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OKANAGAN HOSTS INTERNATIONAL GATHERING TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE WITH *siwłk^w* (WATER) FOR ALL

Kelowna, B.C. – Syilx Territory – As B.C. faces another potential drought this summer and difficult decisions on who gets what water, the Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) and the Canadian Water Resources Association, BC Branch are hosting an international gathering to address the types of challenges that are being seen around the world. The *Siwłk^w (Water) For All – Co-Creating Futures, Environmental Flows Conference* is being held March 13-15 at the Coast Capri Hotel in Kelowna, B.C.

The gathering brings together more than 200 representatives from national and international organizations engaged in water management or research, including fisheries and water managers, First Nations and local government policy-makers, regulators, academia, funders and NGOs.

“We are in a time of great change in water management in B.C. and across Canada, as governments move forward with reconciliation, and bring policies into line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” says OBWB Chair Blair Ireland. “This conference presents a tremendous opportunity to embrace local syilx (Okanagan) knowledge while looking at the state of western science. This is critical, because it’s going to require all of us to tackle the water challenges we’re seeing. No one group can do this on their own.”

“We have to step out of the echo chamber. Now’s the time,” added Dawn Russell, a Penticton Indian Band member and conference consultant. “Traditional knowledge is tied to our *captik^{wł}*, our teachings and understanding, which has provided guidance for millennia on how to relate to and live on the land. Working with western science, we can help develop solutions to our current issues.”

This week’s conference is a follow-up to one held by OBWB-CWRA in Kelowna in 2018, explains Nelson Jatel, OBWB’s Water Stewardship Director and Conference Chair. “In 2016, the Province of B.C. passed the Water Sustainability Act (WSA), an update to a century-old piece of legislation. As part of that, it required that environmental flow needs (EFNs), also known as instream flow needs – for fish and a healthy ecosystem – had to be considered in any new water licensing decisions.”

The 2018 environmental flows conference looked at the state of EFN-setting in B.C. and elsewhere, showcased EFN work in the Okanagan and beyond, and developed recommendations to improve EFN-setting. “Fast forward to 2024, this conference is about how do environmental flows relate to drought, flood and fisheries management,” said Jatel.

“The syilx nation is bringing back large-bodied fish into the Okanagan, restoring this critical ecosystem. So one of the questions we need to look at is ‘How can we ensure enough water to have successful spawning?’” Jatel added. “Ultimately, environmental flows will be at the centre of all important water decisions for the next decade, ensuring enough water for fish, crops, and people.”

“If we don’t have fish, we don’t have a healthy ecosystem that supports life,” Ireland added. “And, if we don’t have a healthy ecosystem, we don’t have healthy communities.”

For more information on the conference, including the program and speakers, please visit <https://environmentalflores2024.ca/>.

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