

Not enough data to support water metering proposal

By [staff1](#) on [January 6, 2016](#)

Two former Osoyoos mayors are speaking out and raising concerns about a proposal to introduce universal water metering in Osoyoos.

At this point, town council has not made any decision to proceed with the idea.

A consultants' report presented to council in October, however, appears to suggest metering would be the most effective way to reduce water consumption in line with provincial targets.

Tom Shields, who served as mayor for nine years in the 1990s and early 2000s, argues that metering would result in many people opting for parched lawns, which would leave the town looking shabby.

Having Osoyoos as a green oasis in the surrounding desert makes the town a draw and improves business, he believes.

Stu Wells, who was mayor from 2008 to 2014, is passionate about water and is a former chair of the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB).

He thinks there are too many unknowns and the data that would inform a major decision like this is incomplete.

Both former mayors are concerned about the \$2 million price tag to install universal metering, even if senior levels of government would pick much of the cost up.

In 2015, Osoyoos consumed an estimated 2.1 billion litres of water. That's "billion" with a "b." And the largest contributor to this consumption is summer lawn irrigation.

People like their green lawns.

There are certainly people who agree with Shields about the merits of green lawns and there are others who disagree.

Some people argue that the arid, desert-like environment is precisely what makes Osoyoos so unique and attractive to visitors. These people rip out manicured green lawns, replacing them with xeriscaping and cacti.

But throughout North America, green lawns are engrained in our culture. Many see green lawns as a basic human right.

It is harder to argue with the points Wells makes about lack of data.

B.C. as a whole has a disturbing lack of information about the size and long-term trends of groundwater resources – something the province is moving to correct.

And Osoyoos is no exception.

We simply don't know the impact of our water consumption on neighbouring aquifers. Nor do we know the extent to which our groundwater sources are affected by the artificially maintained level of Osoyoos Lake.

While the consultants say that metering reduces consumption by 20 to 25 per cent, they don't provide comparisons between consumption in Osoyoos and other communities, such as Oliver, that have universal metering.

In theory, metering is a good idea. It makes water users pay according to what they consume – just as we pay for such other resources as gasoline or electricity.

Those who consume less pay less, and those who consume a lot pay more.

There is an incentive to conserve.

About three quarters of residents in larger Canadian municipalities have water meters and more than half those in communities the size of Osoyoos do. And the trend is moving towards more adopting them.

But much of the impetus for the metering proposal comes from the B.C. Living Water Smart Initiative targets that call for an efficiency increase of 33 per cent by 2020 from a baseline year of 2010. Osoyoos has actually already achieved 70 per cent of this target without meters.

Without knowing how our consumption in 2010 compared to similar communities, however, the 33 per cent target is arbitrary.

Similarly, water needs from community to community vary greatly depending on local evaporation rates, which vary with climate.

As Wells puts it, the water initiative is taking a “one-shoe-fits-all” approach.

Clearly there were problems with last summer's water restrictions. The consultants acknowledge these only led to a marginal reduction in consumption. And the town's inability to enforce the restrictions led some residents to resent that their “fudgerbudger” (Wells' term for cheating) neighbours were getting a free ride.

But \$2 million is a lot of money. The case for bringing in universal metering has not yet been made.

Council would be wise to seek better data and public input before moving ahead with this idea.