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The Okanagan Basin Water Board recently unveiled its Source Water Protection Toolkit to the Regional District Central Okanagan. (Photo/Black Press Media)

Okanagan Basin Water Board says cooperation vital to protecting drinking water

'We're facing complex challenges but we do have many tools to protect drinking water sources'

GARY BARNES / Apr. 18, 2022 2:35 p.m. / NEWS



Local action along with consistent and coordinated approaches are vital to maintaining source water quality in the Okanagan.

That was the message delivered by the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) as it unveiled a [Source Water Protection Toolkit](#) to the Regional District Central Okanagan (RDCO) at its April 14 board meeting.

"Source water protection offers multiple cumulative benefits," said Kellie Garcia, policy and planning specialist, OBWB. "For example, if you're protecting your riparian area, you can be protecting drinking water quality, but also providing habitat for rare and endangered species, providing recreation opportunities for people to bike and hike, and providing aesthetic values as well."

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The toolkit was developed in consultation with, and for, local, provincial, and First Nations government staff, as well as conservation groups. Garcia told the board that the Okanagan has multi-use watersheds, that create many challenges. She added water can be easily contaminated and is costly or impossible to remediate.

"There are many sources of contamination," she said. "Ranching, mining, forestry, recreation, land development, etc., all happening up around our drinking water sources. Climate change has been bringing more frequent floods and droughts and landslides."

On top of those challenges is a complicated legislative framework in B.C. governing water, leading to conflicting mandates and gaps in authority, according to Garcia.

"We have 23 pieces of legislation over local, provincial, and federal jurisdiction. Of course, we've got unceded territories, so Indigenous laws, rights, and title."

Garcia also pointed out that the newly-created Ministry of Land, Water, and Resource Stewardship now puts water across three ministries instead of two.

"They're working on a watershed security strategy and fund which will be dedicated to protecting watersheds drinking water quality, and then they have the mandate to honour the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA)."

B.C.'s [Drinking Water Protection Act](#) sets out requirements for drinking water operators and suppliers, including a source protection plan which takes into account risk assessments and response. Garcia said there are gaps in the Okanagan Valley regarding response plans, and noted that's why the toolkit was developed.

"The plan is actually a living document that outlines your actions that you're going to take and who you're going to take them with in order to protect drinking water."

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The toolkit also looked at what is within the jurisdiction of local governments and what they can use to protect drinking water sources.

"We're facing very complex challenges but we do have many tools to use to protect drinking water sources as local governments," said Garcia. "It's really important to understand though that no single organization can do it. We can't just say well, it's the province's mandate they should be doing their job."

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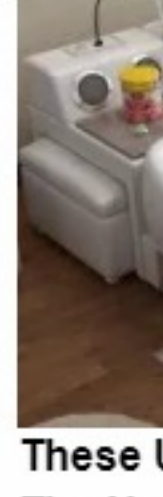
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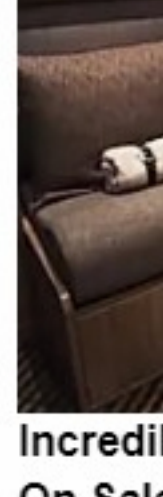
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