



OKANAGAN  
PARTNERSHIP  
Collaborating for  
Sustainable Prosperity

**Priority Regional Flagship**

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**Discussion Paper**

**Okanagan Water Management**

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## Why do we need a coordinated approach to Okanagan Basin water stewardship?

The natural water supply within the Okanagan Basin can only be regarded as a renewable resource if we use water wisely on a long-term basis and control our annual consumption within a sustainable framework.

Since the original Okanagan Basin Water Study was completed in 1974; the valley population has tripled to almost 350,000 people. This population **already exceeds** the target level of 290,000 which was recommended for the year 2020. Due to rapid growth in recent years it is now estimated that the Okanagan Basin population will exceed 500,000 people by 2020!

Clearly, the present growth trend is unsustainable, unless major changes are made to the way in which we manage and regulate the use of our common and life-sustaining heritage: “the waters of the Okanagan”.

Numerous studies since 1970 have consistently recommended an integrated “valley-wide” approach to managing the Okanagan Basin water resource. The OBWB was established by Provincial Letters Patent for this very purpose but, due to several shortcomings in its mandate, the Water Board has never been completely effective in doing so.

Recent economic studies, and in particular the industry-driven recommendations of the Okanagan Partnership, **now point to the necessity** of creating a much strengthened Water Management Agency.

Either a new Management Council/Authority or a revised Water Board should be mandated to exercise or at least to coordinate water resource management on a valley-wide basis. It is only a question of time before the public will demand this. The new agency must reflect the common interests of local government (i.e., the three Regional Districts and First Nations), the senior levels of government and the public at large.



## Okanagan Basin Water Council - Mandate

The new Okanagan Basin Water Council would have a mandate to implement and coordinate basin-wide Management Policies pertaining to:

1. Supply management and licensing of purveyors and private water users.
2. Coordinate, develop and manage upper level reservoirs, control works, and aquifers.
3. The institution of conservation practises (i.e., flow restrictors, improved irrigation practices, low flush toilets and metering) to minimize water waste.
4. Integrated standards and guidelines regarding water quality and drinking water safety (remember Walkerton?).
5. Coordination and upgrading of wastewater discharges and treatment facilities, taking a “total load” approach to lake-bound waste to prevent irreversible pollution of the Okanagan Basin.
6. Integrated standards and regulations to control run-off of nutrient loading from agricultural, industrial, green space (i.e., parks and golf courses), and septic field leakage into the Okanagan Basin.
7. Coordinated policies regarding fisheries development, fish habitat preservation and fish-stock management within the Okanagan watershed and lake system.
8. Future planning of residential, recreational, agricultural and industrial demands for a share of “new water”, to ensure a sustainable water supply and viable economic growth within the Okanagan Basin.
9. Facilitate and oversee a revised Okanagan Basin Water Study (30 year update), leading to a new Okanagan-Basin Agreement or Water Stewardship Charter supported by all four levels of government (including First Nations).
10. Facilitate and coordinate a continuing process of public education, dialogue and consultation on the subject of water stewardship in the Okanagan.

The challenge now is to develop a plan of implementation, at a time when it might be seen as politically opportune to do so.



## Water: A constraint to the economy of the Okanagan

The economy of the Okanagan is limited by water availability and quality. All Okanagan Partnership Cluster working groups identified water resources (quality and quantity) as a significant limiting factor to a sustainable Okanagan economy. It is important to business and community leaders that the management of Okanagan water resources is conducted collaboratively, utilizing a water basin approach. Some of the facts driving the need for action include:

- There are over 200 different water utilities operating in the region.
- Population growth will impact the demand of regional water resources.
- Global warming will influence the water supply.

***Choosing a Future:*** There are forces at work that have made this the right time for new thinking and action on shaping our region's next steps in development. The Okanagan region stands at the proverbial fork in the road where difficult choices must be made. Very rarely does a community have the opportunity to choose its future. More often changes take place incrementally, invisibly, and one morning residents wake up and realize that the qualities they knew and loved are no longer there.

***New Rules for Regional Performance:*** The genesis of this strategy comes from a recognition among regional leaders that the Okanagan's position within the global economy is not an assured one and that the region must compete for its living alongside of other regions.

***Sustainability:*** The Okanagan has experienced rapid growth and will grow further: now it must plan regionally for smart growth. The region's naturally features: aridity, limited air circulation, and rich biodiversity-limit its capacity to adapt in the future to the impact of short-sited growth decision made today. The region's growth, and pattern of development, has led to rising auto pollution, water restrictions, and a loss of biodiversity. All of these impact the region's quality of life and eventually, its competitiveness.

