

NEWS

Okanagan Water Stewardship council responds to proposed B.C. water law

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The Okanagan Water Stewardship Council's initial reaction to the Tuesday, March 11 introduction of a new water act in the B.C. Legislature is positive, but a council committee will now analyze it and respond officially to the province in the next few weeks.

The council is the technical advisory body to the Okanagan Basin Water Board. Whereas the board is made up of elected regional district directors from throughout the valley, the council is made up of members representing 26 agencies interested in water, including fruit growers, cattlemen, conservation groups, forestry, Interior Health, post-secondary institutions, First Nations, local and senior government officials in environment, fisheries, agriculture, real estate boards and more.

At Thursday, March 13's regular monthly council meeting in Kelowna, members discussed provisions of the new Water Sustainability Act which modernizes the 105-year-old Water Act.

"I'm very pleased to see the new legislation advanced to first reading," OWS Council chair Don Dobson said. "My initial review suggests that ministry staff gave serious consideration to recommendations provided by the OBWB. I'm looking forward to reviewing the document in detail."

Nelson Jatel, water stewardship director for the OBWB, read the new act prior to the meeting and outlined key provisions for council members. He pointed out that the board's recommendation that groundwater use be regulated has been imbedded in the new act where it is treated similarly to surface water in terms of protection and use. It also includes requirements for the protection of water to sustain the natural environment (e.g. water for fish); and provides for an agriculture water reserve (e.g. ensuring water for food crops)—two other recommendations from the Okanagan.

The concept of Water Sustainability Plans, unique to different watersheds, has been introduced, replacing Water Management Plans. These would regulate water use in specific watersheds, he added. New administrative penalties have also been introduced in the legislation, along with new enforcement provisions.

“It’s definitely moving in the right direction,” said Jatel.

During the coming weeks, there’s a consultative period regarding water pricing, which will also be included in the new act. Jatel said the OBWB and its council will be contributing to this important discussion.

A schedule to the legislation, naming protected rivers in the province, does not include any in the Okanagan. This is another issue the council has said it will take up with the province.

From the province’s end, dozens of other pieces of legislation will be amended to conform with the new act, and regulations governing some aspects of the act must still be written.