

September 8, 2017

NEWS RELEASE

OKANAGAN WATER BOARD ANNUAL MEETING LOOKS AT EXTREME WEATHER & SOLUTIONS

Kelowna, B.C. – The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) held its Annual Meeting today at Westbank Lions Community Centre in West Kelowna. The theme this year was “Weathering Extremes,” recognizing that the climate in our valley is changing and the need to act on – to adapt to, but also to mitigate – climate change.

Of course the Okanagan has seen flooding and droughts in the past, but as climate models show us, these extreme events will become more common and more intense. This spring, we saw historic flooding, followed by a prolonged period of heat and dry weather, breaking temperature and lowest precipitation records in our valley.

As part of its annual meeting this year, the OBWB showcased some of the projects it is undertaking to address these two extremes, and spoke to the need to do more, in partnership with local governments, senior levels of government, non-profits and individuals.

“In many ways, adaptation has been a core of our work,” explained Water Board Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears. “Things that we do to prepare for climate extremes are also best practices to make our communities stronger. Drought planning, restoring wetlands to hold flood waters, and promoting landscapes that require less water during hot, dry summers – are all forms of adaptation,” she added. “But we also need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to prevent an escalation of extreme events that will make water sustainability far more difficult.”

“You look at Hurricane Harvey in Texas. There was four feet of water. It was so heavy, that it caused a 2cm depression in the earth’s crust,” noted Sears, turning to the flooding we saw here in the Okanagan and a presentation provided by Shaun Reimer. Reimer is Section Head for Public Safety and Protection with the B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development and helps manage Okanagan Lake levels.

Reimer provided an overview of this spring’s flooding at the meeting, and explained how low Okanagan snowpacks in winter suggested a potential drought this summer. But then unexpected precipitation began in March and built up the snowpack. Then the rains came. And soon after that, warm weather which melted the snow, caused higher flows into the lake than could be released without causing severe flooding and bank erosion downstream, he explained.

“We broke our own records for rainfall and have a new high water mark for the valley,” added Sears. “How do you manage around extreme precipitation? There are some things you just can’t adapt to, so it’s important we bring mitigation into the conversation.”

To do this, the Water Board invited Maximilian Kniewasser, director of the Pembina Institute’s B.C. climate policy program, to speak on the state of climate action in B.C. and opportunities to grow a clean economy.

“We’ve already seen a 1C rise in global temperatures and are already seeing the impacts with back-to-back floods and wildfires that are more intense and extreme,” Kniewasser said. “There are challenges but we can adapt to a 1C increase. It’s only going to get worse if we get to 2C, and as a global community we can’t adapt beyond 2C. So that’s where mitigation comes in.

“Above 2C there will be loss of biodiversity. Food will be scarce. Rich countries will do fine, but the implications for humanity as a whole will be unprecedented. That’s not the type of world we want to live in. We are standing at an inflection point – a turning point,” he added. “Five years ago there were no good energy alternatives, but solar is cost-competitive now.

“B.C. is well-positioned to benefit from strong action on climate change. The Okanagan, being at the nexus between rural and urban, offers great opportunities to be a leader in clean technology innovation, while also providing sustainable resource sector jobs, for example in forestry and agriculture,” Kniewasser noted. “The path forward is doable and our province is in a good place to embrace a clean economy and produce the goods and materials that will be in demand in the changing global economy.”

In addition to presentations by Reimer and Kniewasser, Sears presented the OBWB’s annual report and spoke of the need to continue to build on climate adaptation efforts, but to reach out and work with those working on mitigation too. “We need to get ready for unprecedented weather,” she said. “We can ensure that we’re as protected as we can be, getting our communities more resilient, but we should be aware and supportive of efforts to tackle greenhouse gas emissions.”

The annual meeting also included the announcement that the City of Armstrong has once again won the title of “Make Water Work Community Champions.” Armstrong won the title in 2015. The Water Board announces the winner based on the number of pledges collected, per capita, to conserve and “Make Water Work” each summer. Armstrong Mayor Chris Pieper was on hand to accept the honour and be presented with a plaque.

As the current drought continues in the Okanagan, the OBWB encourages residents to conserve and save water for water matters – food crops, fish and firefighting. Find tips to conserve, as well as water restrictions for your neighbourhood at www.MakeWaterWork.ca.

A copy of the 2017 Annual Report can be found at <http://www.obwb.ca/overview/annual-reports/>.