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## Water restrictions start amid rising fears o

JOE FRIES   Apr 27, 2024



People in May 2023 watching water flow into the Okanagan River from the dam on the south end of Okanagan Lake in Penticton. The lake's level is staying high this spring to guard against drought.

JOE FRIES/Penticton Herald

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A small disagreement about watering restrictions in Oliver this week illuminated bigger fears about a province-wide drought.

Mayor Martin Johansen reacted strongly against suggestions from others on council that the town hold off on implementing watering restrictions, in part to protect the revenue it derives from its water utility.

“If you don’t have water, who cares about revenue? You don’t have a town. People’s property values go down. What does that say about what we’re doing here?” said Johansen.

“I’m willing to wait, but I think having water is more important than revenue.”

The discussion was prompted by a staff recommendation to implement Stage 1 watering restrictions – three days a week only for residential irrigation – based on alarming data from three monitoring wells.

The level in one of those wells, at Rockcliffe, was measured at 11.9 feet this month, compared to 16.5 feet at this time last year.

Coun. Rick Machial suggested the water table will rise along with the Okanagan River later this spring, therefore he feels restrictions are premature.

“People aren’t really watering that much anyway, and... we rely on that revenue. If we cut back, then we don’t have any revenue, and where do we get the revenue for our budget? If people don’t use water, well, we don’t make any money,” said Machial.

That triggered the response from Johansen, who also cast doubt on assertions the Okanagan River alone will be enough to replenish wells based on current conditions upstream.

“When you look at Okanagan Lake, it’s three feet below full pool. They’re not letting (much) water out because they want to try to get to full pool – which they’re probably not going to get to,” said Johansen.

“So, I would think if you’re banking on the river coming up, I think you’re out of luck.”

Still, there hasn’t been an official declaration of drought from the B.C. government yet this year – although all signs point to one.

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“I think the reason why they don’t declare a drought this early is because June is traditionally the wettest month, so there’s a wait-and-see kind of feeling,” said Anna Warwick Sears, executive director of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, in a phone interview this week.

“The writing’s on the wall. The snowpack looks really terrible.”

Indeed, as of April 1, snowpack in the Okanagan basin was 73% of normal and 62% of normal in the Similkameen, according to the B.C. River Forecast Centre. The average snowpack across all 34 of B.C.’s water basins was 63% of normal.

Meanwhile, Penticton is coming off its 11th-driest March since 1908, after receiving just seven millimetres of precipitation, compared to the monthly average of 23.6 mm, according to data from Environment Canada. Kelowna is coming off its sixth-driest March since 1899, after getting only 3.9 mm of precipitation, versus the average of 21.6 mm.

“It’s not yet officially a drought and one always hopes for precipitation in the future, but the forecasts don’t really show that. It’s been an unusually warm and dry spring, and we’re not in good shape moving into the summer,” said Warwick Sears.

“The drought (warnings) started in the fall of 2022, so this a long period of dry conditions, which means that the soil is dryer than normal, the forests are dryer than normal, so there’s fire danger, but also just the fact (the ground) is thirsty, so as the snow melts it will be drawn into the water table.”

She urged people to conserve water now, however they can, and visit [www.MakeWaterWork.ca](http://www.MakeWaterWork.ca) for tips.

“The main thing for people to understand is that every water supplier has a different setup. Summerland has some enormous reservoirs in the mountains behind it.... Other water suppliers, depending on where the intakes are, may have less water to draw on, so people need to check in with their water supplier and pay attention to the very local restrictions they have,” said Warwick Sears.

“We really need to be saving water for things that are essential, like food production and keeping the aquatic environment alive, and if there are ways we as homeowners can reduce our water use, that’s just making water more available... for the environment.”

And, to put a really fine point on it: “This is the worst that I’ve ever seen it in the 18 years I’ve lived in the Okanagan – by far,” added Warwick Sears.

“It’s a very serious situation. There’s no getting around it.”