “Our world population is expected to grow from 7-9 billion people and local supply will be more important than ever.”

“People always ask me, ‘Will we run out of water?’ That depends on how we use it. A lot of water is wasted in the Okanagan. Ultimately it is more about usage than supply. In general, over the long term, the public will need to become more engaged in all kinds of water issues and that’s what World Water Day is all about”

For more on the global issues surrounding World Water Day [CLICK HERE](#).