

THE DAILY COURIER

Okanagan warned to plan water use

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Special

Municipalities should start planning how to manage the Okanagan's water now to avoid acrimony when droughts threaten the Valley's water supply, says an environmental law professor.

Deborah Curran, who helped create the province's new Water Sustainability Act, told a Kelowna audience last week that local communities need to develop a strategy "before the ditches run dry."

The plan would replace traditional water rights and require groups and landowners to agree on ways to handle water resources when a long drought hits, Curran told the annual meeting of the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

"Let's talk about it ahead of time," she said.

Curran, who teaches at University of Victoria, warned politicians and staff that new regulations mean local governments must consider water when making land-use decisions. The plan could be designed to minimize damage to the Valley's economy, she said.

She suggested they consult hydrologists to ensure water becomes part of their decision-making. The province will restrict the number of dwellings on a parcel of land in areas where there's limited water, she said.

Under the act, fish and other environmental factors must be considered. In-stream flow requirements take precedence over other water rights — even the traditional first-in-time, first-in-right water-allocation system.

"There's very much a commitment (in the new act) to require that basic hydrological conditions be maintained, which will allow natural conditions to continue to exist," she said.

The Okanagan is the driest part of the province, making water issues here the most acute in B.C., she said. Either local governments work together to reach agreements about sustainable water use, or the province can impose them.

"The process is up to you."

Until now, groundwater use in B.C. has been unregulated. The new rules come into force as part of the new act, slated to be introduced April 1.

Large users will be the focus at first. All licences, groundwater and surface water, will be subject to review after 30 years instead of being permanent, she said.

"Entitlements may change . . . depending on conditions."

Curran said urban water use on lawns and outdoor landscapes must be reduced. And agriculture-water reserves may be part of the management plans, she said.