

Okanagan learns from Vegas experience

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In Southern Nevada, it's illegal to water the street, or to permit irrigation water to run off your property—and fees for violators can exceed \$5,000 per time.

It's just one of the tools used by the Southern Nevada Water Authority to encourage water conservation in a desert environment, similar in some ways to the Okanagan Valley, explains Doug Bennett, conservation manager for the SNWA.

He was speaking at a day-long workshop in Kelowna Wednesday called What can we learn from Las Vegas: water conservation in the Okanagan, put on by the Irrigation Industry Association of B.C., in collaboration with the Okanagan Basin Water Board and Okanagan Waterwise.

In Southern Nevada, they employ water waste investigators who perform 30,000 inspections a year, enforcing such regulations regarding the use of water on landscapes, he told the 120 or so delegates.

One of the tools used to encourage conservation is water smart landscaping, because "it's all about landscaping," he says.

Such landscaping uses a quarter the amount of conventional landscaping with its large areas of lawn.

Today, lawns are prohibited in new residential front yards and only 50 per cent of the back yard can be in lawn.

Instead, attractive groupings of plants are used, and people are finding the new landscaping is also much more attractive than a square of green lawn, he said.

Commercial buildings have to rely on plants instead of lawns, and the golf industry is limited to 50 acres of turf, because only the fairways and landing areas need to be green, and the rough can be landscaped with plants.

Although in Nevada population growth has slowed down, it hasn't in the Okanagan, he noted.

"You can manage growth, but you can't close a town," he said.

Bennett said in the Okanagan, it appears that complacency is one of the biggest problems, with a big, full lake running the length of the valley.

Yet, he warned, water is the underpinning of the economy.

The Okanagan's water will be totally allocated in less than 10 years, advised Ted van der Gulik, senior engineer in sustainable agriculture management for the agriculture ministry.

And, 65 per cent of the valley's water is used for agriculture and 20 per cent is used on turf and landscapes with outside irrigation.

"How do we want our communities to look in the future?" he asked.

B.C. has a water plan which requires that we be 30 per cent more efficient in our water use by 2020, 50 per cent of that through conservation

measures, he said.

Watershed management planning will be needed to achieve those savings.

Anna Warwick Sears, executive director for the OBWB forecast a 50 per cent increase in population in the coming decades in the valley, and there's less winter snow predicted so water storage will be more important.

"There are big implications if we permit the existing type of landscaping to continue," she warned.

We want to preserve our fish resources, municipal needs and agricultural uses, so it's important we conserve water, she said.

"The stakes are high when it comes to managing water in the Okanagan," she said.

"We have less water available to us than almost anywhere else in Canada, but we use at least two times more than the average Canadian.

"The Okanagan is one of the best places in the world to live, and if we want to keep it that way, we need to stop wasting water. Climate change and population growth are going to stress our water system in unpredictable ways," she said.

"Nevada isn't everyone's first guess when we think about water conservation, but Bennett and his team have brought in some really innovative—and effective—solutions to address their water needs. Listening to what they have done, and drawing on the expertise of all the other workshop participants is what will help build a stronger, sustainable Okanagan," she added.

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