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Thinking about water ~ "water is the source of all life."



Water on their minds Conrad Pryce, Regional Director Brad Hope, MLA John Slater, Dr. Anna Warwick Sears and Ted van der Gulik are united in protecting water.

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Maynard photo

By [Dierra Maynard - Similkameen Spotlight](#)

Published: **August 31, 2010 1:00 AM**

A year of drought like the one Australia has been experiencing is enough to give anyone reason to pause and think about water. As talk of climate change reaches more and more ears and observations match the predictions more Canadians are aware of the need for change. Canada is a country that is wealthy with water. British Columbia leads the way.

"We have to preserve what we have," said Regional Director Brad Hope in his opening statements to a crowded room at the Riverside Theatre last Wednesday. Representatives of many different organizations and committees joined together for an intensive look at water.

The gathering was called simply a "Similkameen Water Planning Workshop." An opening prayer was offered by Chief Robert Edward of the Lower Similkameen Indian Band while a traditional welcoming was given by Nancy Allison of the Upper Similkameen Indian Band. Hosted by Director Brad Hope, the workshop explored many aspects of water conservation and preservation.

MLA John Slater and Parliamentary Secretary for Water Supply and Allocation relayed his experiences with the Okanagan Basin Water Board to the audience. "I am really passionate about water," said Slater. "Water is the number one issue in restricting settlement. We need to start responding to current and future water challenges by modernizing the Water Act. It is an essential part of implementing Living Water Smart." Living Water Smart is a website endorsed by the provincial government (www.livingwatersmart.ca). "We have a strong desire for continued community, stakeholder and First Nations involvement in groundwater regulation," continued Slater. "Right now there is a divergence of opinion on water allocation and we need to have better cross agency coordination and communication."

Conrad Pryce represented the Ministry of Environment through the Water Allocation Branch out of Penticton. "Our vision is safe, sustainable water valued by all," said Pryce. "We support sustainable water land use decisions. Pryce explored the supply versus demand formula for water allocation. Supply is calculated through precipitation while demand is calculated through water licences. We need to look at the available water which is formulated from supply minus demand," said Pryce. "We need to manage drought situations and we need to regulate to protect the domestic supply, the fish and agriculture." Part of the Water Allocation Branch's agenda is to examine existing water licences. "Abuse of a licence can lead to it being revoked, issuing warnings and/or fines," Pryce stated. "Monitoring water abuse and use is all part of our Ministry."

Ted van der Gulik is a Senior Engineer with the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture and Lands. He outlined patterns of agricultural needs and models helpful to agricultural water planning in the Okanagan. He also explored what is possible in the Similkameen. "When you shower the water goes back into the water basin," stated van der Gulik. "When you irrigate the water goes into the vegetation and then dissipates and disappears into the atmosphere. Eighty-five per cent of the water in the Okanagan is used for outdoor purposes. "We need to take steps to improve irrigation management."

Marlowe Sam came with a message from the Indigenous people. As a doctoral student from UBC in Indigenous Studies his focus was on Water Rights and Customary Indigenous law. His message was clear. "The Indigenous people need a seat at the table," said Sam. "What remains is like a skeleton of a sick man.". "With economic development there has been no foresight into the long-term effects of human settlement, but for thousands of years beforehand it was. We need to stand up and give ourselves a voice and forge alliances to protect what we have left."

"My purpose for being here is to try and enhance the discussions with an Indigenous voice," stated Dr. Jeanette Armstrong. Armstrong is an Executive Director of Enowkin-the Cultural and Education of the Okanagan Nation, on the Faculty of Indigenous Studies at UBC Okanagan and on the Environment Canada Traditional Knowledge Sub Committee. "The responsibility that sits heavy on us is for future generations," said Armstrong. "We need to live in a place of harmony with other life forms to thrive. Water is the source of all life. Waterways are intricately intertwined with the health of its communities historically and in the present. Ethics are really important in making good decisions for our future." Armstrong pointed to the destruction of the riparian system as the main contributor to climate change. "Ninety-six per cent of the riparian system has been destroyed through development. We need to examine the concept of the 100 mile diet and start looking at what we have to offer our community and focus not just on the domestic system, but on the whole riparian system."

Dr. Anna Warwick Sears was the last presenter at the workshop. She brought with her the expert knowledge of someone already on a water board. Sears is Executive Director of the Okanagan Basin Water Board and explored the governance model of OBWB and its possible use as a model for a Similkameen Water Board. Sears outlined questions and issues relevant to maintaining a sustainable water strategy in the Okanagan. "There is this myth of abundance," said Sears. "We need to move past that and bridge the interests of all the Okanagan jurisdictions into an Okanagan voice to senior government. We need to focus on actions with valley wide benefits." Sears stated the importance of a plan book. "A clear plan of action for your board helps when it comes time to find funding. Grants are available if you are ready for them."

The Similkameen Valley Planning Council didn't take long to focus in on water as their top priority over many in depth sessions that ended around a year ago. "Looking at the next forty years," said Hope, "we see things differently than when we just look at tomorrow. Examining the possibility of creating our own water branch is the next step of that." Mayors attended from other communities as well as Councillors Marilyn Harkness and Frank Armitage and Regional Director for Keremeos.

"We here in Canada don't do a good job of making people think about water," concluded van der Gulik. "That has to change."

"It has been really nice to see this level of participation at our workshop," said Hope. "I feel that whatever problems we face in the future, we will be able to deal with together."

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