

# Region braces for potential drought

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Published: **May 11, 2010 6:00 PM**

Updated: **May 12, 2010 8:00 AM**

The decline in the snowpacks around the province has raised the spectre of a drought, and in turn water conservation is being urged and water restrictions along with drought management plans are being considered.

According to a snow survey and water supply bulletin released by Allan Chapman of the River Forecast Centre, the Okanagan is sitting at 76 per cent of its normal basin percentage while the Similkameen is at 37 per cent of its normal amount.

Nelson Jatel, water stewardship director for the Okanagan Basin Water Board, said that we have seen similar issues last year, putting us into a possible multiple-year drought and making it harder to replenish an already low water supply.

“We entered this year with a deficit and we’re seeing very little precipitation,” Jatel said. “The problem is that we need to have significantly more than normal to deal with this deficit.”

Despite the consecutive years with low water supply from the decline in snowpacks, Jatel said it’s not necessarily something we should worry about as it’s part of the area’s hydrology.

“We’ve had droughts in the past and we’ll have droughts in the future,” said Jatel. “I never characterize it as something we should worry about, but is it something we want to plan for and as individuals address? I think so.”

Here in Penticton actions have already been taken to conserve the water supply. From the beginning of May to the end of August the city will be on at least stage one water restrictions.

Carolyn Stewart, Penticton’s water conservation program co-ordinator, said that we must look beyond our communities in our attempts to conserve water, and consider “our basin as a whole.”

“If we don’t develop sound water practices now we are going to be paying the price,” Stewart said. “Whether we pay the price in the near future or in the long term, we certainly are going to see that there might be a time when we don’t have choices anymore.”

In Vernon they are currently under stage three water restrictions, which prevents people from filling pools and watering lawns. But following protests from pool owners and golf course operators the city has put the restrictions on hold for two weeks.

“Their reservoirs are very low, which is a real concern because the North Okanagan traditionally has significant storage for the entire valley,” Jatel said. “So that Vernon storage can be really important for everybody.”

With all the drought talk being thrown around, the weather over the next couple of months can have an impact on whether the water supply will actually be an issue.

“We are entering the period now where we tend to get our spring and early summer rains,” said Doug Lundquist, Environment Canada meteorologist. “It’s our local monsoon season.”

He added that according to a probability forecast for the area’s precipitation, there is a 40 to 50 per cent chance that May, June and July will be wetter than usual.

“I don’t put a lot of faith in that particular forecast,” Lundquist said. “I really keep caution with the precipitation forecast. It can be quite variable, especially in this season.”

Whether or not we get our “monsoon season” Stewart said we can’t wait until a drought is actually here to react.

“The real critical solution is we have to be pro-active, so that when we do have a drought we are prepared”