



## Okanagan domestic use water well sign-up frustration mounts

Province lagging on well application approval process

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Okanagan Valley residents reliant on wells for their water could potentially lose their access rights if they don't register their use with the provincial government.

While frustration over well approval delays are causing some people to opt out of participating in the registration program until the bureaucracy hiccups get ironed out, that attitude could present dire consequences.

"From a legal perspective, all they have to do is register and the protection of their priority use water rights are preserved. If they do not, they lose that status and could find themselves losing those water drilling rights in the face of future groundwater license applications in their area," said Greg Tyson, a water policy analyst with the B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development.

The issue was brought up at last week's Okanagan Basin Water Board meeting, when director Rick Fairbairn, representing the North Okanagan Regional District, voiced concerns he has heard from water rights holders, telling him the registration process is frustrating and a miserable failure for both water well drillers and their clients to negotiate.

"I am told 19,000 well registrations have been submitted and only about 2,000 have been actually licensed," Fairbairn said.

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Water board director Toby Pike, representing the Water Association of BC, said a disconnect currently seems to exist between the well registration application and approval process.

"There doesn't appear to be the resources available relative to the needs of the program," Pike noted.

The issue dates back to 2016, when the province of B.C. adopted the new Water Sustainability Act, which for the first time enacted groundwater licensing procedures for B.C. residents.

As part of that process, existing domestic water well rights holders were given a three-year grace period, which expires in March 2019, to register their wells to protect their longstanding water rights against future new license applications.

Tyson acknowledged the water well registration initiative has run into delays, but registration will continue to protect well rights holders while those issues get ironed out.

"The danger is if you don't register by March 2019, then your priority status is jeopardized. Some people living in rural areas may not feel it's all worthwhile, but if an inspector is dealing with a groundwater application in your area, your established rights will not be give priority consideration by inspectors dealing with other license applications," Tyson said.

Tyson, who grew up in Kelowna, said the expectation based on existing historical water well data and other research was about 20,000 applications would be forthcoming.

Extra staff were hired to help administer the registration process, but other staffing demands and a provincial election interrupted that mandate.

"We had up to 80 people in the beginning, hired and brought up to speed with the training, but the initial application uptake was on the slow side and some of those people were drawn into other areas where staffing help was needed," Tyson said.

He said the last provincial election also proved disruptive in the water well registration public advocacy push.

He acknowledged the application approval delays raise frustration for existing water well rights holders, but those who haven't still need to follow through on the registration process.

"They will be allowed to continue to use water as they have done in the past for as long as it takes for their application decision to be made. If you don't apply within the three-year transition window, you put yourself in the position where down the road you might not be allowed to use the water. This just protects your priority rights."

Water well users are asked to contact [FrontCounter BC](#) to determine if your well record already exists in the provincial database. If no record exists, applicants are asked to complete a well registration form and email it to [Groundwater@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Groundwater@gov.bc.ca). This registration is for domestic water well use only.

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