## Water Management: An Okanagan wide issue

The Okanagan region is in this together. Water use in one part of the Okanagan region affects the entire region. It is important that we develop a regional water management council tasked with prioritizing and focusing resources to manage the Okanagan water resource.

There's only one Okanagan. Everyone has to share the water. Each community's decisions about the valley's land and water impact others...it's an integrated system.



## Point of Departure: How the Okanagan has been performing

The Okanagan has had many discussions, workshops, seminars and suggestions about what needs to be done to manage our water resource. Discussions have included national scientists, all levels of government, and community members. Now is the time to act and develop a meaningful vehicle to manage our water resource, preserve our quality of life and support sustainable prosperity.

Over the past 30 years there have been many studies and recommendations that include:

**1971. Survey results of Okanagan residents found that environmental pollution (primarily water pollution)...were the most important issues.**  
O'Rieordan. J. May 1973. A Survey of Resident Attitudes towards Water and Related Resource Management in the Okanagan Valley. Preliminary Report No. 34,. Task 19. Office of the Study Director. Penticton, BC.

**1974.** Good water management is essential to the maintenance of desirable lifestyles of the Okanagan community. Because all parts of the basins are linked by the flowing nature of water, it is important to avoid actions in one part that will adversely affect the environment in another or reduce the future potential of valley-wide economic activities, for example the attraction of tourists...It appears to be the consensus of the Okanagan Community that a single authority be established to coordinate the implementation of the framework plan. As much use as possible should be made of existing intuitions, for neither the public nor the senior governments desire the creation of a new intervening level of government. The success of the task forces during the study in bringing together people from all parts of the basin verifies that valley-wide consensus on water management problems is possible.  
**Recommendation #1(b): That the Okanagan Basin Water Board be reconstructed and Letters Patent amended to give the Board authority to carry out water resource management functions; to be responsible for those water resource management functions that pertain to the Valley as a whole...**

**Action: Filing of Letter Patent for the Okanagan Basin Water Board:**  
Objective 6. The Water Board shall be the regional authority...  
Objective 16. No capital expenditure shall be undertaken by the Water Board without prior approval in the form of a resolution by each Regional Board of the participating Regional Districts.



- 1993 **1974 the Okanagan Basin study recommended that one agency or board be given the responsibility of managing the water supply in the Okanagan. Twenty years later little progress has been made toward this goal.** Westland Resource Group. 1993. Charting a Course for the Okanagan: A review of issues and actions. Central Okanagan Regional District, North Okanagan Regional District and Okanagan Similkameen Regional District.
2000. **Recommendation #1. It is recommended that the Okanagan Basin Water Board begin work towards creation of an alliance of high-level, strategic partners with a mandate of long term water quality protection and water management in the Okanagan basin. Okanagan communities, through the Okanagan Basin water Board, are encouraged to take a leadership role in this regard.** Review of Water Stewardship in the Okanagan Valley, Summit Environmental Consultants Ltd. February 2000.
2002. **Project Objective: Identify ways that the three regional districts can collaborate to achieve development that protects the environment and conserves land, air and water, and protects liveability.** Green Sustainable Economic Development in the Okanagan. Westland Resource Group. 2002.
2004. **There was consensus that a basin wide institutional framework was required to ensure coordination and foster increased collaboration among agencies involved in the management of water resource,** Running on Empty? Water and Our Common Future. Identifying the Water Management Issues of the Okanagan Basin. March 19, 2004. Okanagan Basin Water Board.



## Focus on Action: Okanagan Water Management Council

### ***Identified Need***

The Okanagan needs one voice with the authority and responsibility to manage the Okanagan water resource.

### ***Recommended Actions***

With the support from regional government and strategic partners, the Okanagan Basin Water Board change their constitution and bylaws to reflect the following recommendations:

1. Change the name of the OBWB to: Okanagan Water Management Council
2. Change the membership of the board to reflect the multi-user group with a stake in regional water planning:
  - a. Regional District Reps. (RDOS-3, CORD-3, NORD-3) 9
  - b. Okanagan Nation Alliance 2
  - c. Appointed Okanagan water purveyor 1

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Total Board (Executive Committee) 12
3. Change voting formula. Change current requirement of 100% approval. Motions to have a 2/3 majority to pass. Opt-out option for regional districts who do not want to participate in a given project or initiative.
4. Increase the core operational budget and staffing of the Okanagan Water Management Council to reflect a broader role in water management.
5. Develop a strong stewardship council to support the executive committee.
6. Identify key strategic partners (i.e. Provincial and Federal government, UBC-Okanagan, BC Freshwater Institute, etc.)



## Appendix A. Population Projections from 1974 Okanagan Basin Study

