



Okanagan Basin
WATER BOARD

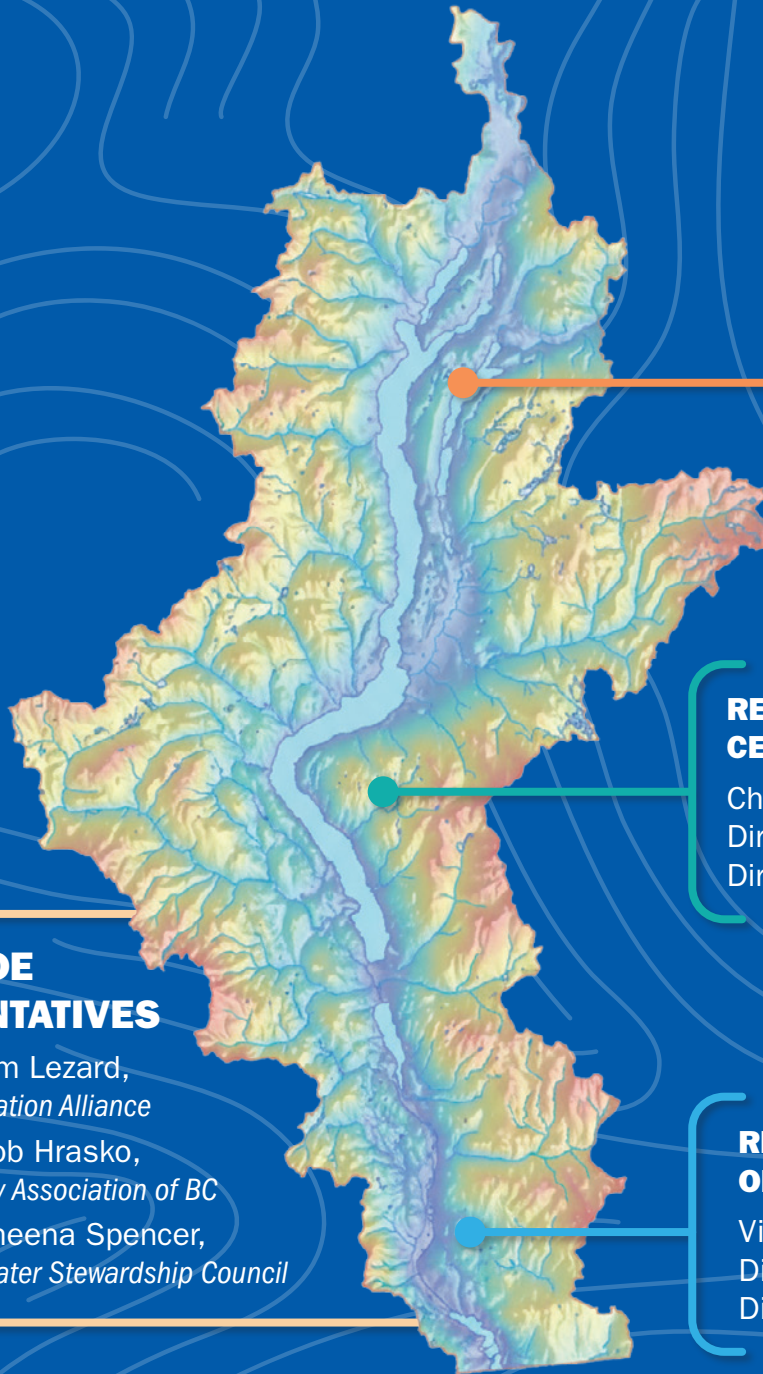
5 Year

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

2026–2030

● Providing Local
Government Leadership
to Steward Shared Water

2026 BOARD OF DIRECTORS



REGIONAL DISTRICT OF NORTH OKANAGAN

Director Brian Guy
Director Bob Fleming
Director Rick Fairbairn

REGIONAL DISTRICT OF CENTRAL OKANAGAN

Chair Blair Ireland
Director Kevin Kraft
Director Ron Cannan

REGIONAL DISTRICT OF OKANAGAN-SIMILKAMEEN

Vice Chair Doug Holmes
Director Subrina Monteith
Director Sue McKortoff

BASIN-WIDE REPRESENTATIVES

- Director Tim Lezard, Okanagan Nation Alliance
- Director Bob Hrasko, Water Supply Association of BC
- Director Sheena Spencer, Okanagan Water Stewardship Council

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge that we work on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded *tmx̓w̓ílaʔx̓w* land of the *syilx* Okanagan people who have resided here since time immemorial. We honour and respect this land and the *siw̓l̓k* water which flows through the valley and connects us all.

MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD

Water is key to life in the Okanagan. It connects our communities, sustains the ecosystems that define this region, and underpins our economy.

The context for water in the Okanagan is changing rapidly. Climate variability and population growth are increasing the pressure on our watershed, a region already challenged with water quantity and quality concerns. At the same time, budget pressures and costs are increasing. This makes coordination, efficiencies, shared understanding, and a valley-wide perspective more important than ever.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board (OBWB) exists to support local governments through that work. We are not a regulatory or decision-making body. Our role is to convene, to support, to provide credible information, to advise, and to advocate. Over nearly six decades, the OBWB has built a strong track record in this role — bringing communities together, advancing science, and supporting a coordinated, valley-wide approach to water. This 2026–2030 Strategic Direction provides a framework for future projects, programs, and partnerships, reflecting the OBWB’s strengths and focusing on where it will have the greatest impact.

Collectively, our current Board brings many decades of experience with government, water science, and the OBWB, and we have seen firsthand the value the organization provides. Local government election cycles bring transition every four years, but the challenges facing our watershed are ongoing. Meeting these challenges to protect water for generations to come requires continuity, long-term and valley-wide thinking, and working together on proactive, sustained actions. These are the demonstrated strengths of the OBWB.

It has been our pleasure to work together to develop this Strategic Direction. The OBWB remains committed to supporting our communities as they navigate water challenges in the years ahead.

“It’s our communities that are on the front lines of water in the Okanagan. The OBWB’s role is to support them — by convening partners, advancing science, and helping ensure a coordinated, long-term, valley-wide approach to water — an approach we have built and strengthened over decades.”

- Chair Blair Ireland


Chair Blair Ireland


Director Rick Fairbairn


Director Sue McKortoff


Vice Chair Doug Holmes


Director Kevin Kraft


Director Tim Lezard


Director Brian Guy


Director Ron Cannan


Director Bob Hrasko


Director Bob Fleming


Director Subrina Monteith


Director Sheena Spencer

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT REALITY OF OUR REGION



OUR LANDSCAPE IS NATURALLY DRY:

The Okanagan is one of the most water-stressed regions in Canada. It has a semi-arid climate, the lowest average annual precipitation in southern Canada, and the lowest per person water availability in Canada.



WE EXPERIENCE SEVERE WEATHER WHIPLASH:

We can move from droughts to floods to wildfires in rapid succession. Historically, winter snowpack functioned as natural water storage, accumulating in the mountains and melting gradually through the spring and early summer to feed our creeks and recharge our aquifers. We are seeing a shift from snow to rain that is reducing natural storage and increasing variability in water supply.



OKANAGAN SALMON HAVE RETURNED HOME:

Prior to channelization and damming, the Okanagan River system supported significant populations of large-bodied salmon like Sockeye and Chinook. Through sustained leadership by the Okanagan Nation Alliance and its partners, salmon are once again returning to Okanagan lakes and tributaries. Their continued recovery depends on careful water management to ensure adequate flows and suitable temperatures during key migration and spawning periods.



OUR POPULATION IS INCREASING QUICKLY:

The Okanagan is a highly desirable place to live, and its population has grown from approximately 115,000 residents in 1970 to more than 400,000 today. Continued growth is projected, with estimates suggesting an increase of 30–50% over the next two decades. This expansion will increase demand on water supplies and infrastructure, requiring thoughtful land-use planning to accommodate new residents while protecting environmental systems.



THE OKANAGAN IS A TOP VACATION DESTINATION:

Long recognized for its beaches and agricultural production, the Okanagan has evolved into a four-season destination: skiing, wineries, farm-to-table dining, golf, arts and cultural events, and outdoor recreation. Tourism is a multi-billion dollar sector that depends on the health and beauty of the watershed. Maintaining clean, reliable water is essential to sustaining both the visitor economy and the quality of life that supports it.



