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Aridity map shows valley as top concern

J.P. Squire Aug 8, 2022



An international team of scientists has released a new world map on aridity, confirming the Okanagan Valley as one of the areas of concern.

The aridity database, recently published in the Nature journal – Scientific Data for the period 1970-2000 can be used as a baseline for future projections.

"We're in that arid or semi-arid environment—the Okanagan's been arid for a very long time—and that always means that we're going to need to conserve water. That's why we have all these water conservation campaigns and work with municipalities on drought planning," said Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, on Friday.

"We've been working with the communities on the twin faces of climate change for quite a number of years. There's still an intense amount of work being done on flood planning, flood mapping, and trying to support municipalities as they slowly work that information into their bylaws. You need to have changes in zoning, things like that," she said. "We're also working with the water utilities side of the municipalities and (water) improvement districts to do more drought planning and update their water restrictions."

As well, water board staff sit on the Thompson-Okanagan regional drought group that has provincial staff, municipal staff and representatives from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, salmon groups and other stakeholders who meet during droughts to ensure better communication, she noted.

"The fact that we are a very arid area means that we definitely have to plan for more extremes of heat and dryness. But we also have to plan for the intense rainstorms. One of the reasons why things are going to be dryer in the future is that we're going to get precipitation more in the form of rain than in snow so we're not going to be able to hold it," she said. "That exacerbates the problem: where you have the precipitation running off and then, we don't have sufficient reservoir storage to hold it. The mainstem lakes hold a tremendous amount of water but we don't want to mine them. Nobody wants to have the lake levels drop severely. So we have to learn to live within our budgets."

Dr. Robert Zomer, lead author of the aridity paper, said: "These datasets have been found useful across a wide variety of applications, particularly related, but not limited to water management and crop production, but also socio-ecological and socio-economic applications addressing sustainable development and climate change, and can be particularly useful for local adaptation to global change."



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