People go for a swim in Okanagan Lake in Kelowna on June 22, 2021. (Aaron Hemens/Capital News)

Okanagan Lake hits lowest level since 2003

Despite its low level, it's not a dire situation yet, according to provincial dam manager

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Okanagan Lake may seem like it contains an abundant amount of water, but it's actually slowly drying up.

Besides a natural evaporation process, some water systems also draw from the lake to serve residents and farmers in the valley. And now, with wildfire season well underway, crews also draw from the lake to help tackle the fires.

Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) communications director Corinne Jackson said in preparation for spring rains and runoffs, the province generally lets out some water from the lake to avoid flooding.

But after the province drew down the lake, the spring rain and snowmelt that were expected never came.

"We went into the summer with a deficit on Okanagan Lake," Jackson said.

"With historically high temperatures and low precipitation, the two have combined to take us to where we're at now where we're dealing with drought."

Currently, the lake sits at 341.85 metres above sea level. Ministry of Forests's public safety and protection section head Shaun Reimer said the lake hasn't been this low since 2003.

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"The last that we saw the lake at this level was in 2003, which some people will remember as another drought and bad wildfire year," he said.

"Ideally, we want full pool to be at 342.8 metres and peak there, then come down to about 342.24 during this time."

In order for that to happen, there must be enough spring melt and rain to replenish what evaporates and what is used up. That said, Reimer thinks it's not as bad as it could be.

Looking back to 2003, he said that winter yielded a normal snowpack, which helped Okanagan Lake capture enough water and rebound, going back up to full pool by fall 2004.

"It's not something I would consider to be in a dire situation right now. So even if it's just a normal snowpack year this winter, we should be able to rebound," he said.

"The more dire situation would be if we had a situation like this two years in a row."

Jackson said if we continue not receiving any measurable rain, the dropping lake level could become a huge problem, especially for the farms in the valley.

"If we continue in this trajectory, we are going to have concerns ensuring there is enough water for food crops and also, it will put pressure on utilities to be able to provide water for firefighting, which is an ongoing issue," she said.

Of course, the drought doesn't just affect lakes in the Okanagan. Jackson added that creeks are also suffering from low water levels and very high temperatures, which could put at-risk fish and their habitat when they come back to spawn in the fall.

"If we end up in a multi-year drought and we do not have the precipitation to bring us back to full pool or our average water levels, then we will have some serious concerns in the future."

But with climate change continuing to change weather patterns, it's unsure if the valley will get snowmelt in spring 2022 or even enough rain before then.

"We're not seeing what we used to see in the past. Things are changing," Jackson said.

"People have to understand that all our water is connected: the water in our streams, creeks, our lakes. When one part of the valley is stressed, it affects another part."

More information on how to conserve water as well as watering restrictions can be found through this website.

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