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NEWS RELEASE

OKANAGAN WATER BOARD BRINGS PROVINCE & LOCAL WATER USERS TOGETHER TO DISCUSS & ADDRESS DROUGHT

Kelowna, B.C. – In response to the current drought in the Okanagan, and the increasing stress on fish, agriculture, and other water needs, the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) gathered together a broad section of user groups today to review the current situation and coordinate a plan of action.

“Water is one of our most valuable resources and we all need to work together to conserve it,” said Steve Thomson, Minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (FLNRO), who delivered opening remarks at the Okanagan Drought Response Workshop, held at the Coast Capri Hotel in Kelowna. “With drought at its worst level in the southern interior since the Province created the Drought Response Plan in 2010, it is more important than ever for people to curtail their water use now, so more will be available later in summer and fall.”

Others speakers included:

- Doug Findlater – Okanagan Basin Water Board Chair and Mayor of West Kelowna
- Valerie Cameron – FLNRO’s Water Stewardship Manager
- Shaun Reimer – FLNRO Section Head for Public Safety & Protection
- Brian Symonds – International Joint Commission’s Osoyoos Lake Board of Control, Canadian Board Member
- Howie Wright & Richard Bussanich – Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA)’s Fisheries Department
- Hans Buchler – BC Agriculture Council, past board member
- Lee Hesketh – BC Cattlemen’s Association, Program Coordinator
- Mitch Moroziuk – City of Penticton, Director of Operations
- Kevin Van Vliet – City of Kelowna, Utility Services Manager
- Renee Clark – Regional District of North Okanagan, Water Quality Manager

“Our water is all connected – upstream and downstream,” added OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears, noting the significance of having all the players in the room. “Okanagan utilities may have different sources but in a real way we’re mutually dependent on each other. We truly are all part of ‘One valley. One water.’”

For Richard Bussanich, a fisheries biologist with Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA), the drought and its effect on the fish has been “sad and humbling.”

ONA has been working with all levels of government, on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border, for more than 10 years to bring back the salmon fishery. This year, they were expecting to welcome 100,000 sockeye back to their spawning grounds, plus an additional 50,000 to 100,000 for food, commercial and recreational fishing. “This was going to be the best it had ever been since 1938, since we’ve been recording,” said Bussanich. Now, fishing has been banned along the main stem of the Okanagan River between Okanagan Lake and Osoyoos Lake to protect existing fish stocks, and ONA is expecting a return between 18,000 and 45,000 salmon.

“We live in a fragile environment,” noted Bussanich, adding that he hopes that today’s workshop is the beginning of an important discussion in the Okanagan. “My hope is that it plants a seed and we begin to see a change in the way we live in our valley, and we can say 30 years from now, on August 13 a change began to happen.”

Hans Buchler, representative for the BC Agriculture Council and a grape-grower himself, notes that with the early start to the growing season this year, many producers are coming close to using their full licenced allocation of water already, with several weeks left in the growing season. As such, he has several ideas to address the current water crisis. For example, farmers could dramatically reduce water use for crops that have already been harvested (e.g. cherries and apricots), ensuring enough for later crops such as pears and apples, and enough for fish, he added. In fact, said Buchler, fish should be included in agriculture as a food and considered as part of food security.

“Nobody likes water cut back, but it’s better to do it in a coordinated way,” added Buchler. “It’s hard to predict weather, but if this is the new normal, we really need to get our act together.”

While the OBWB continues to work with various user groups to address the current drought, it is also encouraging residents to do what they can to conserve. Make Water Work is an outdoor water conservation initiative of the Water Board’s Okanagan WaterWise program and local governments and utilities throughout the Okanagan. Residents can go to MakeWaterWork.ca and find tips to conserve, plus restrictions specific to their neighbourhood. They can also join an increasing number of residents who are pledging to Make Water Work and be entered to win more than \$8000 in WaterWise yard prizes.

In June 2015, the Province updated its Drought Response Plan from 2010. It can be found online at: <http://www.livingwatersmart.ca/drought/docs/2015/Drought-Response-Plan-Update-June-2015.pdf>.

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The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) was established in 1970 as a collaboration of the three Okanagan regional districts – North, Central and Okanagan-Similkameen. The board provides leadership for sustainable water management by protecting and enhancing the quality of life and environment in the Okanagan Basin, from Armstrong to Osoyoos.