

October 29, 2019

NEWS RELEASE

AQUAHACKING CHALLENGE LAUNCHED IN OKANAGAN TO HELP ADDRESS B.C. FRESHWATER ISSUES

Kelowna, B.C. – Students, tech leaders, and those with an interest in freshwater issues were on hand today for the launch of the B.C. AquaHacking Challenge 2020, hosted by the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) and Aqua Forum, held at UBC Okanagan.

AquaHacking was founded by the De Gaspé Beaubien Foundation five years ago with the goal of connecting youth and young professionals with an interest in freshwater issues, clean-tech innovation and entrepreneurship, with mentors who could help them launch real-world solutions. Aqua Forum was established as a separate non-profit to oversee the initiative and the program initially had a five-year focus on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Basin (2015-2019). After five years, and with funding from RBC Foundation to bring the program coast-to-coast, and further funding from the Real Estate Foundation of BC (REFBC), organizers were ready to expand westward.

“As a member of the De Gaspé Beaubien family who is from B.C., it is really exciting to see a program like this come here, to harness the skills and talents of young British Columbians in having a positive impact on freshwater in the province,” noted Aidan Mattrick. “We knew to expand we needed a great local partner like OBWB – a community leader with water management expertise, and a partner that would be enthusiastic and receptive to work on these issues. I can’t wait to see what develops over the next few months and beyond.”

OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears is just as keen about the challenge. “I’m excited about the challenge because of the opportunity to work with new partners, and to raise awareness for water issues among tech professionals, and build stronger ties to the university and college community,” she said.

The challenge is open to teams from across Canada and it’s anticipated that the tech solutions coming out of this could deliver national, and even international, benefits. The five water issues, selected by an advisory committee panel and to be addressed as part of this year’s B.C. AquaHacking Challenge, include:

- 1) Contaminants in stormwater (Answering the question: How can we improve water quality in our lakes and streams by reducing stormwater contamination?);
- 2) Residential/commercial outdoor water use (How can we reduce the amount of water used outdoors by B.C. homes and businesses?);
- 3) Flood damage in communities and the need to communicate flood risk (How can we reduce damage to homes, businesses and infrastructure and better communicate the risk of flooding to communities?);
- 4) Preventing and mitigating the effects of invasive zebra and quagga mussels (How can we prevent an infestation and potential damage from invasive mussels?); and
- 5) Access to potable water in Indigenous communities (How can we improve access to clean drinking water for Indigenous communities in B.C.?).

This challenge will be one of three events being held across Canada in 2020. Separate events are being held in Winnipeg and Halifax. In each challenge, students and early-career professionals will receive mentorship & skills building workshops, while they compete for more than \$50,000 in prizes and a secured spot in a start-up incubator.

“The AquaHacking Challenge is a fantastic model for testing ideas and driving real innovation. We’re proud to help bring this unique, creative and scalable approach to B.C.,” said Leanne Sexsmith, REFBC’s Director of Grants and Special Projects.

“I look forward to seeing what kind of tech solutions are developed,” added Sears. “The water issues we have put forward are among the top priorities in our valley and important to communities across B.C.”

Supporters and funders of the B.C. AquaHacking Challenge include: IBM (founding technology partner), RBC Foundation, REFBC, Teck Resources and Mitacs.

Advisory committee partners are: Central Okanagan Economic Development Commission, Okanagan Sustainability Leadership Council, Urban Systems, City of Kelowna, Purppl, Okanagan Nation Alliance, and the B.C. Ministry of Environment and Climate Change and Ministry of Jobs, Trade and Technology – Cleantech Planning and Innovation Branch.

Academic partners are: UBC Okanagan and UBC Vancouver, Okanagan College, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, Thompson Rivers University, and University of Northern B.C.

Implementation partners are: Hackworks, Waterlution and the OBWB’s Okanagan WaterWise education and outreach program.

For more on the B.C. AquaHacking Challenge 2020, visit <https://aquahacking.com/en/bc-2020/>.

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