WE HAVE SOME OF THE BEST GROWING CONDITIONS IN CANADA:

The Okanagan has a long history of agricultural production, made possible through irrigation. The Agricultural Land Reserve protects the land base required to sustain local food production. The agricultural landscape also contributes significantly to the character of the valley, attracting residents and visitors who value its orchards, vineyards, and open spaces.



INVASIVE MUSSELS THREATEN EVERYTHING:

The impacts of invasive mussels are well documented in Eastern Canada and the US. Invasive mussels fill beaches with razor-sharp shells, drastically change water chemistry, and rapidly colonize water intake pipes and damage infrastructure. Maintenance requirements and costs can reach millions of dollars annually. Because eradication is not feasible once established, prevention through coordinated inspection, monitoring, and public awareness is essential to safeguarding the Okanagan's water systems.

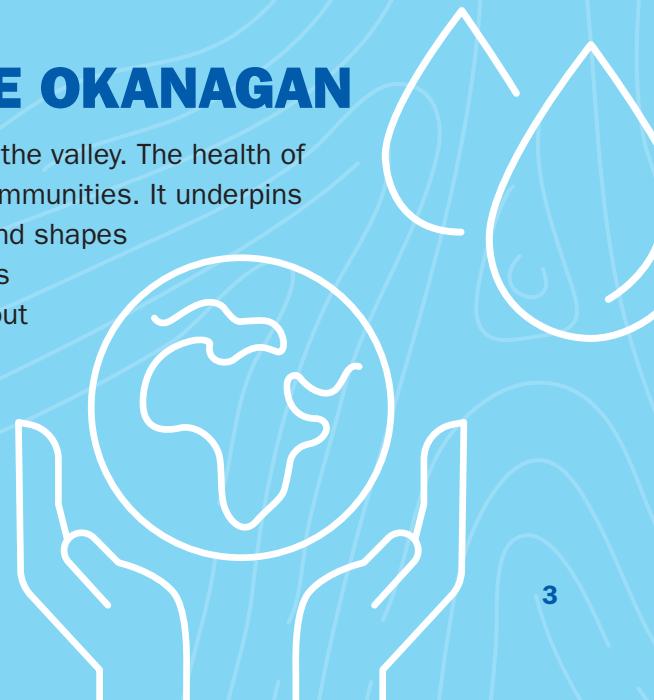


OUR HEADWATERS HELP STORE AND RELEASE WATER — AND THEY'RE CHANGING:

The hillsides surrounding the valley's lakes and creeks form the headwaters of the streams that supply water to our communities. These upland landscapes — including forests, grasslands, and shrub-steppe — act as natural reservoirs, storing snowpack and rainfall before slowly releasing water into creeks, lakes, and aquifers. Over the past two decades, large wildfires, mountain pine beetle outbreaks, recreation, and forestry have altered many of these areas. These changes can affect how quickly water moves through the system and may influence both water quantity and water quality.

WATER IS KEY TO LIFE IN THE OKANAGAN

Okanagan shared water connects everyone and everything in the valley. The health of the watershed cannot be separated from the health of our communities. It underpins our economy, protects our communities from flood and fire, and shapes the beauty of the landscape that defines this valley. Decisions made in one part of the watershed affect conditions throughout the valley, reinforcing the need for coordination and collaboration. The choices we make today will determine the resilience of our valley tomorrow.



IMAGINING A FUTURE WHERE...

From the headwaters to the lakeshores and Okanagan River, every Okanagan resident understands that Okanagan water sustains everyone of us and acts with care to protect it.



VISION

The Vision of the OBWB is a future where all Okanagan communities unite around a shared water ethic to ensure healthy water for generations to come, supporting thriving ecosystems, vibrant communities, and sustainable local food production.



MISSION

The OBWB's mission is to provide leadership to protect and enhance quality of life in the Okanagan Basin by advising on and supporting sustainable water management.



