

NEWS

Kelowna: Public input has no impact on Water Sustainability Act

by [Jennifer Smith - Kelowna Capital News](#)

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UBCO professor and B.C. Regional Innovation Chair in Water Resources and Ecosystem Sustainability

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A review of the new Water Sustainability Act slated for royal assent reveals calls for public comment had little to no effect on the final product.

Speaking to the Okanagan Water Stewardship council Thursday, UBCO professor John Janmatt, the B.C. Regional Innovation Chair in Water Resources and Ecosystem Sustainability, pointed to the astoundingly quick timeline—first, second and third reading went through in less than two months—as he raised questions about the purpose of the act's new focus on water pricing and highlighted the lack of public input in the final document.

“Whatever debate or discussion there was had no impact on how this thing was shaped,” Janmaat said. “I looked at the first reading and the third reading, both available on the web, and nothing has changed.”

The Water Stewardship Council is a technical advisory board for the Okanagan Basin Water Board and it submitted suggestions en route to the first draft of the document, and initially seemed pleased with what went to first reading.

“It’s heading in the right direction,” said Nelson Jatel, OBWB water stewardship director, in a news release issued mid-March when the group obtained an advanced copy.

Chief among concerns at the time was a schedule to the legislation naming protected rivers in B.C., which left out the Okanagan’s water systems.

This is the first complete overhaul of water governance in the province in over 100 years, and it includes substantial changes.

Under the Act, groundwater will be integrated into the same allocation and licensing system for surface water for the first time, and its extraction and use monitored in a similar manner to surface water. There are new powers for protecting water needed to sustain the natural environment, protections for water needed for agriculture, and it renames water management plans as water sustainability plans for watersheds, writing in new administrative requirements for the documents.

All of this administration is a bit of a problem, Janmaat pointed out, but it’s one the OBWB is hoping to solve.

Last Tuesday, the board approved sending a proposal to Minister of Forest, Land and Natural Resource Operations Steve Thomson to develop a new B.C. Water Commission to handle the new water pricing and collection of fees.

The agency would use software developed here in the Okanagan to handle the administrative side of the new act’s requirements and potentially create another Okanagan-based agency.

“Currently, reporting of licensed water use in B.C. is collected ineffectively, if at all. However, this new water use reporting software, developed by the OBWB in partnership with the province and now used in the Okanagan and Nanaimo, would allow information on major groundwater and surface water extractions to be gathered efficiently from all over B.C.,” said Jatel, in a statement issued midday Monday.

The OBWB’s business case suggests a staff of 10 could be hired, with an annual budget of \$5 million in fees collected from water rates.

The staff would work on water sustainability planning, strategic water research and support for water licence enforcement.

Janmaat's presentation noted the underlying purpose of the pricing is still very vague, saying it will neither curb the day-to-day consumption of water for the average person nor necessarily recoup funds spent managing water systems.

The new groundwater regulations are expected to have the most impact on industry, forcing companies like Nestle, which draws groundwater for its bottled water operation, to pay for what they use and reputedly adding controls to oil and gas hydraulic fracking, water used to extract gas from deposit sites.