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Kelowna

Keeping an eye on drought

'Too early to tell' drought's impacts on Okanagan agriculture

Nicholas Johansen Jun 24, 2021 4:00 am

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The Okanagan is in the middle of one of its worst droughts in many years, but it remains to be seen how the dry conditions will impact the Valley's agricultural industry.

This past spring was the [driest on record](#) in both Kelowna and Vernon, while Penticton and Kamloops were also close to breaking records. And the dry and hot conditions have persisted through June, with forecast temperatures [rising into the 40s](#) this coming weekend.

Irrigation in the Okanagan is supplied from a number of diverse sources, but largely from upland reservoirs like the McCulloch Lake and Beaver Lake reservoirs.

"We wouldn't be growing anything if we just relied on rain," said Glen Lucas, general manager of the BC Fruit Growers Association.

"If it's a little dry or a lot dry, as long as we have irrigation, the crop is fine ... Most times, the waters from the upland reservoirs feed the water systems for farms and municipalities and I'm not aware of any cases where that's been cut off due to drought. There have been some where there have been requests that irrigation be reduced, but those have been usually temporary and short-term and rare. Typically it's not a concern."

The decision to restrict agricultural water usage lies with the provincial government, but Lucas says measures like altering irrigation schedules would be implemented before restrictions.

Agriculture is the number one use of water in the Okanagan, but the Okanagan Basin Water Board's Corinne Jackson says, "it feeds our community and our economy."

She says Greater Vernon Water and the District of Lake Country have recently put out messaging to their agricultural water customers about maximizing water efficiency, due to concerns around a dry summer.

"It's too early to tell what the summer holds, but all indications at this point suggest that we could be in for a severe drought, in which case it makes sense for us to be preparing now," Jackson said. "It makes sense for agricultural customers to be making sure they don't have leaks ... and the same goes for residential users."

"We all have a part to play to make sure that we're going to have enough water this summer for food crops that are going to be watered right into the fall. To ensure that we have enough water when it comes to firefighting this summer. And to ensure that we've got enough water for the fish when they start coming up stream to spawn."

The latest [provincial drought update](#), updated Wednesday, pegs the Okanagan basin at a "Drought Level 1," on the six-level scale. "Adverse impacts to socio-economic or ecosystem values are rare" in Drought Level 1, according to the province. Local water restrictions become "likely," when the drought level reaches Stage 3.

Meanwhile, the nearby Kettle Basin, Salmon River Basin and Nicola Basin are currently assessed at Drought Level 2, where adverse impacts remain "unlikely."

Lucas says the Valley is seeing the effects of climate change today, and water utilities will have to adapt to an earlier melt season, and less precipitation later in the spring, in the decades to come.

"We're seeing the change now, it happened this summer. We used to say, 'Oh ya, 2050,' but actually it happened this year," Lucas said.

"We need to be more prepared to catch some of that early spring melt and rain instead of snow."

He added the agricultural industry is also working to adopt new technologies that will see more efficient use of water during the growing season, like soil moisture probes that ensure crops are watered only when necessary.

"Usually it's multiple-year droughts, not single-year droughts, that causes problems," Lucas said. "If you have a drought for five years like you do in California, things change. Fortunately, we get the snowpack, a lot of moisture in the winter, and so we're different from California in that way."

"But if we ever did have a particular water supplier that got into trouble with a low reservoir level, like it was in Summerland about 10 years ago, then certainly our organization works with the municipality and interacts with the famers to figure out the best way forward. If there's not enough water, then there's not enough water, so we have to manage that."

And while it's still early in the growing season, Lucas says he doesn't anticipate any water-availability issues for Okanagan farmers.

"We don't anticipate any issues in the short term here. But if it's 40 C from now until the end of September every day, we'll be talking in a month. But there's no evidence that will happen."