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Water rights in sights

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Presentations on the controversial question of whether water rights should be traded and sold on the open market received an excited reception at the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council.

Speakers from three universities addressed the issue in presentations to the technical advisory committee to the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

Currently, water in B.C. is controlled by the provincial government through the Water Act, which is nearly a century old and being updated.

Ron Griffin, a water resource economist from Texas A&M University, believes water marketing has a big role to play in the future of water management.

First, he said, you set aside water for environmental purposes, then you assign it transferable property rights and allow transactions, overseen by government.

In B.C., he noted, no value is paid for raw water, only for the infrastructure to deliver it and for cleaning it, and that's wrong, he believes.

He was astonished to discover there was no low flow shower head in his hotel here.

In Texas, he said many irrigation water rights are now held by urban users, transferred through a Watermaster's Office.

Sales and leases of water rights are common.

People can pay \$6,000 for an acre-foot of water, but it's then theirs, permanently.

Perhaps the Okanagan isn't ready for such a system, he said, pointing to flat rate water bills.

And, he said he's shocked at the way groundwater users are permitted to just 'steal' water from surface water users, without paying and without licenses.

Henning Bjornlund, Canada Research Chair, water policy and management at the University of Lethbridge/University of South Australia, warned that the Okanagan's area-based entitlements to water lead to little encouragement to improve efficiency of water use.

"You have an opportunity to do something now. Don't put it off," he advised.

There's little flexibility with perennial plantings of such agricultural crops as tree fruits and grapes because there can be significant losses under severe low water conditions, he noted.

He warned that the Okanagan could lose its attractiveness if agricultural land is replaced with buildings. Even tourism is dependent on water.

"Conflicts in the medium term are inevitable," he said.

Water markets are the most viable way to take the hard positions on water because it's between the buyer and the seller, and no politicians have to end up with egg on their faces.

They're not easy to introduce, he admitted, but they're necessary, he believes.

First, he said you have to define the water that cannot be traded, such as water for the environment and a reserve of water for agriculture, based on the Agricultural Land Reserve.

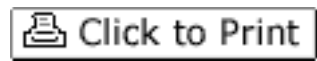
Land and water rights should be separated. There should be a separate right to own and right to use water.

B.C. Water licenses accompany property, so when land is sold, the licences go with it.

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