

Working toward sustainable water management in the Okanagan Basin

by Kellie Garcia



The chain of large, deep lakes along the Okanagan valley bottom may give the impression that

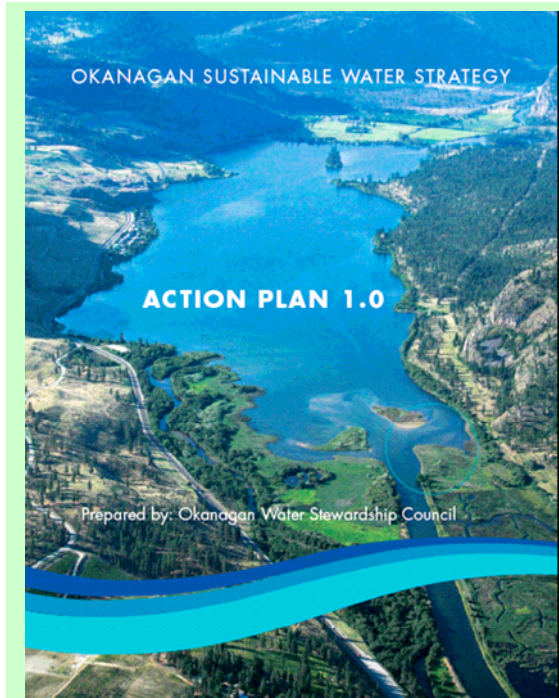
there's more than enough water for everyone. The truth is that the Okanagan Basin is one of the most arid watersheds in Canada, and has the lowest, per capita availability of freshwater. Water shortages have already occurred in some areas of the basin. Given climate change, rapid population growth, and the fact that most water is already allocated, conflicts over water are likely to intensify. In response, the [Okanagan Basin Water Board](#) recently released the [Okanagan Sustainable Water Strategy](#), which outlines water management practices that will help us meet these challenges and work toward long-term water sustainability in the Okanagan.

The foundation for sustainable water management was set in 1969, when the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) was formed through collaboration of the three Okanagan regional districts. A water management study (now known as the [1974 Water Basin Study](#)) commenced, and, to this day, is considered one of the most ambitious ever undertaken in Canada. For thirty years, the OBWB focused on the most urgent recommendations of the 1974 study: 1) reducing nutrient inputs to the main valley lakes; and 2) controlling the invasive aquatic plant, Eurasian water milfoil.

In response to rising public interest in water sustainability, the OBWB introduced a new initiative in 2005 to promote coordinated water management in the basin. The initiative includes taxation to raise funds for water projects, and the formation of the [Okanagan Water Stewardship Council](#) (OWSC), an expert advisory panel to the OBWB that represents a diverse cross-section of water interests throughout the Okanagan Basin.

In September 2008, the OWSC released the [Okanagan Sustainable Water Strategy: Action Plan 1.0](#), a guide for sustainable water management practices that will help us adapt to changing climate and rising water demand in the basin. The strategy contains 12 guiding principles and 45 action items for regulators, politicians, local governments, water utilities, and stewardship groups to better manage the Okanagan's limited water resources.

"The strategy is an inclusive document that is intended to bring stakeholders together toward achieving common water management goals," says Bob Hrasko, chair of the OWSC editorial committee. "The 45 action items that are recommended are relevant, necessary, and simply the right thing to do."



The Okanagan Sustainable Water Strategy is guided by 12 key principles

1. *Recognize the value of water.*
2. *Control pollution at its source.*
3. *Protect and enhance ecological stability and biodiversity.*
4. *Integrate land use planning and water resource management.*
5. *Clearly allocate water within the Okanagan water budget.*
6. *Promote a Basin-wide culture of water conservation and efficiency.*
7. *Ensure water supplies are flexible and resilient.*
8. *Think and act like a region.*
9. *Collect and disseminate scientific information.*
10. *Provide sufficient resources for local water management initiatives.*
11. *Encourage active community engagement, education, and participation in water management decisions.*
12. *Practice adaptive management.*

Critical questions the strategy explores include:

- How can we ensure high water quality is maintained and sensitive riparian and wetland ecosystems protected?
- How do we plan for a future with enough water for all priorities, including ecosystems?
- What happens in drought years: where is water allocated and in what proportions?
- What can we do to reduce our demand and use water more efficiently?
- How do we develop the required storage needed to capture water in the spring for use later in the year?
- What is the best structure for water governance in the basin?

