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Voluntary water restrictions urged in the Okanagan as drought concerns rise

Steve Arstad

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Concerns about a pending drought are raising drought stages in the Okanagan. The province raised the drought level to three yesterday, June 20, 2019, while Okanagan Lake is at level two.
 (ADAM PROSKIW / iINFOnews.ca)

PENTICTON - A continued long-range forecast for drier than normal conditions and the effects of last winter's low snowpack levels are escalating drought levels in the Okanagan.

The province moved the valley's drought level to three yesterday, June 20, after data shows present trends could lead to serious water shortages and damage to ecosystems later this year.

It could also mean limited or restricted availability of water for some users if conditions result in water flows below critical thresholds for fish.

Drought level three calls for voluntary water use restrictions from all water users, including residents, industry, farmers and municipalities, with a suggested 30 per cent reduction in water use targeted.

Spring rains have failed to get Okanagan Lake to reach fullpool, as well as a number of upland reservoirs. Some utilities are already releasing water from reservoirs in order to meet downstream needs.

Okanagan Basin Water Board Communications Director Corinne Jackson says the level three condition was last experienced in 2017 but didn't occur until August.



"That came on the heels of a very wet spring. This year, it's three months earlier, and we've had very dry conditions for the last few months," she said.

Jackson also noted some reservoirs are already being tapped, much earlier in the season, in order to supplement downstream flows and meet demand.

Provincial section head, public safety and protection Shaun Reimer, who looks after Okanagan Lake levels at the Penticton River Channel dam, says implications of yesterday's drought level three announcement, in terms of water management, concerns withdrawals from tributaries feeding the Okanagan River.

"The province works with the water board to develop a different set of criteria for the mainstem lakes. Okanagan Lake, as of July 1, will be at drought level two, which involves voluntary compliance from water purveyors," Reimer said.

Reimer said Okanagan Lake, while currently below the 20th percentile in water levels historically, is still 10 cm higher than it was in 2003 and 2009.

"It's not a healthy amount of water, but we have had experience recently with low water levels in the lake. The big question is what will happen next year, if the drought continues. Under current conditions, it's hard to see where we will be later in the year," he said.

Environment Canada Meteorologist Matt MacDonald says another low-pressure system is forecast to make its way into the Okanagan region next week, but moisture levels aren't expected to make much of a dent in the water deficit to date, with June joining March, April and May in four consecutive months of below average precipitation.

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