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Water security a B.C. economic driver

New study says \$100 million watershed investment over next decade will create 13,000 new jobs

BARRY GERDING / Jul. 18, 2021 8:00 a.m. / NEWS



Okanagan Lake water level manager Shaun Reimer at the Pentiction dam regulating the water release from Okanagan Lake further south into the Okanagan Valley watershed. (OBWB photo)

A new study calling for the creation of a B.C. Watershed Security Fund states it would be a significant driver of employment and economic activity across the province.

The study recommends a \$100 million/year fund investment over the next decade would create about 13,000 more jobs and increase the provincial GDP by \$1.3 billion.

“As a point of comparison, the cost of replacing the Pattulo Bridge over the Fraser River in the Lower Mainland is estimated to be \$1.4 billion. So for less cost than building one major bridge, the provincial government can create a legacy of long-term employment and healthy watersheds through the province,” states the study.

The report was compiled by the consulting firm Delphi Group, with support from the BC Freshwater Legacy Initiative, Water Sustainability Project and BC Water Funders Collaborative, of which the Okanagan Basin Water Board is a member but did not contribute financially to this particular study.

While not breaking the economic impact down to regions across the province, such as the Okanagan Water Basin, the study finds potential economic growth is greatest in the areas of watershed management and restoration, and education, training and infrastructure capacity building.

The job growth is seen in areas such as watershed management and restoration; industrial water management and infrastructure; urban water management; regulatory and public administration; and education, training and capacity building opportunities up to 2030.

The study also comes at a point when the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development has received a report outlining changes needed to update the Okanagan Lake Regulations System.

The Delphi study stated: “The Watershed Security Fund can bridge this gap to create funding partnerships with local governments. Local governments that have developed watershed programs have proven very effective at leveraging additional funds from many different sources.”

Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, said the study hopefully attracts the attention of officials at seniors levels of government to consider when determining funding levels for water security infrastructure, system maintenance and research projects.

“I think it is an eye-opener in learning how much work actually goes into maintaining drinking water systems and water infrastructure, how many people are employed by that and how important it is for the decision-makers to be thinking about shifts in our economy and to think about the importance of water to our communities and the payback that comes from taking care of it,” said Warwick Sears.

“This study shows there is a huge economic benefit to that...all the work you do to maintain our water systems now will continue to pay off over the longer term.”

Warwick Sears says people talk about the economic benefits to B.C. from the forest industry, the mining industry, but the value of protecting our drinking water and the systems which provide it often gets overlooked and under-valued in that context.

She added the ministry of environment and climate strategy is developing a post-COVID watershed security strategy, which in part led the supporting stakeholders of the study to illustrate the economic connection behind such funding decisions.