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The ripple effect

By [Richard Rolke - Vernon Morning Star](#)

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You'll occasionally hear oldtimers say, "We should have closed the gates to the valley years ago."

And given what's happening with water in the Okanagan — or the lack thereof — it's hard to argue with that view.

After all, every new person that moves here, or tourist that stops, places additional pressure on an increasingly limited water supply in an arid climate. This year's snowpack hasn't been this low in virtually my lifetime, and that means extreme measures are being taken for the launch of the irrigation season (watering twice a week).

A recent study by the Okanagan Basin Water Board considered the two greatest impacts on water supply and demand — climate change and population growth.

It found that if climate and population both change as expected, and all land that can be reasonably irrigated is developed between

2011 and 2040, annual water use would average 19 per cent higher over that period than it is today, even if we continue to introduce water use efficiencies at the same rate we are doing today.

The North Okanagan Regional District is also knee-deep into its regional growth strategy, and trying to determine how our region can remain sustainable over the long-term.

Suggesting that there be no more growth in the Okanagan Valley appears ludicrous given that we have something most Canadians covet — mild winters, hot summers and a vibrant lifestyle.

People are going to move here, and unless you're First Nations, that's what we all did.

A growing population base is also critical to the lifeblood of a community. Merchants depend on shoppers and workers, schools need students, realtors require home buyers and city halls feed on taxes. Without all of these things, services and opportunities dwindle and communities become stagnant.

But as someone who has lived in the Okanagan his entire life, I sometimes wonder if we have gone too far, too fast. Houses cover dry, dusty hillsides. Golf courses and wineries have consumed countless acres of land. We can keep making reservoirs larger and keep tapping lakes deeper in the bush, but eventually the demand for water is going to outstrip supply.

At what point are the natural resources of the Okanagan maxed out, and there isn't the ability for one more subdivision or swimming pool? When is enough, enough?

Unfortunately, these are questions that future generations, including my daughters, will increasingly be faced with.

No longer will the discussion be restricted to bureaucratic reports or computer-generated graphics. They will be actually faced with the day-to-day realities of climate change and over-population.

There will be those who think the world is black and white, and the issue of water supply can be handled simply by banning all building permits. But I live in a world of grey. I fear for the future of a valley my family has called home for 100 years, but I can't deny I have benefitted financially and socially from urbanization.

I bring absolutely no solutions to the table, except that when the powers-that-be tell me to only irrigate twice a week, or not at all, I will do so.

And as I water my vegetables, I will continue to feel powerless, and wondering what the future will hold.

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