

June 24, 2019

NEWS RELEASE

AQUAHACKING CHALLENGE COMES TO OKANAGAN TO HELP ADDRESS WATER ISSUES

Kelowna, B.C. – The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) is pleased to announce that it is joining forces with Aqua Forum to bring, for the first time, the national AquaHacking Challenge to Western Canada and to our valley. This challenge, aimed at attracting tech-savvy youth to help tackle freshwater issues, will be one of four events being held across Canada in 2019-2020.

“This hits a real sweet spot for us,” said Water Board Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears. “It brings together so many of our interests, like raising awareness around – and solving – water issues, expanding partnerships with post-secondaries and the tech community, doing something bold and innovative, and engaging the entire community.” The enthusiasm was echoed by OBWB’s Board of Directors who voted unanimously to participate.

“As we expand our programming across Canada, we are thrilled to be working with the OBWB in the Okanagan to deliver the first AquaHacking Challenge in B.C.” added Isabelle Bourduas, Aqua Forum Chief Operating Officer. “Our objectives are to leverage young tech talent for the benefits of freshwater and to build lasting and impactful collaborative relationships between leading water organizations and the tech & innovation sector in B.C. – and across Canada.”

Founded by the De Gaspé Beaubien Foundation on the belief that innovation and entrepreneurship are necessary for sustainable environmental change, the program initially had a five-year focus on the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Basin (2015-2019). Since then, it has received funding from the RBC Foundation to bring the program coast to coast. Along with founding technology partner IBM, funding for the BC AquaHacking Challenge has also been provided by the Real Estate Foundation of BC.

As a startup-incubator program focused on demand-driven innovation, the program starts with tangible fresh water issues selected by local water leaders and focuses on developing solutions. During the seven-month process, the multi-disciplinary teams of hackers will have access to expert-led water issue webinars, skills-building webinars (Design Thinking, Machine-learning, The Perfect Pitch) as well as facilitated leadership and collaboration workshops.

Teams are adjudicated along the way and finalist teams are secured spots in incubators, ensuring solutions are further refined for eventual commercialization and implementation.

So far, between 2015 and 2018, the program has resulted in 12 active start-ups with 75% still active. Ten critical water issues are actively being worked on, including microplastics, blue green algae, sewage overflow. As well, more than 800 tech-engaged youth are now more water-aware.

“The challenges we face in the Okanagan are not so different than those in other regions,” Sears added. “Looking at past outcomes from this program, the tech solutions coming out of this challenge could reach far beyond our own valley and deliver national, and even international, benefits.”

Additional background on the AquaHacking Challenge can be found at www.aquahacking.com.

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