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NEWS RELEASE

OKANAGAN WATER BOARD ANNUAL MEETING FOCUSES ON WATER MANAGEMENT IN AN INCREASINGLY INTERDEPENDENT WORLD

Kelowna, B.C. – The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) held its Annual General Meeting at the Laurel Packinghouse in Kelowna today. The theme this year, “A Watershed in the World,” recognizes the growing interdependence of watersheds and that the decisions we make here not only affect the Okanagan, but other watersheds outside our boundaries as well, as we are affected by them.

“I used to joke that ‘No watershed is an island,’” chuckles Anna Warwick Sears, Executive Director for the OBWB. “Even though a watershed is a geographic boundary useful for managing our waters, we are increasingly finding ourselves affected by things happening outside our watershed, including invasive species, changing weather patterns due to global warming, and population growth.

“We can’t ignore what’s happening around us, and at the same time we have to be good citizens and recognize that our actions do affect surrounding watersheds, in Canada, the U.S. and the world.”

In an ongoing effort to build bridges, collaborate, and learn from and share best practices with others, the OBWB invited Dr. Amber Manfree, a researcher at the Center for Watershed Sciences at the University of California, Davis, to present the keynote address. Manfree spoke on the lessons learned in water and environmental management from the front lines of California’s five-year drought.

Sears noted that Dr. Manfree has a unique and valuable perspective, having worked with experts in various fields of science and policy on drought and flooding, invasive species, species at risk and protection, including fisheries restoration. These are the same issues we are concerned with here in the Okanagan, she added.

“California is where we get a large proportion of our food. It is also a major global economy. Their success and failure with water is going to affect our food supply and economy directly,” said Sears.

“While I work with people who look at things on a smaller scale, I gravitate to looking at things on a larger watershed and even historical level,” said Manfree. “My background is in historical ecology and watching how things change.

“If we looked back, two or three lifetimes, people would be astonished at the changes that have occurred on our landscape. And yet, as humans, we think the way something has been is the way it will always be. But landscapes have always been in flux and will continue to be.”

Some of this is natural, and some of it is human-caused, she added. “In California, we have massively altered our water systems and this is causing a cascade of problems. Our changing climate is also affecting weather patterns.”

The result, she explained, is flooding in some areas, and not enough water in other areas causing problems for fish, farm crops, people and more.

“We’ve been avoiding looking at things, the impacts of our actions. But the longer you wait, the fewer options you have,” Manfree added. “We must reorganize how we approach problem solving. There’s going to be unexpected events, but the level of damage they cause is something we can control.

And while Manfree notes that change is sometimes difficult, for example choosing to move out of a floodplain or not build in a fire prone area, or change crops to suit the water now available in an area, there are examples of people acknowledging the need to do things differently and doing it. In Napa Valley, she added, wine growers removed 20 acres of vines worth millions to help reestablish wetlands and aquatic function in the area, understanding that a healthy ecosystem benefits all.

“The Okanagan is fortunate to have an agency like the Water Board that is working on a scale that allows flexibility, and an organizational structure that encourages strong dialogue on these issues – with government, farmers, residents and others, all at the table,” Manfree added.

Manfree’s presentation was followed by a recognition and celebration of such dialogue – the 10th anniversary of the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council. The council is the Water Board’s technical advisory body made up of representatives from 28 water stakeholder agencies who volunteer their time monthly to provide independent advice and policy recommendations for sustainable water management in the Okanagan. Agencies include the BC Fruit Growers and BC Cattlemen’s Association, BC Wildlife Federation, Water Supply Association of BC, Okanagan Nation Alliance, Environment and Climate Change Canada, B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, UBC-Okanagan, Okanagan Mainline Real Estate Board, and others.

“The council is certainly one of our strengths,” noted Sears, adding that the diversity of the membership and the expertise has been essential in the Water Board’s ability to move forward on numerous projects, from providing input to water policy, to research, to on-the-ground projects that improve our water.

Sears also presented the Water Board’s Annual Report “A Watershed in the World” highlighting progress made by the agency on several projects throughout the 2015-16 year. These include: research to better understand the valley’s groundwater supply, Environmental Flow Needs work to determine the water needs of fish, Eurasian Milfoil control, expanded communication initiatives for example with the Make Water Work water conservation and Don’t Move A Mussel campaigns, as well as an extension of the Water Board’s direct services to Okanagan local governments including assistance with the development of drought plans.

“All around us, and across North America, things are changing – from the weather, to the water laws, and everything in between,” Sears said. “Some of these changes are challenging, some positive, but we want to help our Okanagan communities be ready. California provides some extreme examples and some great solutions that we can learn from.”

As in the past few years, the annual meeting also served to acknowledge this year’s “Make Water Work Champion,” recognizing the Okanagan community which collected the most pledges per capita to conserve and Make Water Work this summer. This year, the District of Peachland won the title. Peachland Mayor Cindy Fortin was on hand to accept the honour and be presented with a plaque.

A copy of the Annual Report can be found at
http://www.obwb.ca/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2016_obwb_annual_report.pdf.