

Growers seek support



By Vernon Morning Star

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Okanagan orchardists are looking to civic leaders to help keep the industry viable.

The B.C. Fruit Growers Association is making the rounds to local municipal councils to discuss issues of importance, including housing for foreign workers, water, invasive pests and support for the Sterile Insect Release program and starling control.

"Agriculture is the main industry in the Okanagan with new plantations and new technology," said Jeet Dukhia, BCFGAs president and a BX grower.

Farm housing is a subject being dealt with locally in Coldstream. An application will be coming forward from a local orchard for additional housing.

"We do have one major grower who is looking at additional houses on their property," said Mike Reiley, the district's director of development services.

With growers increasingly reliant on labourers from Mexico, there is a need to provide somewhere for them to live. But the challenge, according to Dukhia, is a lack of government funding in B.C.

"In Washington State, the government has provided \$100 million towards worker housing," he said, adding that there needs to be a study on the issue.

In terms of water, the BCFGAs is pushing for more reservoir investment to ensure there is sufficient supply for crops. It also wants a regional approach to water management.

"We need more of a master plan. That's what they've done in Washington," said Glen Lucas, BCFGAs general manager.

Juliette Cunningham, a Vernon councillor and Okanagan Basin Water Board director, believes there is a need to focus on local food security.

"The issue of agricultural water is upper most on our agenda and we understand how important it is," she said.

Rob Sawatzky, Vernon mayor, is encouraging the BCFGAs to take its various concerns to senior government.

"Those are large issues that at the local level we don't have the mandate for," he said.

But Coldstream Mayor Jim Garlick believes municipalities can have a role in lobbying for agriculture.

"I think we can have conversations about this at the Union of B.C. Municipalities (convention)," he said.

Pat Pimm, a Peace River MLA, was recently named B.C.'s agriculture minister. He is the seventh person in the portfolio since June 2008.

"We have invited the new agriculture minister to the Okanagan. He said he is busy, 'So why don't you come to Victoria?'" said Dukhia.

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