OUR FOUNDATIONS

The foundation of OBWB's 2026-2030 Strategic Direction is built on:

- ▶ **Our legislated mandate**
- ▶ **Our core values and their corresponding operating principles, and**
- ▶ **Our commitment to reconciliation.**

OBWB's Legislated Mandate

The OBWB's mandate was established in legislation in 1969 through the Municipalities Enabling and Validating Act, with Supplementary Letters Patent to the Okanagan regional districts to:

- Organize or receive proposals from private interests, organizations or agencies and all levels of governments regarding best practices for water use and management;
- Define water problems and priorities, economic feasibility of solutions, responsibility, necessary legislation and required action;
- Communicate and coordinate between levels of government and their agencies about water use and management;
- Present proposals and recommendations to local or senior governments, according to jurisdiction and responsibility;
- Participate financially or otherwise, in surveys, investigations or projects on behalf of Okanagan local governments;
- Coordinate implementation of the **Okanagan Basin Study** (1974)
 - for water management activities that affect the Valley as a whole;
- Advise local or senior government agencies when proposed actions, regulations or bylaws are contrary to the Okanagan Basin Study or OBWB recommendations; and
- Participate in an aquatic weed control program for Okanagan lakes.

The OBWB was founded in 1970 as a collaborative, inter-regional local government agency to identify and resolve critical water issues in the Okanagan. We bring people and ideas together — catalyzing water initiatives throughout the valley.

OBWB'S COMMITMENT TO RECONCILIATION

The Okanagan Valley — and the watershed that sustains every community within it — lies within the traditional and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan People. For the Syilx Nation, *siw̓tk̓w* water is a living relative that connects generations. As expressed in the *Syilx siw̓tk̓w Strategy: We Will Protect the Water* published by the Okanagan Nation Alliance in 2021:

“The Syilx Okanagan People flow with *siw̓tk̓w* as it connects us to one another and our ancestors... This ancient and inherent bond has sustained our People for countless generations and is a cornerstone of our material, cultural, and spiritual identity.”

The document goes on to invite “everyone who shares our remarkable Territory to recognize the essential role that *siw̓tk̓w* plays in all of our lives. Non-indigenous stakeholders and governments must build capacity to learn how to work respectfully with the Syilx Okanagan Nation and understand our own governance.”

From our locally driven and funded origins in 1968, the OBWB has recognized that water is key to life in the Okanagan. Yet our institutional history reflects the colonial framework within which we were created. Indigenous voices were not included in the federal and provincial *1974 Basin Study** that guided our work, and meaningful inclusion and partnership have evolved slowly over time. We acknowledge that reconciliation requires honesty about our own history, and that trust is built through consistent, respectful action.

As a local government organization with an advisory mandate, our role is to convene, to support, to provide credible information, to advise, and to advocate. In that role, we commit to continue:

- Recognizing the essential role that *siw̓tk̓w* water holds for the Syilx Okanagan Nation — ecologically, culturally, spiritually, and economically, across the Territory;
- Building our own capacity to understand Indigenous water relations, laws, and rights, consistent with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the principles affirmed in UNDRIP;
- Learning how to work respectfully with the Syilx Okanagan Nation, taking responsibility for our own education and intercultural competencies;
- Valuing Indigenous knowledge systems as autonomous and legitimate, supporting collaborations with Western science in ways that acknowledge power imbalances and respect differing world views; and,
- Supporting collaborative governance approaches between Indigenous and non-Indigenous decision-making parties where priorities align, recognizing that progress will occur at the pace of relationship and trust.

* Canada-British Columbia Consultative Board. (1974). Main report of the Consultative Board: March 1974. Prepared under the Canada-British Columbia Okanagan Basin Agreement. Office of the Study Director. <https://www.obwb.ca/library/1974-okanagan-basin-study/>

To equate the word ‘siwłk^w’ with ‘water’ is to greatly oversimplify the meaning.

