




Reflections on water governance and climate change

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 In the summer 2011 *Watermark*, I presented examples where more adaptive governance could help address issues related to climate change. The collaboration between the Okanagan Basin Water Board and the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council was one example. I was fortunate to catch up with Bernard Bauer, Chair of the Stewardship Council, to hear his reflections on this collaboration. Bernie is a professor of Earth & Environmental Sciences and Geography at UBC Okanagan, and has been Chair of the Stewardship Council for two and a half years.

STEVE CONRAD (SC): *What are your thoughts on the role of the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council in relation to overall regional watershed planning?*

BERNIE BAUER (BB): The Council plays a critical role in addressing some of the institutional issues that exist in the interaction between senior [provincial], regional, and local levels of government. [In BC] there is not a forum for sustained and meaningful interaction, so the Council provides an opportunity for developing dialogue and mutual trust. The Board has a mandate to manage water resources and the Council provides for stakeholder representation.

The Council meets on a regular basis and has built up trust and a common language. It is able to discuss key issues, and, through our members, get communications back to stakeholder groups. Members give a monthly report on their challenges and issues, while visitors give presentations on topics of interest for the Council. The Council breaks into sub groups to work on ongoing initiatives in the *Sustainable Water Strategy*, which contains 40-odd action items. The *Strategy* is a guiding document that the Council refers to often, and a recent review after three years provides a report card on what areas have progressed and which items need greater attention.

SC: *Can you share any recent examples of success?*

BB: One example is the groundwater monitoring initiative. The region has limited information

about groundwater usage and aquifer-level trends. The Council played a pivotal role in developing a groundwater monitoring initiative, and the BC's Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resources Operations, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Environment Canada and the Okanagan Basin Water Board came forward with funding, as an incentive for local jurisdictions to contribute to the installation of groundwater monitoring wells in high priority aquifers. The Council cannot implement these projects itself, but can frame ideas for consideration by the Board, which ultimately decides whether to proceed and in what manner. The monitoring well network is an example of where the Board had an interest in moving forward on collecting groundwater data, and the Council developed the program using the technical expertise of its members. Every member on the Council has a role to play and has a stake in the success of water management in

“Every member on the Council has a role to play and has a stake in the success of water management in the region.”

the region. Together, they [the Council and Board] drove the program forward. In the end, it is a very good partnership. The Board is primarily a political body (nine are elected officials, one from the Council, one from the Okanagan Nation Alliance, and one from the Water Supply Association of BC) and has higher-level – political – considerations to address, whereas the Council can discuss technical details and on-the-ground concerns.

SC: Many view the OWSC as a model of collaborative governance.

Can you comment on this?

BB: I agree that collaborative governance is the way to go; the question is how to make these relationships work. In many cases, collaborations are informal mechanisms that rely on the dedication of participants. Although you can create a structure that enables collaboration, you cannot actually mandate collaborative relationships. An example is the mandate for regional drinking water teams. Regional drinking water teams were formed to bring representatives from various Ministries together to support collaboration and information exchange on drinking water issues that interface with land-use decisions and provincial health concerns. There has been a range of success, depending on the team composition and their capacity. Some teams have struggled to understand their mandate, whereas others have really moved forward on solving the issues. Collaborative mechanisms can work effectively, but what is needed is the institutional support to accompany them, as well as sustained funding to retain active staff members who really care. The Council and Board have a track record of leadership, respect and longevity, so many people on the Council continue to return to the table year after year. There is now considerable trust in the process, and that is the essence of collaborative governance.

SC: Do you see involving additional members on the Council?

BB: Every year, the Council looks at its membership and reviews who is missing, based on the issues it is addressing. Last year, for example, the Council added three members, one from APEGBC and two from the real estate sector. Early on, the Council was focused on fish and habitat issues, and now, the Board has strong representation from agriculture [being a large water user]. The Council wants to ensure there is no over or under-representation of any single stakeholder group. As well, if there is a member that consistently does not attend meetings, the Council looks at their involvement and may ask for another representative. Overall, the Council does

not want the group to be too large, and right now, the Council routinely involves about 30-40 people, including regular and ad-hoc members.

SC: Do you see the Council's role changing in the future?

BB: The Council is the technical advisory arm to the Board, which oversees the water planning process in the basin. It also serves as the liaison committee that connects various stakeholders with the Board. What we have seen is an evolution in what the Council is involved in, which reflects our much greater knowledge and capacity, as well

as the ever-shifting water-related priorities in BC. During its first year, we listened to issues on water, so everyone on the Council could hear the same information. Then the Council moved to develop its *Sustainable Water Strategy*. Following, the Council moved to work on actions within the *Strategy*, such as source protection, groundwater, hydrometric monitoring, drought planning, conservation, public education and involvement in the water act modernization. The Council is in a pattern of picking items from the *Strategy* and taking action on them. This does not mean the Council would not address future issues, especially if the province completes a *Water Sustainability Act*. 💧

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