

Okanagan Wetlands Strategy completes phase one



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The Central Okanagan has some of the better protections for wetlands in the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys, according to work done during the first phase of the Okanagan Wetlands Strategy.

The strategy is a three-phase collaborative effort to re-establish the importance of these ecosystems, which house phenomenal biodiversity, boost real estate values, offer flood mitigation and generally improve the livability of the valley for plants, animals and human beings.

Drawing on input from a wide variety of stakeholders, researchers spent the last year [inventorying wetlands in this region](#), where over 85 per cent have been lost to urbanization, agriculture and development.

"When we looked at the Central Okanagan, we only had, within the regional district, I think 11 wetlands that were not identified and currently protected in some means by development permits—which is pretty good," said Kyle Hawes of Ecoscapes Environmental Consulting, the researcher contracted to lead the study.

The South Okanagan has been identified as the area where conservation and restoration efforts are badly needed, particularly along the border in the Osoyoos and Oliver area.

Maps will be released to the public on the Okanagan Basin Waterboard website in May. The volume of wetlands still in need of the basic identification and protection an environmental development permit can offer is highest in the South Okanagan, although there are a few areas in a similar position in the North Okanagan as well.

There are also critical biological reasons to focus on the south, according to Nelson Jatel, water stewardship director of the Okanagan Basin Waterboard.

"Some of the meandering in Osoyoos is critical habitat for salmon, which we're quite excited about in terms of its strategic value for the entire okanagan basin," said Jatel.

In general, wetlands located on private lands from Salmon Arm to the border have been identified as top priorities for protection. This will mean focusing the next phases of the strategy on including private property owners and highlighting some of the economic benefits these habitats offer a landowner.

"I think there's been some great studies done in the past that show if you live next to a wetland, your property value increases. It's very close to having beachfront property," said Jatel.

"Having wetlands and open spaces does two critical things for the economy," he added. "One is that it can increase and improve property values, and maybe more importantly, it also provides for increased livability."

The first phase of the strategy's development involved mapping all forms of government identification, encroachment and protection of wetlands—from forest tenures to grazing tenures, BC Conservation data on species occurrences to parks and protected areas. The next phase of the work will apply the information, gathering groups to work together, boots on the ground, on conservation and restoration efforts.

Finally, a larger strategy to re-establish the need for wetlands and protect these areas, with clear prioritization based on the biological, hydrological and social significance of individual habitats, and potential threats, will be drafted.

Facts to note:

- wetland loss is one of the leading causes for species becoming at risk in the Okanagan
- 67 species at risk are supported by Cattail Marsh Ecosystems such as those in this region
- nearly 85 per cent of low-level wetlands in the Okanagan have been lost and studies indicate we're losing wetlands at a rate of 1.4 per cent annually
- over 80 per cent of wildlife use wetlands either directly or indirectly for their life, for general living, feeding and reproduction
- wetlands are critical to flood control, acting as a giant sponge

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