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Kelowna Capital News

Okanagan Basin watershed study model is groundbreaking

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It might be the most comprehensive and detailed watershed supply and demand model ever done anywhere.

The first two phases of the Okanagan Water Supply and Demand project is drawing to a close after five years of gathering information and conducting studies about this 8,000 square kilometre watershed.

It includes five mainstem lakes and 32 sub-basins; 324 aquifers (underground water), including 79 alluvial and the remainder bedrock.

There are 101 water purveyors managing the 200-kilometre-long watershed for a population of about 350,000 and 54 per cent of the water used is agricultural.

Partners in the project include three federal and three provincial ministries, the Okanagan Nation Alliance, the Okanagan Basin Water Board, UBC-O and SFU and the Water Supply

Association of B.C.

Interim reports on the study were presented to the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council Thursday afternoon, with release of the final report expected to coincide with celebration of World Water Day in March.

Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the OBWB, says the work is "cutting edge. It's incredibly detailed information that's been gathered. However, there will still be ambiguity," she added.

Wenda Mason, manager, major projects for the water stewardship division in Victoria, told the council members the last assessment of the Okanagan water basin was done in 1974. Today, most streams in the valley are fully-allocated.

People then turn to groundwater, which is not licensed in B.C., and yet it interacts with streamflows.

Although Okanagan Lake is 600 feet deep, only the surface water can be used, without mining the lake—drawing it down below what can be refilled when the winter snow melts.

A phase three of the study will involve development of tools and recommendations; taking the scientific information and making it available to people to use in decision-making.

"People have to evaluate the data, then make decisions," she explained.

Coordinated drought planning for the whole valley is one of the potential uses for the information, although local detail and water use planning would have to be done as well, she

noted.

Staff and consultants will continue to gather data and refine the models and improve accessibility for the data.

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