

By Editor | February 13, 2016

Federal funds flow to Okanagan for water sustainability



The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) has secured a \$397,000 grant through the federal Gas Tax Fund, helping better understand the water needs in a region known for its water challenges and Canada's largest population growth. The announcement was made Friday in Kelowna.

Thanks to this funding, a two-year study will begin looking at the Environmental Flow Needs – or the water needs of fish and aquatic ecosystems – in the Okanagan. This phase of the project will include approximately 10 stream-by-stream studies, using flow monitoring equipment in streams identified as important for fish habitat throughout the valley. The work will be a partnership between the OBWB and Okanagan Nation Alliance's (ONA) Fisheries Department and the B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations.

"Water is precious in the Okanagan, where we have one of the lowest rates of water available per person than anywhere in Canada, but have one of the highest rates of use in the country," noted Doug Findlater, Chair of the OBWB. "Through this grant, the Water Board, ONA and provincial ministry will be conducting the largest Environmental Flow Needs study in Canada. This is an essential process needed to sustainably manage the waters of this valley."

“Through the federal Gas Tax Fund, the Government of Canada allows communities in British Columbia, and all across Canada, to fund local infrastructure projects and strategic priorities that best meet their communities’ needs,” said Kelowna-Lake Country MP Stephen Fuhr, speaking on behalf of the Hon. Amarjeet Sohi, Minister of Infrastructure and Communities. “The federal funding announced today will help the OBWB, which serves the three Okanagan regional districts, to plan ahead and prioritize the water needs of fish and aquatic ecosystems, helping ensure the sustainability of the Okanagan,” he added.

According to the OBWB’s Executive Director, Anna Warwick Sears, the need for this project was identified back in 2010 when the agency completed Phase 2 of its Water Supply and Demand Study. “Since then, concerns have continued to grow about the number of water licences on Okanagan streams, so we started working with the province on how to make the best licencing decisions. But then we both realized there’s a critical information gap – we need to know the needs of fish before allocating more licences. In fact, B.C.’s new Water Sustainability Act will require environmental needs be taken into consideration,” she explained.

“As we reflect on the drought of last summer and the competing needs for water, and as those needs continue to multiply with population growth, this project is aimed at helping make the best water use decisions possible,” Sears added. It will help the province with water licence decisions, but it will also help local governments make better informed development and infrastructure planning decisions. And, it can also help in fishery recovery efforts.

“Instead of waiting to see the fish gasping in the streams, this will allow us to know how much water they need,” said Sears. “It’s like an advanced warning system, letting us know when and where restrictions and regulations are needed.”

“The Okanagan Nation holds constitutional rights including those related to our syilx Water,” stated Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, ONA Chairman. “For decades the Syilx Peoples have been developing watershed-based processes and policies to ensure our water sustainability is addressed and informed by our traditional ecological knowledge in a meaningful way.”

“Water is one of the world’s most vital resources, and that’s why it’s so important to study the timing, quality and quantity of water flows in order to maintain a healthy balance between the needs of the ecosystem and the residents of the Okanagan,” added Steve Thomson, Minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, and MLA Kelowna-Mission.

In British Columbia, the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) administers the Gas Tax Fund, in partnership with Canada and British Columbia.

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