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Latest valley water study offers no surprises; Demand is growing while the supply is under increasing pressure

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By John McDonald

You don't have to be scared by the implications contained in the Okanagan Basin Water Board's Water Supply and Demand study, but you should definitely be concerned.

The second phase of study, released Friday by the water board and the B.C. Ministry of Environment, shows a water system that's not quite facing catastrophic failure, but is close enough that it should act as a wake-up call for all valley residents and businesses.

"I think scare is the wrong word," said Brian Symonds, regional operations director of the Environment Ministry's Water Stewardship division. "But people need to be responsible for the choices they make, because those choices can last a long time."

Symonds said all he needs to do is look at around him as he travels through the valley to motivate himself.

“That’s why we live here and if you want to protect it, you have to make changes,” he added.

Three years in the making, the second phase of the study provides reams of new information about every aspect of water in the valley from demand and supply to allocation and regulation.

Dr. Anna Warwick Sears, the water board’s executive director, said the gist of the study points to the need for increased conservation and adaptation in all parts of the Okanagan Valley.

“It is a very dry place...we have less fresh water available per person in the Okanagan Basin than anywhere else in Canada,” she said. “Yet the average Okanagan resident uses more than two times as much water as the average Canadian.”

Among the key findings of the study is that although valley residents are amongst the most prolific water users in Canada at 675 litres per day, that number drops to 150 litres when outdoor domestic landscaping is taken out.

Some 86 per cent of the water we use is for outdoor purposes such as agriculture (55 per cent), domestic outdoor (24 per cent), golf courses (five per cent) and parks and open spaces (two per cent). Just 14 per cent is used indoors, split between domestic indoor use and commercial/institutional use.

Agriculture is a relatively efficient user of water, even though it is the largest single user.

According to the report, agriculture uses 120,000 million litres of water to irrigate 18,300 hectares of land, for an average of 660mm per hectare. Meanwhile, golf courses, parks and domestic landscaping uses an average of 900mm per hectare for 7,585 hectares.

The study shows that we use about half of the water allocation allowed under water licenses, of which there is over 4,000.

Groundwater, which requires no license for extraction, receives some attention in the report. About 22 per cent of the water used in the Okanagan is from groundwater and the report acknowledges that not enough is known about the potential for supply from groundwater or the health of local aquifers.

Warwick Sears said her wish now is that both local governments and individuals will now use the study, plus its new interactive website, to make proactive decisions about water use.

For more details of the report, go to www.obwb.ca