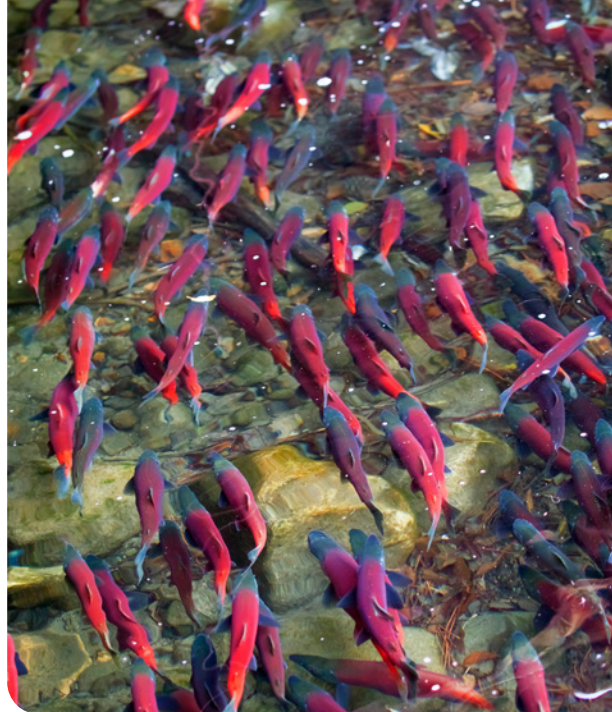
“siwłk^w comes from siw and łk^w

siw comes from the word for when a human drinks — siwłk^w: to sip

łk^w comes from the word for when an animal drinks — łk^witkw: to lap

Together, the two parts form siwłk^w — embedding within the word itself the Syilx ethic that the right to water is equal for humans and animals.”

- From the *Syilx siwłk^w Strategy: We Will Protect the Water* (Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021)



OBWB's Journey to Date

OBWB recognizes that reconciliation is not a destination, it is an ongoing commitment that must be advanced through continuous learning and re-learning, relationship-building, and consistent action. The OBWB has been working to deepen its relationships with the Okanagan Nation Alliance and individual Syilx member Bands, and to embed the spirit of reconciliation into how the organization operates.

A significant milestone came in 2021, when the OBWB and Okanagan Nation Alliance jointly developed *Advancing the OBWB and Okanagan Nation Alliance Relationship*, which outlined concrete ways to strengthen the partnership and begin reflecting the principles of UNDRIP in the Board's work. Since then, meaningful steps have been taken: the ONA Director's voting authority has been made equal to that of local government Directors, and all Syilx member Bands and the ONA have been invited to appoint representatives as members of the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council, with financial support available to enable their participation.

Building internal capacity for reconciliation has been a priority. Staff and Board members have engaged in a range of learning opportunities, including kinSHIFT's Elements of Truth, the

Indigenous Engagement Institute's workshops, the nsylxcən beginner language course at the Sncəwips Heritage Museum, and university courses at UBC Okanagan and the University of Alberta. Additionally, the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council has established a subcommittee grounded in Gwen Bridge's Ethical Space framework, and the Board and Council have hosted presentations on Indigenous water law, perspectives, and ethical space.

In practice, partnership with the Okanagan Nation Alliance continues to shape the OBWB's work. This includes co-leading the Okanagan Hydrometric Program; supporting Syilx-led salmon restoration through grants; advancing the science of environmental flow needs and fish habitat; and working together on issues of shared concern, including chemical use in lakes and invasive mussels.

While progress has been made, this remains ongoing work that will require sustained efforts, humility, and a willingness to learn and adapt. Both the Board and staff are committed to advancing this work, and the OBWB looks forward to continuing to strengthen its relationships with the Okanagan Nation Alliance, Syilx member Bands, and their communities.

OBWB'S CORE VALUES



Three core values guide the OBWB's work and define our role in strengthening water sustainability across the Okanagan: **ONE VALLEY, ONE WATER; CREDIBILITY;** and **ACCOUNTABILITY**. Our operating principles describe how we put these values into action.

One Valley, One Water.

We recognize that all water in the Okanagan is shared and connecting all who live in the valley.

- **WHOLE-WATERSHED THINKING.** OBWB projects and programs focus on activities with a broad geographic scope.
- **COLLABORATION.** We seek collaborative solutions to water concerns, coordinating resources and efforts, and working to build relationships and shared understandings.
- **LONG-TERM STEWARDSHIP.** We look ahead to protect water for future generations, considering the needs of our children and grandchildren as we consider the needs of today.

Credibility.

We are a trusted source of water science and information, grounded in expertise and committed to thoughtful, balanced approaches.

