

## Election 2015: Roll with the changes—make your politicians help



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Set against the backdrop of a burning West Kelowna hillside earlier this summer, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said it was possible that climate change was the cause of the high number of B.C. fires.

While he didn't address the government's role in dealing with that issue, he did say there would eventually be talks with premiers across the country on how to deal with the fallout.

"When the dust settles, so to speak, on all of this we're obviously going to sit down and assess what new or different needs to be done in the future, what we can do in terms of better co-ordination of resources, mitigation," Harper told reporters who had gathered for the brief visit.

"We'll look at all those things."

The dust has since settled, but it's still unclear how the feds and province will work together to solve summer's new set of problems.

If nothing else, it's been made clear that a review of firefighting budgets will be required, as the province blew through their allotment long before the last tendril of smoke rose from the valley.

Meantime, the Okanagan Basin Water Board hasn't waited for the dust to settle.

They are operating on the theory that climate change is underway as they work with local governments to ensure there's a game plan when it comes to water management, in particular. That will allow area residents to adapt as the changes become more apparent.

Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the OWBW, points out that the federal government's help is needed in funding everything from infrastructure planning to habitat protection and research.

"All of those things have to do with budget allocation," she said.

"People should just let their would-be representatives know that this is a priority to them—they want to have an Okanagan Valley that is less sensitive to extreme weather events."

What those changes will look like, however, remains to be seen.

"There's a lot of uncertainty and that keeps being hammered home over and over again, by everybody who is in the climate change world," said Warwick Sears.

"The uncertainty has a few levels...We don't know how intense climate change will be from year to year, or what the weather is going to do."

Flash floods, drought, fires, rising temperatures and correspondingly lower snowpacks are some of the issues already presenting themselves to the area.

And, Warwick Sears explained that's affecting things as basic as infrastructure planning.

Weather is a huge factor in planning, but the past has become an unreliable means to predict future weather.

It's what's called a loss of stationarity.

"Normally when engineers are designing a bridge, they look at high flows of last 100 years, take the worst case scenario and then add 10 per cent ... well, that doesn't work anymore," she said.

Mission Creek, she used as an example, has experienced three one-in-200 year high water events in this decade alone.

"So, the question is what going to come at us, and what do we need to do to create roads and bridges that are more resistant in all the different scenarios?"

While infrastructure needs may be causing some consternation among engineers and government bodies, one of the ways to deal with these changing weather patterns is habitat protection.

"The federal government's involvement in habitat protection is important," Warwick Sears said.

"A lot of those projects have a dual purpose. If you are protecting habitats by creeks and setting back development, you're slowing the water down as it comes down... you're reducing the intensity of flooding and reducing erosion."

Projects like the creation of a wider riparian area and a higher dyke around portions of Mission Creek, she explained, also provide a very real economic benefit and help to protect a lifestyle that people in the Okanagan have come to enjoy.

"Cook Street boat launch by Manteo has (suffered) from a big slug of sediment that has moved down Mission Creek because of the big storm events and erosion from a few years ago," she said.

"Having more trees and shrubs and a bigger area to contain that sediment will help boaters."

Lastly, Warwick Sears said that monitoring is also extremely important, and there needs to be more systems in place to track changes in water patterns. Those dollars would come from the federal government.

"If you want to do this kind of engineering to improve bridges and create roads that are more resistant to high water events, you need to know how much water is in the streams," said Warwick Sears.

"The best way to do that is Water Survey of Canada, monitoring stations. They have an excellent way of tracking the stream flows. You can log on from your computer and see how high the water is."

There used to be hundreds of monitors, and now there are only 25.

"They have been cut back over the last decade ...we are desperate for better data to better prepare for droughts and floods and improve habitat for fish," she said.

And, she said, these things all have economic spin-off, too.

"You can look at fish sentimentally, and say you want to protect them for own benefit, but they're also a huge economic driver in the valley," she said. "Fishing has the potential for being an incredible benefit to the valley."

All of the areas highlighted, she said, are simply common sense planning. And, the doom and gloom attitude that comes with climate change conversations reframed so long as the issue is dealt with head on.

"You can't do anything about the weather, but you can prepare for it," Warwick Sears said.

"I went out yesterday after long procrastination and bought some battery powered LED lights you take camping.

"My mom lives on the coast and she went through that windstorm. So I realized I have got to go and get some basic things in place around my house.

"This is exactly the way I think about adaptation to climate change."

You want to have the basic stuff in place.

"You need to understand where your flood plains are, know what infrastructure is at risk, then you need funding that step by step improves things so we are all a little safer," she said.

And if you want to see your government respond to these concerns, express your wishes to the candidates and seek assurances that these are the kinds of things that will get funding.

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