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Work starts to save wetlands

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Jillian Tamblyn

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Valley wetlands are getting some much-needed attention after a century of neglect.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board has hired a manager to prioritize some of the most threatened wetland areas and to protect and enhance them. Jillian Tamblyn has been on the job for seven weeks. She hopes to improve six wetland complexes in the Okanagan and Similkameen by 2016.

"It's everything from doing new plantings around wetlands, potentially creating wetlands, information signage . . . and working to protect or restore them," she said Friday.

"We're looking at opportunities to keep what we have and improve what we have remaining."

Hundreds of ponds, marshes and other wetlands remain on a valley bottom that used to host thousands. Developers and farmers have filled in many to make way for construction and orchards. Others have dried up since 1998 because the water table has dropped.

Working to save wetlands

A backhoe operator pounds posts into the ground at McLachlan Lake in the Garnet Valley, west of Peachland, for fencing to help protect a wetland there.

The water board launched a \$65,000 project last year to map all the ponds in the Valley and to collect opinions on which wetlands are worth saving. After months of collecting data, mapping Okanagan wetlands and holding open houses, the board is moving to the next phase — hands-on wetland restoration and rehabilitation.

Environment Canada announced Friday it's granting \$50,000 to the water board to support the two-year project.

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"Okanagan wetlands provide enormous benefits to people by protecting against floods, improving water quality and water supply, controlling erosion and supporting a host of recreational activities," Kelowna-Lake Country MP Ron Cannan said at Fascieux Creek in Kelowna.

The project has led to new fencing around McLachlan Lake — a five-hectare wetland area on Crown land outside Peachland — to keep out cattle and vehicles. Tamblyn plans to focus on six other areas: one around Princeton, one in the Vernon area, two in the Kelowna area and two in Penticton and the South Okanagan.

"It might be planting, restoring some species. It might be doing some work to regulate water flow coming in," she said. "Wetlands are natural cleaners of water. They slow down water flow. The plants will actually absorb . . . different toxins and chemicals, which cleans the water."

The government granted another \$50,000 to the Okanagan Nation Alliance to manage hands-on projects on the Penticton Indian reserve near Penticton's airport. Band members will monitor the western painted turtle, an icon of Okanagan ponds that's now a species of special concern.

"We're going to track them and watch their movements," said Chief Jonathan Kruger. "There's (also) beautiful creatures like herons, frogs and toads. We're honoured that we're working together for something that's really good. Wetlands are so important to the land."

The band plans to put a protective covenant on 1.2 hectares of wetlands to protect the habitat, Kruger said.

The board estimates more than 85 per cent of the Valley's wetlands and riparian areas are gone, and the remaining ones are at risk. Depending on where you live, one to five per cent of the Valley's land base is in wetlands, Tamblyn said.

Naturalists say wildlife species that depend on wetlands are suffering, notably the tiger salamander and the olive clubtail dragonfly — both endangered in Canada. The northern leopard frog is extinct.