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# ‘We need to be more water-wise’: Okanagan chiefs, mayors encourage conservation

Okanagan Valley communities square off in Make Water Work challenge

BARRY GERDING / May 18, 2023 5:00 p.m. / NEWS



“Water is king in the (Okanagan Valley). Nothing is more important than water.”

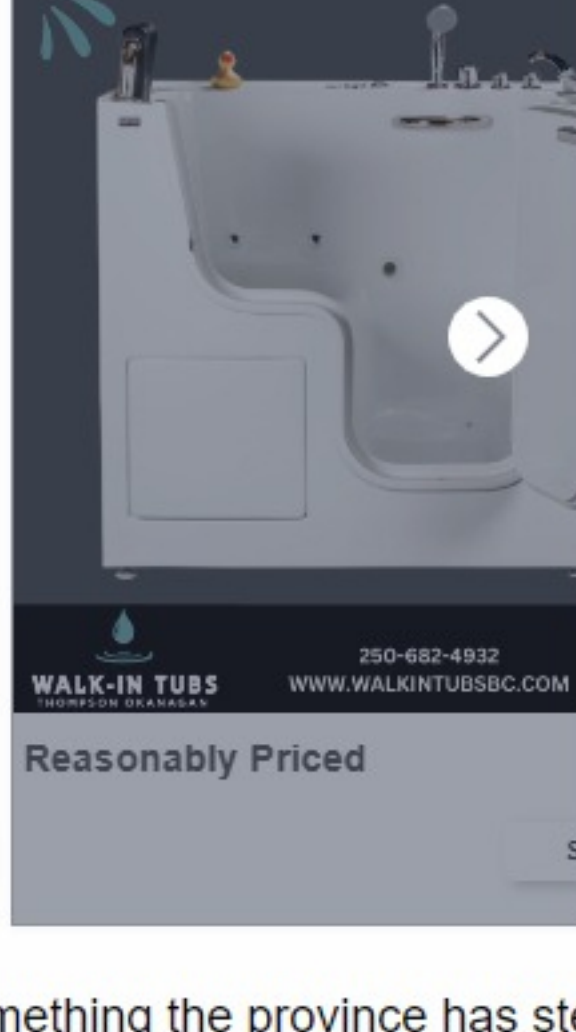
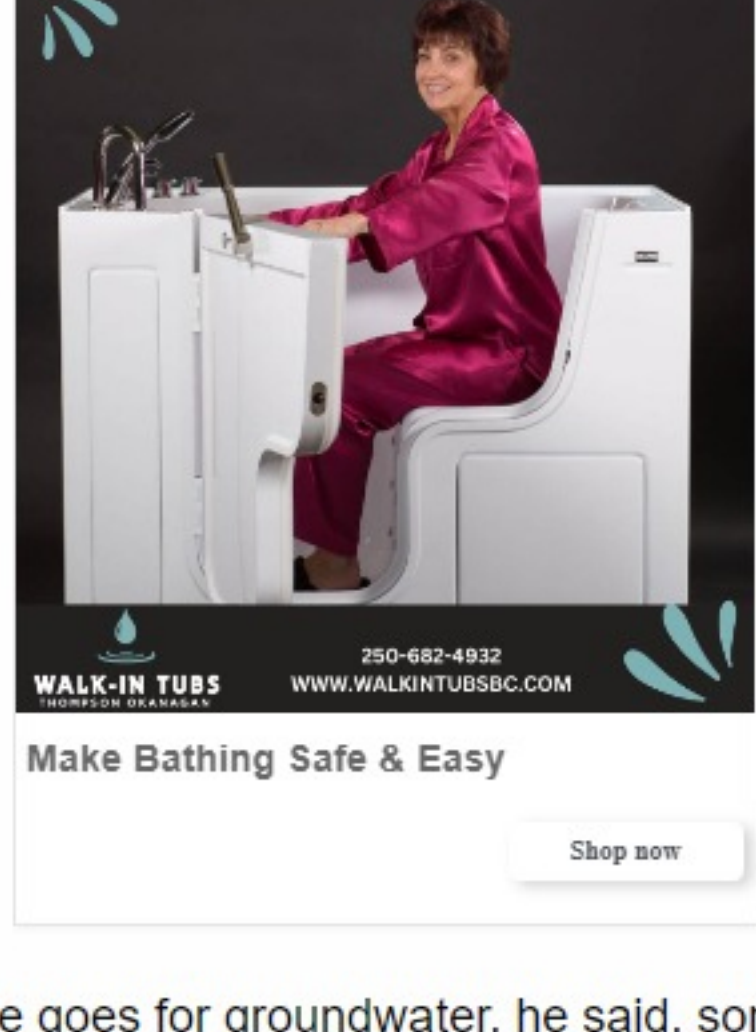
With those words, Okanagan Indian Band Chief Byron Louis helped launch the 2023 version of the Make Water Work community and individual challenge to make commitments to water conservation on Thursday (May 18), appropriately held at the UnH2O xeriscape demonstration garden at the Mission sports complex on Gordon Drive.

