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Island water conference is a huge success

QUALICUM - Four hundred and fifty people packed into the Qualicum Beach Civic Centre over the weekend of November 4 to attend the highly anticipated Our Water Our Future conference. The Vancouver Island-wide gathering was organized by the Oceanside Coalition for Strong Communities, with key support from CUPE Island Water Watch and numerous other local organizations.

The conference themes of privatization, conservation, sustainability and commodification attracted local and provincial politicians including NDP MLAs Leonard Krog (Nanaimo), Scott Fraser (Alberni-Qualicum), Shane Simpson (Vancouver Hastings), and local politicians Mayor Robert Hutchins (Ladysmith) and Mayor Teunis Westbroek (Qualicum Beach). Representatives from EPCOR, the company which recently purchased the nearby French Creek water system and holds P3 contracts in Port Hardy and Sooke, also turned out to listen to the proceedings.

Keynote speakers Severn Cullis-Suzuki and Tony Clarke of the Polaris Institute led the morning and afternoon plenary sessions. Both spoke passionately about the importance of local actions in the global struggle for public water, equity and social justice.

General Vice President Ken Davidson, CUPE BC Regional Vice President C.W. Peterson, Local 374 President Justin Schmid, and Local 401 President and Island Water Watch Chair Rodger Oakley participated in the conference. Schmid, who facilitated a workshop focused on small communities noted, "People travelled from all points of the Island for this event on a rainy Saturday and left inspired and with a much stronger sense of what Island Water Watch is doing to support communities to protect public water and wastewater."

Davidson opened the afternoon session bringing greetings from CUPE BC. He noted that the conference couldn't be more timely, with CORIX looking to expand operations into Harrison Hot Springs and the Village of Pemberton – to name a few.

"CUPE in B.C. represents many water workers and the front-line people who provide services to communities every day. We are strongly committed to fighting privatization and defending the many public services that we all rely on to make our communities work," said Davidson.

Among the many excellent workshops was one led by Mexican water activist, Claudia Campero Arena. Claudia shared stories of the harsh realities of water privatization in Mexico and around Latin America and spoke of her participation in the present international organizing drive to push back against water privateers. Campero urged participants to get involved in their communities to protect public water and make it accessible to all.

Participants heard from academics, elected officials and activists who have worked to defend public water, the integrity of watersheds and public participation in water governance. The conference also featured tours of a watershed and a creek restoration project.

Island activists closed the conference by developing regional action plans and discussing ways to move forward building on the weekend's successes.