



Preparing for weather events in Okanagan communities

2017 flooding a lesson in climate change unpredictability

BARRY GERDING / Mar. 15, 2018 4:00 p.m. / COMMUNITY / NEWS



The need for Okanagan communities to prepare for the eventuality of extreme weather conditions is one of the takeaway lessons from the 2017 valley flooding response review, says the executive director of the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

The independent review was focused on the flooding response management of forests, lands, natural resource operations and rural development ministry staff.

But among the report's 65 recommendations regarding staffing levels, experience and training, and streamflow forecasting models in the face of climate change, Ann Warwick Sears said the need for emergency preparedness invoked by individual communities was also cited.

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"You can do all the forecasting you want and collect all the data you want, and that is an important piece to do, but when sudden weather changes like we saw last spring occur, communities need to have emergency plans in place for how to deal with flooding, where the risk areas are and what protective measures can be put in place to minimize the damage," said Warwick Sears.

"Historically, we always seemed to find a way to engineer our way out of high flood events, but one of the things of the 21st century there is a lot less hubris now about engineering our way out of problems. What was a brilliant engineering step to take in the 1950s doesn't really work as the magic bullet solution today."

Warwick Sears suggested we can apply some of the preventative damage thinking behind minimizing forest fires towards emergency flood response tactics.

"They are different kinds of natural disasters but we can take some of the fire suppression principles and apply them to flood management as well," she said.

She cited the LiDAR infra red imaging project the water board is currently working to develop with valley communities, to map out the valley floodplains and generate strategies to address minimizing potential flood damage, as one such preventative action step.

Warwick Sears said she was also happy to see the review reinforce that ministry staff did the best job they could have under the circumstances to manage the level of Okanagan Lake .

"They followed all the protocols and procedures they are asked to follow, and when those protocols were incorrect, they changed them."

The review revisited the string of unusual weather conditions that led to the flooding— unusually high level of precipitation in the fall of 2016 that saturated the soil; a colder, dry winter that froze the saturated soil; then record-breaking precipitation levels in March and April that expedited the snowmelt runoff.

"The prediction forecast was for a drought summer, and that's actually what happened. It was just the other unforeseen weather conditions that happened leading up to that. We were fortunate in that June is generally the wettest month in the Okanagan, and if that had been true to form last year, the flooding would have been much worse. But as it turned out, we had almost no rain that month."

West Kelowna Mayor Doug Findlater said while managing the lake level is a provincial responsibility, his community has taken steps to address potential flood concerns with several waterways such as McDougall Creek, Smith Creek and Powers Creek which flow across the municipality.

"That is the danger for us, the creeks being able to handle the spring runoff, so we've been doing dredging projects to remove sediment where the creeks flatten out and around bridges," he said.

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