



Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, talked to the media about the benefits of LiDAR aerial landscape imaging at Kinsmen Park in Kelowna earlier this year. Barry Gerding/Black Press

Airplane crash delays Okanagan Valley aerial mapping project

Aviation tragedy claimed lives of project pilot, aerial mapping technician

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A tragic airplane crash this summer has delayed completion of an aerial geography mapping project for the Okanagan Valley.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board had enlisted a radar technology tool called LiDAR to create digital three-dimensional aerial imaging data to accurately map the valley landscape.

The \$600,000 project, contracted out to the Port Coquitlam firm Eagle Mapping, was expected to provide valuable data that can help community planners, government environment management officials and First Nations communities how to better respond to landscape changes caused by global warming and to both better enhance flood protection and prevention measures along with better development planning by valley communities near sensitive ecosystems and floodplains.



The environment ministry had embarked on similar mapping exercises on Vancouver Island and the Interior this year as part of a larger \$1.45 million program.

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But the Okanagan project suffered a setback when the Eagle Mapping LiDAR technician and his pilot were killed in an airplane crash while conducting another aerial survey assignment in the Kannanaskis region of Alberta in August.

Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the OBWB, said she wasn't made aware of the aviation mishap until almost 10 days after it happened as the aerial mapping project was being coordinated by the ministry of environment office in Victoria.

Along with the two fatalities, the camera gear used on the plane was also damaged in the crash, as recovery efforts to save the camera-recorded data is still underway.

"There was a significant amount of data on the plane cameras related to our project when the plane went down," she said.

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Adding to the complications was the heavy forest fire smoke filling the skies across the region for much of August, making any flights unable to continue due to limited aerial photography visibility.

"What we had enough imaging of the floodplain mapping aspect on the valley bottom, but there were a bunch more things we hoped to do with LiDAR for the whole watershed such as mapping slope stability, understanding the quality of the watershed, evaluate forest canopy...there are so many things you can do with this three-dimensional imaging," Warwick Sears said.

"The ironic thing is we are doing the floodplain mapping because of the impacts of climate change, but one aspect of climate change is forests fires, with the smoke getting in the way of completing the project."

Warwick Sears said her hope is that work will reconvene next spring when the snow is melted.

"It's been a challenging project with the different weather conditions and the tragic accident but we are slowly making our way through it and it will eventually all come together," she said.