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Plan to raise lake levels upsets users

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A plan to raise water levels on Beaver Lake has outdoor enthusiasts ringing alarm bells over risks to fish supplies throughout B.C.

Situated 16 kilometres northeast of Winfield, the small freshwater lake is integral to the supply of trout eggs for a hatchery that stocks lakes across B.C.

“For 60 years we’ve been taking eggs out of this system,” said Mark Siemens, manager of Summerland Trout Hatchery during a harvesting trip.

Eggs are squeezed from fish that are then returned to the lake. The eggs are put into containers and shipped to Summerland where they’re fertilized and the fry are released into various lakes across the province, including the lake they’re taken from.

Beaver Lake is also integral to a District of Lake Country plan to manage drought. The local government contends raising the dam on both it and Oyama Lake chains would allow it to store more water for residents and help reload increasingly dry streams, like Vernon Creek.

To do that, it is applying to the province for a permit to raise the dam on the lake systems.

“It would raise lake levels six feet,” said Siemens, explaining that much of the shoreline where traps sit would be gone.

“It would flood our traps. We could move them, which isn’t the end of the world.”

What appears to be a bigger concern is how the harvest will be impacted once the ecosystem is changed.

“Lake levels aren’t raised indefinitely,” said Siemens, adding if levels were to stay high there

would be no problem.

But water is dammed, built up and then drawn down as needs arise.

That filling-and-draining effect would make the lands surrounding the lake nearly inhabitable for the bugs that trout currently feed on.

"Reservoirs and fish don't get along," Siemens said.

Right now a battle over the water body is playing out in local government offices between the district and user groups.

Pat Whittingham of the Ocoela Fish and Game Club says he's concerned that reduced fish stocks will negatively impact recreational fishing while taking a bite out of revenues for the provincial economy.

"Freshwater fishing contributes nearly half a billion dollars annually to the provincial economy," said Whittingham, noting the money is raised through license sales, equipment rentals and travel.

But, he said, people are less likely to stay with the hobby if fish levels and gratification are reduced, and those funds will dwindle.

Nearly every body of water in the Okanagan is managed for some reason already, but that doesn't mean smooth sailing in years to come, explained Anna Warwick Sears from the Okanagan Water Basin Board.

"One of the predictions with climate change is we won't have enough snowpack so we will need to store water in liquid form for when you need it in the summer...this is true for fisheries flow and for human use," she said.

Environmental studies, she said, are always conducted when there's some kind of control structure being installed, and that should determine the outcome.

"Building a dam will always have some environmental impact, but what will be better for the community in the future...that's what has to be worked out."

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