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Okanagan water supply under pressure from all sides, says expert panel

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAA8Jdfvaes&feature=player_embedded

By John McDonald

Not all of the water experts assembled for a UN World Water Day public forum would agree on every aspect of water use and misuse in the Okanagan, but they all agree on one thing – our water, both in quantity and quality, is under pressure on many different fronts.

From the obvious effects of drought and climate change to the insidious effects of fertilizer run-off and pharmaceuticals flushed down local toilets, Okanagan Lake and the watersheds that supply it, are under siege like never before.



Robert Sanford, Canada chair UN Water For Life.

Robert Sanford, Canadian chairman of the United Nations Water For Life, perhaps said it best in his summation, which described the valley as a kind of poster child for global water issues.

“If I were to describe the world’s water woes and situate them in a single basin, I could very well be describing the Okanagan,” he said. “You live in a semi-arid region with increasingly limited water resources. All available water resources have been fully if not over-allocated. You now have cities and agriculture competing with one another and with nature for water.”

Sanford said there is a realization, at least amongst the officials who work with water in the valley, that nature needs more water, but humans here have invested heavily in ensuring availability and use for themselves and fear its scarcity could limit future economic and social development.

“You have an identity-defining body of water that, because of growing demands and more frequent drought, is becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain and protect,” he added. “Of top of that, your rapidly growing communities are composed of people who, having largely come from elsewhere, believe that unlimited abundance of water resources is a Canadian birthright.”

Sanford praised the various people involved in water management throughout the valley, but said there is an irony in their good work.

“You have done such a good job of holding it all together and managing the problem that many residents barely know there is one,” he added.

He urged the Okanagan Basin Water Board, host of the forum along with UBC, to step up the struggle to get that message out.

“It may be helpful if residents of this basin were more aware of the vicious circle in which others in dry places elsewhere have found themselves trapped,” said Sanford said his biggest concern for the Okanagan is its growing vulnerability to deep and persistent drought.

“Global population is increasing fastest in the dry regions of the world – places like this,” he added. “The best science and most brilliant water conservation innovations and practices are being mocked and overshadowed by relentless growth.”

Sanford said the priority for all water purveyors and managers is to ensure nature is given priority over man-made uses.

“Public policy in Canada would be wise to move toward supplying adequate water to nature before over-allocation for human purposes and climate-related changes to water supply make it difficult to do so,” he added.

john@kelowna.com