

EXAMINING OUR OUTDOOR WATER USE

Friday's release of the Okanagan Water Supply and Demand Project should be a wake up call to all Okanagan residents: even though the Okanagan has the "lowest per person water supply in Canada", each of us uses, on average, more than twice the Canadian average per day. Furthermore, in a region that relies on water resources to sustain two economic drivers (agriculture and tourism), almost one quarter – 24% – of consumptive water is used outdoors, mostly on our lawns.

This figure is astounding. The project itself is based on best available science and data but, in some cases, the data was limited. It does not show we are running out of water; it shows that the risk of water shortages is increasing valley-wide. We will still have wet years along with dry years, but the length of the growing season is increasing, the population is growing, and we will see a decreasing snowpack – an essential form of water storage in our arid region.

The Okanagan Water Supply and Demand Project is led by the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) and the BC Ministry of Environment. Other partners include the Okanagan Nation Alliance, provincial ministries, federal agencies, several universities and the Water Supply Association of BC. Studies were conducted by university and government researchers, and environmental consulting firms.

In short, we have water today; we likely will have issues in the future if we do not manage our water resources more carefully.

Fortunately, it is not too late to be proactive. Not only can our local governments move to adopting policies to plan wisely, each of us can make a difference by assessing our outdoor water use, beginning with our lawns.

According to "American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn" by Ted Steinberg, our obsession with lush, green, weed-free expanses of lawn is relatively new in North America, beginning post Second World War. Some 65 years later, lawn care has grown into big business, with Americans alone spending an estimated \$40 billion each year on it. Maintaining a 'perfect' lawn is expensive: on our pocketbooks, our time, our environment and, perhaps, on our health.

There are definitely benefits to a lawn. It has a cooling effect, creates an oasis of calmness, can help control erosion, and is a great design element, providing unity and continuity in the landscape. The green space, however, does not need to be expansive. Nor does it need to be a foreign species (such as water-hungry Kentucky bluegrass) or even lawn at all. The green space can be accomplished using a lawn alternative such as one of the low-growing thyme or veronica species (that can bear low to moderate traffic) or another vegetative groundcover. Or, reduce the lawn area and put in a raised bed for vegetables or a colourful, xeriscape (waterwise) planting bed. Although the perception persists that xeriscape is just rocks and desert plants, this myth is slowly being dispelled. There are dozens of plants, from trees to annuals, which thrive on less water. These are plants, both native and adapted species, which will outlive severe water restrictions.

For more information on the Okanagan Water Supply and Demand Project (Phase 2), visit the Okanagan Basin Water Board's website- www.obwb.ca. The Okanagan Xeriscape Association's website, www.okanaganxeriscape.org, has plenty of information on waterwise landscaping and an ever-expanding plant database.