

Water limited: Making the right decisions

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Water governance is an important consideration of sustainability. How we organize the decision-making process will determine how sustainable our water supply will be. This means we need to look at who makes what decisions, and where the community has input.

One region that we can look to for ideas is the Okanagan Basin. The Okanagan Basin Water Board was created from an existing group of three regional districts (three reps each). They added a seat each for First Nations, a water supply association and the Chair of their advisory Water Stewardship Council.

The Okanagan Water Stewardship Council consists of people from various related backgrounds including fruit growers, foresters, ranchers, regional, provincial and federal government agencies, and a variety of water and conservation stewardship groups. They act as advisors to the Board, and the Council is responsible to the community through the Board.

The creation of the Board and Council is not an exclusive approach. How the Council has developed it's parameters within which it works however, is unique.

Like many planning initiatives, the Council has started with a vision. Their vision is "clean and healthy water in sufficient abundance to support the Okanagan's natural ecosystems, agricultural lands and high quality of life for perpetuity. Accurate, up-to-date water information and scientific knowledge will support community and regional planning. Water will be managed in a spirit of cooperation, and a valley-wide ethic of conservation will create a lasting legacy of sustainable water resources for future generations."

In order to put this vision into place, guiding principles have been developed. The Council has decided that a regional approach is vital, and that ecosystems come first. This is how they explain it: Natural processes in healthy watershed ecosystems are the most effective and cost-efficient

means to maintain water quality and quantity. Restoring degraded lands and protecting surface and groundwater source areas are the essential cornerstones of an overall strategy for sustainable water resources.

It is these guiding principles that have shaped the priority actions for the Council. They have been very busy with conservation education, irrigation alternatives, a groundwater regulation pilot, water demand and supply research, storm water management, drought management planning, water use reporting, and more.

The model in the Okanagan involves many knowledgeable people who can shape better policy, help elected officials make decisions, and get a lot of key work completed. Giving the Council the resources to research and develop management options ensures the work will be conducted in an inclusive manner that considers the needs of the community. It also shows that it is possible to plan and manage our water based on ecosystems and restored natural functions.

Why should we note what they are doing and how? We have many of the same issues, including a need for more monitoring and regulation of our groundwater. Anticipated changes to the Water Act could mean we will be expected to deliver this based on the Okanagan model.

We also know our regional government is beginning to implement our Drinking Water Action Plan. As well, our provincial government and regional stewardship groups are collecting information on our surface and groundwater. Partnerships already exist for us to build upon. The question for us is how to arrange the players to create an effective planning and decision-making approach.

Perhaps we can take what is valuable from the Okanagan and other governance models, and create our own approach for this region, based on our ecosystems. Perhaps we too can plan to "create a lasting legacy of sustainable water resources for future generations."

Water Limited explores issues of water management in the community. It is funded by the Georgia Basin Living Rivers Program and Mid Vancouver Island Habitat Enhancement Society. MVIHES coordinates the Englishman River

Watershed Recovery Plan, and conducts education, restoration and monitoring projects. It also works to support healthy watersheds and shorelines.

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