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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OKANAGAN WATER BOARD ANNUAL MEETING LOOKS AT VALLEY'S WATER FUTURE

Kelowna, B.C. – The Okanagan Basin Water Board held its Annual General Meeting Friday, August 10, at The Innovation Centre in Kelowna. The theme this year was “Preparing for the Future,” acknowledging the focus of the Water Board during the past year on preparing the region for a water future that includes drought and fires, as well as flooding.

“We chose our theme because it best describes the focus of our work this year,” explained OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears. “I’ve been thinking and reading a lot about climate change, which is affecting the weather in the Okanagan and exacerbating the impacts to our communities. There is a lot of uncertainty about how the weather patterns will play out, but we know that we are going to have more extreme events – floods, fires, and droughts. It’s not too late to reduce the impacts if we take climate change seriously.”

Much of the agency’s work this past year has focused on helping communities develop drought plans, floodplain mapping, and better understanding environmental needs for water. Work has also been done to research ground and surface water supplies and its interconnection in our valley, as well as expansion and protection of wetlands to address flooding and promote improved water quality. “All of this work is intended to help our communities make better decisions to meet the challenges we are facing today and in the years ahead,” Sears added.

This is in addition to continued efforts by the OBWB this past year to protect the Okanagan from invasive zebra and quagga mussels, promote water conservation in our semi-arid region, remove invasive milfoil from valley lakes, and provide grants through programs like the Water Board’s Sewage Facilities Grants Program, helping local governments upgrade their wastewater systems.

“This summer we’ve seen devastating heat waves and fires around the world. Although there was severe flooding in the South Okanagan this spring, we’re fortunate that 2018 has been a bit easier on B.C. than 2017. And we’re fortunate in the Okanagan that we have strong communities that work so well together on both emergency response and long-term mitigation planning,” said Sears.

To that end, the OBWB invited Tamsin Lyle to be its keynote speaker. Lyle, a leader in flood management planning in Canada, spoke to the future of flood preparation, mitigation and resilience in the Okanagan. The gathering also heard from Brian Symonds, former Director of Water Stewardship for the Province of B.C., who presented on understanding past and future flood levels in our valley. Symonds, who is now retired, has continued to advise, as necessary, on Okanagan Lake levels during the last two flood seasons.

“Floods are something we don’t want to think about until we need to. And when we do think about, it challenges us and forces us to make difficult decisions and tradeoffs,” Lyle said. “Historically, we have tried to avoid these difficult conversations and decisions, opting instead to fight floods - by stopping the water, by building walls, by pushing the problem away. With a changing climate, and more extreme weather and flood events – we can’t continue to build our way out of the problem. We have an opportunity to do things differently, and to do them better – to learn to live with the water rather than fighting against it,” she added.

“Floods are something that affects everyone. Flood damages cost Canadian taxpayers 100s of millions of dollars a year, disrupt businesses and damage the environment and cultural assets. This is something that Okanagan residents know intimately. Recent flooding, and the stress and toil associated with it, will be

remembered by those directly affected for the rest of their lives. Limiting future impacts is something we should all care about,” said Lyle.

In addition to Lyle and Symond’s presentation, Sears presented the OBWB’s annual report, reviewing the work of the past year, what these efforts mean for the future of water in the Okanagan Basin, and plans for 2019.

“The Okanagan, long-recognized for its beauty but also water challenges, stands as an example of what’s possible with water planning, thanks to the partnerships that have been built over our 38-year history,” Sears noted. “We look forward to continuing to work with all of our various partners – Indigenous, local and senior governments, the academic and agricultural community, stewardship groups, businesses, residents and more – to address these challenges and meet the needs of our valley for a sustainable and healthy water supply.”

The annual meeting also included the announcement that the City of Armstrong has retained the title of “Make Water Work Community Champions” for 2018. “Oh my! I was already strategizing for 2019, thinking a third-time win could be out of our reach,” responded Armstrong Mayor Chris Pieper. “I’m very proud of our community continuing to lead in this way. Water is so key to everybody and everything.”

Make Water Work is a valley-wide initiative of the OBWB’s Okanagan WaterWise program, created and delivered in partnership with local governments and utilities throughout the valley. The winner is determined based on the number of pledges collected, per capita, to conserve and “Make Water Work” each summer. Although Make Water Work has awarded prizes to individual pledgees since 2011, the friendly community-to-community challenge began in 2014. The first Community Champion was Oliver, followed by Armstrong in 2015, Peachland in 2016 and Armstrong again in 2017.

As the current dry weather continues in the Okanagan, the OBWB encourages residents to continue to be WaterWise 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 2018 Annual Report can be found at <http://www.obwb.ca/overview/annual-reports/>.