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# OKANAGAN WATER BOARD ANNUAL MEETING TAPS INTO WATER SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE & OTHER CHALLENGES

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Photo: Betty Selin

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) will be holding its Annual Meeting Sept. 8 in the Mary Irwin Theatre at Rotary Centre for the Arts in Kelowna, highlighting its work over the past year and previewing projects for the year ahead. The event, which is open to the public, runs 9 am. to noon, with doors opening at 8:30 a.m. The theme this year is “Tapping into Water Solutions.” This is a free event, but registration is required at <https://OBWB-AnnualMeeting2023.eventbrite.ca>.

“We have long understood that the Okanagan has water challenges. And, with one of the highest rates of population growth in Canada, this of course is going to affect water availability, as well as water quality,” explains OBWB Executive Director Anna Warwick Sears. “Add the uncertainty of climate change with extreme weather events, from floods to droughts and severe wildfires, and the stress on water supply increases. We also understood that there are water solutions to many of these challenges. It’s time to make sure our community understands this – from the policy-makers, to the citizens – encouraging buy-in and participation in these solutions.”

As part of this year’s event, the OBWB has invited former wildland firefighter and current UBC Okanagan (UBCO) Assoc. Professor Mathieu Bourbonnais to provide the keynote presentation. He will be speaking on “Fire, water, and the changing Okanagan landscape - applications and opportunities for solutions using remote sensing in the Okanagan Basin.”

Bourbonnais and his team at UBCO’s Earth Observation and Spatial Ecology Lab have been working on new ways to map and monitor wetlands and riparian vegetation using different satellite systems to support conservation and management, as well as ways to detect aquatic species like invasive milfoil in Okanagan lakes to better control it. “Our biggest focus though is developing new systems for understanding how wildfire might impact our communities, ecosystems, and water,” says Bourbonnais. “Our goal is to understand how landscapes and ecosystems are changing, the potential impacts of processes like fire and threats like drought, and to help identify and develop solutions.”

“We invest a huge amount of time and money in collecting water data and use it for our own purposes, like floodplain mapping. But what’s really exciting is seeing how others also use it and create additional value from it,” added Sears, noting how local First Nations are using OBWB data to map and understand historic shoreline changes, and City of Vernon used the data to create a floodplain bylaw. “Mathieu’s lab is using cutting-edge data and technologies, like machine-learning, to leverage and extract information on water that we wouldn’t normally be able to do,” she noted.

For Bourbonnais, he hopes that members of the public and local politicians will come away with new information that will help push decision-making policy to address the Okanagan’s water, and related, issues.

“We have some really big challenges ahead of us with water-related issues and rapidly changing fires, and if we want things to change it will take partnerships and collaboration with First Nations, communities, conservation groups, industry, and all levels of government. Despite the challenges we’re facing, we have a lot of tools to start making changes, so nothing is hopeless, but there is real urgency to start taking meaningful action now.”

In addition to the presentation of the annual report by Sears, and Bourbonnais’ presentation, the “Make Water Work Community Champion” will be announced, recognizing the community that collected the most pledges, per capita, to conserve water this summer.

“This has been a fun part of the annual meeting agenda over the last several years, and it’s an opportunity to bring attention to current water conditions in the valley during the most water-stressed time of year,” noted Sears. This year has especially been tough with the Okanagan joining many other regions around the province, being declared in Level 5 drought, the highest drought level, indicating “exceptionally dry” conditions where adverse impacts to socio-economic or ecosystem values are almost certain.

“A number of Okanagan streams are running very low, causing concern for salmon that are supposed to come back to spawn. And this year’s wildfires have also impacted water supply in some Okanagan communities,” Sears said. “Conservation will continue to be critical until mid-October,” she added, encouraging residents to continue to follow their local watering restrictions. Restrictions for Okanagan utilities, as well as tips to conserve, can be found at [www.MakeWaterWork.ca](http://www.MakeWaterWork.ca).

A copy of the 2023 Annual Report will be available on our website soon at [www.obwb.ca/overview/annual-reports/](http://www.obwb.ca/overview/annual-reports/).