Louis talked about how the 34 streams that feed into Okanagan Lake are already over-allocated by provincial and federal government-approved water uses.

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The same goes for groundwater, he said, something the province has stepped up research and water monitoring efforts of in recent years to better understand water flow and natural aquifer storage habits below the ground.

“So that leaves the spring runoff as the remainder of the water, and this year that is already done. So where do we go from here?”

The answer to that question is something the Okanagan Basin Water Board has set upon developing for more than a decade, bringing forward water use realities for a valley in a semi-arid climate zone, educating various stakeholders on how to conserve water and embracing the Indigenous relationship with the land which dates back hundreds of years – about conserving water now for future generations and living within the means allowed by our environment.

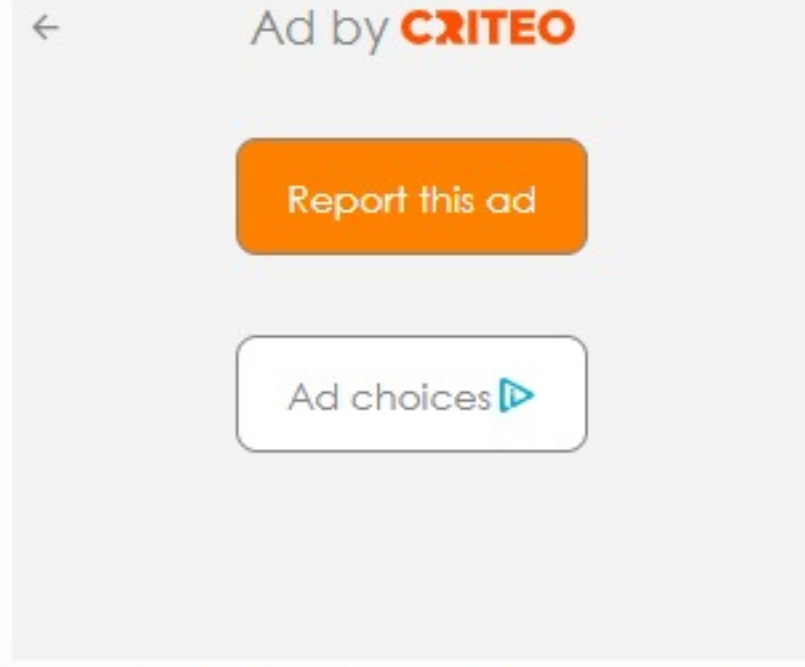
Louis talked about Kelowna’s Glenmore as once being known as Drought Valley.

“Nowhere in that valley is there a ‘glen’ or a ‘moor.’ You will not find that anywhere,” he said.

“We have to stop giving the valley attributes it does not have,” adding those attributes are instead dictated by nature and what the local environment can sustain.

Make Water Work, started in 2013, has been one public education strategy, creating a competition among communities across the valley from Vernon to Osoyoos to collect the most water conservation pledges.

“This is year 13, and we have won it five of the 13 years,” said Armstrong Mayor Joe Cramer.



“Peachland is next at four. So we feel it is time for some of our neighbours to step up to the challenge.”

Jordan Coble, a Westbank First Nation band councillor, echoed the sentiments expressed by Louis, calling water a precious and sacred resource that serves all living things, creatures big and small, and is not simply a resource that people can waste or use carelessly.

“Our Indigenous culture recognizes the importance of water and also respects our role to protect it as a sacred resource,” Coble said.

He said the release of two million Salmon fry into Mission Creek earlier in the morning is a reflection of that commitment to future generations, restocking a creek salmon run cut off by attempts to redirect the naturally meandering creek to foster development growth and flood control.

“We are giving the salmon a chance to have their home back,” said Coble.

“Even though we may not see the immediate benefits of this our lifetime, we can be proud of doing this work to benefit others, our future generations.”

Lake Country Mayor Blair Ireland, OBWB vice-chair, said he grew up in Kelowna, not far from Mission Creek, and never remembers it being this dry or this hot during May in his childhood.

Ireland said climate change is forcing Okanagan Valley residents to reduce the strain on our water resources.

“The path we have been on is not a sustainable path. We need to be more water-wise,” Ireland said.

“Things are changing very rapidly and we’ve got to be ready for that. We have seen growth in our community of 22.6 per cent in population over the last four years.

“We are one of the fastest-growing communities in Canada. It is prudent to be thinking about the conservation of our water resource.”

Ireland said that means being receptive to new ideas – not watering pavement driveways, not watering lawns from dawn to dusk, adjusting the use of irrigation, not growing grass lawns, using xeriscape plants in gardens that are native to the local environment, using rain barrels to collect precipitation for use in gardens and using grass clippings as mulch.

For more information about the Make Water Work challenge and how to participate, check out the website [makewaterwork.ca](http://makewaterwork.ca).

To learn more about what plants are sustainable in the Okanagan, go to the [Okanagan Xeriscape Association](http://Okanagan Xeriscape Association) website.