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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LOCAL LEADERS PRACTICE DROUGHT RESPONSE THROUGH GAMING EXERCISE

Kelowna, B.C. – Severe droughts bring big conflicts to communities, but most of us aren't ready for such events, and some don't even want to think about it. So how do you engage people on such a serious topic? Make it fun, but keep it meaningful. With that in mind, key players in government (elected officials and staff), Okanagan water suppliers, and reps from the agriculture, fisheries and ranching community, are participating in a drought simulation exercise in Kelowna today. Participants are choosing who gets what in a severe water shortage and learning the implications of their decisions.

The drought tournament, taking place at the Coast Capri Hotel, has been organized by the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) in collaboration with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) and B.C.'s Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations. Its purpose is to get those responsible for water management to understand how different choices impact water supply and can increase, or reduce, conflict. The exercise will also help participants who want to develop drought plans for their communities and establish contacts for basin-wide collaboration.

"We're very pleased to be offering this type of practical workshop here in the Okanagan," noted Stu Wells, Chair of the OBWB and Mayor of Osoyoos. "Our region has faced droughts in the past and will face them in the future. Just this year, we had a very wet spring but look at the dry summer and fall we had which created near-drought conditions.

"One of the most important things we can do for our communities is to be aware of the various scenarios we may be facing and to be prepared. To ensure the most positive outcomes, we need to know where the need for water is going to be, and what the consequences and trade-offs of our decisions will be. This is what this workshop is all about – helping communities prepare and be as resilient as possible."

"You shouldn't underestimate the importance of fun in learning," added facilitator Warren Wilson. "People are sometimes inclined to ignore serious and difficult management decisions. By inserting fun into this process people are more likely to engage."

The tournament, a concept developed by AAFC, is set up as a game, with an element of competition, making it fun while also providing a valuable learning experience, explained Wilson, who led a similar workshop in Calgary last year. "At the Calgary event, I saw people sharing best practices and learning from each other. We're looking for the same results here."

As part of the exercise, participants are divided into teams, given a drought scenario, asked to identify and work through some of the issues anticipated with a drought (e.g. water reservoir management, the need for water for food production, and water for fish). The teams are then given options for managing their water supply. The decisions of each team are scored by jersey-wearing referees and other teams, and entered into a sophisticated computer program, known as the Water Evaluation and Planning (WEAP) tool. From this, participants are able to understand and assess how their decisions would play-out in a multi-year drought.

In addition to the Calgary example, similar workshops have been held in Saskatchewan and Colorado. In each instance the event was extremely well-received.

Valerie Cameron attended the Calgary workshop and is attending today's in the Okanagan. She is the Provincial Water Stewardship Manager with B.C.'s Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, responsible for the province's drought response.

"One of the greatest things about this tournament is that it brings together different levels of government, the academic community, and local stakeholder groups, just as would be required to find solutions in a real drought," Cameron said. "Drought response is not just a government responsibility. It's one we all have to work together to address. So this tournament is a microcosm of reality."

In considering what she is looking to get out of the workshop, Cameron added that in Calgary she was amazed at the number of innovative ideas that came forward and is looking forward to a similar experience here in the Okanagan. Also, she added, increased awareness around drought is important.

"In B.C., we have a perception of an abundance of water but we have areas that face a limited supply – the Okanagan, Thompson, and Nicola, for example. The Peace Region is currently in a level 4 drought – the highest level," added Cameron. "With climate change we are going to experience more drought. It's time for us to think about it and plan for it., which in turn will help us respond and adapt."

In addition to local, provincial and federal government representatives, participants and observers of today's drought tournament include delegates from: Okanagan Nation Alliance, Interior Health Authority, BC Fruit Growers Association, BC Cattlemen's Association, UBC-O, SFU, University of Alberta, University of Saskatchewan, as well as representatives from the U.S.' National Integrated Drought Information System from Denver, CO, and the National Drought Mitigation Center from Lincoln, NB.

- 30 -

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