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SHARED DUTY TO PROTECT OKANAGAN WATER THE FOCUS OF ANNUAL MEETING

Kelowna, B.C. – With all the changes coming – with population growth, civic and federal elections, new B.C. water regulations, climate change, and recent court rulings recognizing Aboriginal title – the Okanagan Basin Water Board has chosen as this year’s Annual Meeting theme “Shared Water. Shared Solutions.” The board held its meeting today at Rotary Centre for the Arts in Kelowna.

“The Water Board was deliberately designed as a partnership organization, that’s the basis of our whole structure,” explained OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears. “It’s from this position of strength that we work to ensure a sustainable water supply in the valley.

“It’s becoming more important than ever to recognize water as a precious and limited resource,” added Sears. “We all share in its use – whether for growing food or wine, for healthy fish and eco-systems, for drinking, and playing in – and we must also all share in its protection. We need to find shared solutions to ensure its sustainability.

“This past year has seen movement on many important projects,” Sears noted. These include: providing an Okanagan voice to the new B.C. Water Sustainability Act (WSA); the start of a wetland strategy for the Okanagan, aimed at addressing the steep decline in these systems that protect water quality, prevent flooding and recharge groundwater; continued work to prevent a costly and devastating infestation of invasive mussels; improvements to control aquatic weeds; the re-establishment of monitoring stations to measure stream flows; work towards a tool to improve the way water managers make licencing decisions, and much more.

Looking forward, there is much work to do, but there are also many unknowns, she added.

“There are more changes coming,” Sears said. “We have to act deliberately and pay attention to changing conditions – whether we’re talking weather, financial, or political. We don’t want to waste time or resources.”

Recognizing all the changes ahead, the OBWB invited Deborah Curran, municipal lawyer and Hakai Professor in Environmental Law and Sustainability at University of Victoria, to provide this year’s keynote address. Curran was asked to speak on the WSA and its impact on local communities, as well as the implications that follow from this summer’s Supreme Court ruling granting land title to B.C.’s Tsilhqot’in First Nation.

“Water impacts everyone – and it impacts every local government,” said Curran. “From ensuring there’s enough, to dealing with flooding. It has to be taken seriously. Being proactive will reduce liabilities and will be central to decision-making.

“There are four things local governments need to be aware of,” she added. “One, the Water Sustainability Act is moving towards groundwater licencing. This will affect local governments since many communities use ground-water and also the regulations will impact surface water licencing. Two, the act recognizes the need to meet ‘environmental flow needs’ – or water for fish. In the future, water licences may be changed to meet water needs of fish. Three, aboriginal rights and title are likely to have implications for water entitlements. And four, they need to be aware of the importance of negotiation with other users and rights holders. The trend for water disputes is to negotiate by having everyone cut back and develop water sustainability plans. Negotiating water use in a regional context – in the Okanagan and elsewhere – will win out at the end of the day.”

The Water Board’s 2014 Annual Report “Shared water. Shared solutions.” can be found at <http://www.obwb.ca/overview/annual-reports/>.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) was established in 1970 as a collaboration of the three Okanagan regional districts – North, Central and Okanagan-Similkameen. The board provides leadership for sustainable water management by protecting and enhancing the quality of life and environment in the Okanagan Basin, from Armstrong to Osoyoos.

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