



Participants sample invertebrates at the Winfield Nature Reserve wetland in Lake Country. Photo credit: Contributed

Okanagan losing battle to preserve wetlands

Political will called for to create and enforce mitigation standards

BARRY GERDING / Jan. 19, 2018 6:30 a.m. / NEWS

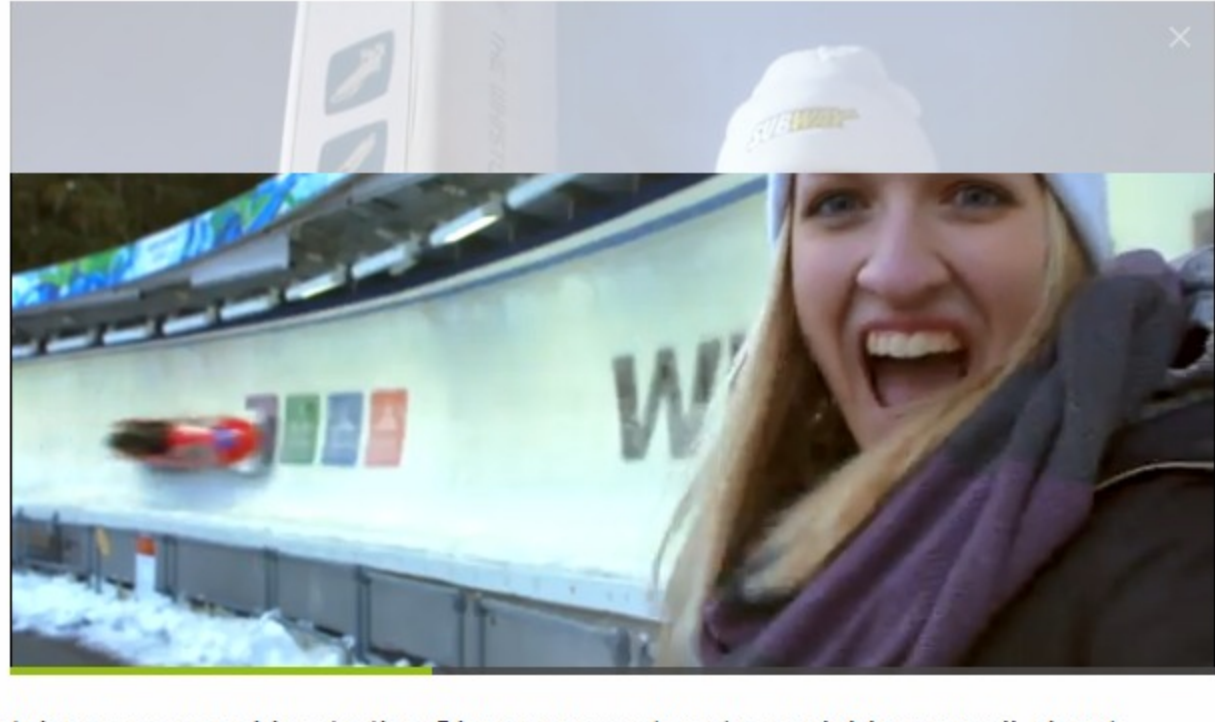


The Okanagan Valley is a major contributor to why B.C. is among the worst provinces across Canada for protecting wetland habitat, says an expert on the subject.

Neil Fletcher says the Okanagan has lost 85 per cent of its natural wetlands, largely to urban development sprawl.

"People are living where wetlands used to be," he said.

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Fletcher was speaking to the Okanagan water stewardship council about wetland preservation last week in Kelowna.

He is one of the most knowledgeable sources on the topic, serving as manager of the BC Wildlife Federation wetlands education program and chair of the provincial wetland stewardship partnership.

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Fletcher started out in Ottawa, Ontario where he prepared a management plan for a provincially significant wetland next to a housing development site.

He later moved on to monitoring nutrient loading in the waters surrounding the RCMP horse breeding facility where he strapped on chest waders and pounded groundwater monitoring wells into grassy waterway filled with poop.

Today, Fletcher is concerned with the multifaceted wetlands of British Columbia and helps to empower communities to protect, conserve and restore them.

Fletcher said the Okanagan's poor history of wetland preservation extends across Canada, where an estimated 70 to 80 per cent of wetlands have been lost, again largely due to development.

While mitigation efforts are available to restore wetlands, it is an expensive, long-term process and currently doesn't have the political will of the provincial government to be strictly monitored, regulated and enforced.

"It takes a long time for the mitigated recovery of a wetlands. We are still learning as we go about how to improve restoration efforts," he said.

The impacts of a lost wetlands on the local environment are many, from becoming prone to flooding to endangered species placed in harm's way.

"About one-third of our endangered species require wetlands at some stage in their lives to survive," Fletcher said.

Generating a positive government-driven response has been slow, but Fletcher does cite some positive steps.

The new Water Sustainability Act has recognized the existence of wetlands, which Fletcher said is a step up from being categorized in the past as a swamp.

"But there are no specific standards set for wetland preservation. That is the challenge."

One example of what could be is the forest industry, which since 2004 has enforced strict policies about the mitigation and protection of wetlands in harvesting timber, regulations that the oil and gas industry also emulate.

Fletcher said it is largely left to environment management professionals to determine appropriate mitigation or protection measures, and they often are caught between what they feel is necessary and what their clients are willing to do.

"The policy guidance should not come from professionals but from the government who sets policy that all professionals and industry can follow."

That guidance should include what constitutes wetland damage avoidance, minimizing ecological harm, where compensation should occur, acceptable forms of compensation, mitigation policy and providing guaranteed ecological outcomes.

Achieving that would come from standard regulations with adequate enforcement resources, inventory data, incentives and education initiatives for development proponents and government administration.

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