Key actions recommended in the strategy include:

- Preparing source water assessments and source protection strategies
- Enacting land-use policies and bylaws to protect water
- Establishing environmental, agricultural, and urban water reserves
- Preparing drought management plans and water-use plans for individual utilities and the basin as a whole
- Developing a collaborative Okanagan water conservation strategy
- Implementing policies that support coordinated water storage
- Developing a community engagement strategy that highlights water conservation and pollution prevention
- Creating an Okanagan Basin Information Network
- Creating an Okanagan Water Fund
- Developing an Okanagan Water Management Plan
- Revisiting and reassessing the strategy every five to seven years.

"The Okanagan Sustainable Water Strategy is a real turning point in demonstrating leadership for water management in the Okanagan; in addressing climate change and population growth issues," says Nelson Jatel, water stewardship director at the OBWB. "Implementing the plan is critical in ensuring our environment, economy and quality of life remains healthy."

Jatel adds that, "Public workshops planned for the spring of 2009 will be an exciting opportunity to hear from the public and NGOs about how they would like to contribute to good water management practices in the Okanagan – our future depends on it."

New systems of governance and new tools are necessary if we are to meet the challenges posed by the imperative of sustainability. Local stewardship involvement and implementation; regional guidance and leadership; and provincial support with regulatory enforcement, are all necessary for success of the strategy. "It is important to remember that the Okanagan Basin is a headwater region and all we have to work with is the moisture that falls from the sky, which makes the strategy imperative," says Ted van der Gulik, OWSC vice-chair. "We cannot get water from anywhere else."

Kellie Garcia is the research and communications coordinator for the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

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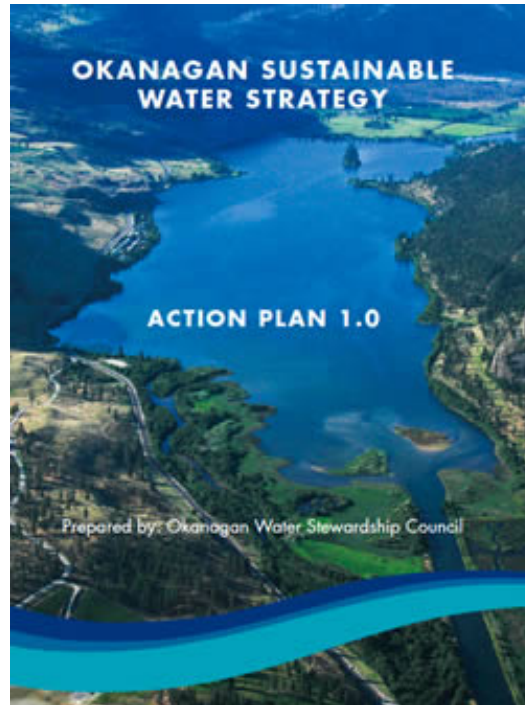
Clean water is the most precious natural asset in the Okanagan – essential to the beauty of our landscapes, our healthy economy and the well-being of our citizens. The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) was [instituted in 1970](#) through a collaboration of the three Okanagan regional districts to provide leadership on water issues that span the entire valley – recognizing the need to work together to protect our common resources.

For many years, the OBWB directed its efforts toward the most urgent recommendations of the [1974 Okanagan Basin Study](#) – reducing phosphorus and nitrogen inputs to the main valley lakes and controlling the invasive aquatic plant, [Eurasian watermilfoil](#). In response to rising public interest in water sustainability, the OBWB – with support of the regional districts – has recently put into action a [new initiative](#) to promote coordinated water management throughout

the basin.

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[Living Water Smart](#) – British Columbia's Water Plan
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Okanagan Sustainable Water Strategy

- [Action Plan 1.0](#) - 4.4MB PDF
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