- **INFORMED ACTION.** We are guided by the best available science and community expertise.
- **BALANCE.** We take a balanced approach, recognizing the environmental, social, cultural, and economic dimensions of water management.
- **NON-PARTISAN.** We support best practices and sound policies in the long-term interest of the watershed, independent of political affiliation.

Accountability.

We are responsible stewards of our mandate and resources, and we communicate clearly about our progress.

- **TRANSPARENCY.** Our actions and decisions will be transparent and open.
- **SHARING.** We share the knowledge and data generated through our publicly funded work so that communities across the valley can benefit.
- **INNOVATION.** We are committed to continuously improving our work, seeking new ideas and approaches while respecting experience and established knowledge.





WE REAFFIRM OUR COMMITMENT TO ONGOING GOALS

For more than 55 years, the Okanagan Basin Water Board has adapted to meet the evolving needs of the region. The goals set out in previous strategic plans remain foundational to our work. This Strategic Direction does not replace those commitments; it reinforces them and clarifies how OBWB will continue advancing them over the next five years.

1) **DELIVERING OUR MANDATE ACROSS ALL PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS**

As the Okanagan grows and changes, OBWB must remain both stable and adaptable while providing organizational excellence. We will continue to anticipate emerging trends while providing the consistency and credibility our communities depend on.

2) **WATER MANAGED FOR ALL NEEDS UNDER ALL CONDITIONS**

The Okanagan faces increasing variability: drought, flood, and changing snowpack patterns. Many conflicts over water quantity concerns can be avoided through careful management and planning.

3) **MAINTAINING EXCELLENT WATER QUALITY**

Water quality protection requires vigilance across upper watersheds, agricultural lands, and urban areas. Healthy riparian areas, wetlands, invasive species prevention, and source protection remain critical.

4) **ADVANCING PARTNERSHIPS WITH OKANAGAN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

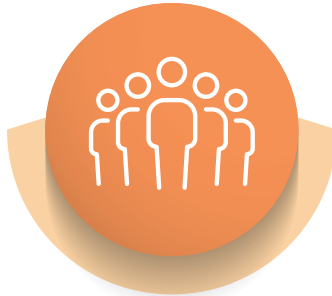
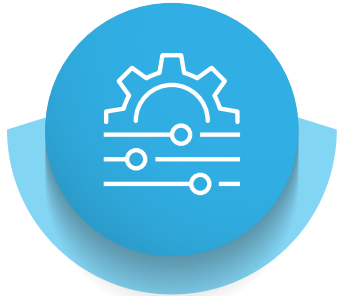
OBWB remains committed to building respectful relationships with the Okanagan Nation Alliance and individual Syilx Bands and to supporting collaborative approaches to water planning and management across the basin.

OBWB'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2026-2030

Over the past two decades, there has been increasing recognition of the watershed's importance and a corresponding growth in the number of organizations working for the betterment of the watershed. This is both positive and necessary in our rapidly changing region. However, increased activity makes coordination, clear communication, and alignment more important than ever to ensure efforts are complementary rather than fragmented or duplicative.

The 2026–2030 Strategic Direction outlines how OBWB can best contribute within its legislated mandate in this evolving landscape. It builds on OBWB's demonstrated strengths and successes and provides a clear framework to guide the use of time and resources. This is not a detailed work plan, but a strategic framework that enables flexibility to respond to emerging needs, partner readiness, and funding opportunities.

These Strategic Priorities build on OBWB's strengths and guide our work over the next five years:



**Advancing Science,
Environmental
Monitoring,
and Information
Management**

**Building
Partnerships
and Capacity in
the Watershed**

**Educating,
Advocating,
and Advising
on Good Policy**

Strategic Priority 1: Advancing Science, Environmental Monitoring, and Information Management

OBWB invests in research, monitoring, modelling, and data stewardship to ensure the Okanagan has the knowledge and tools needed to adapt to climate variability, population growth, and economic change. These investments provide decision-makers with credible evidence to assess risk and inform water quantity and quality decisions.

▶ **STRENGTHEN OKANAGAN-BASED RESEARCH**

Identify knowledge gaps, build partnerships with post-secondary institutions and research partners to advance applied research that responds to real-world water challenges in the basin.

▶ **EXPAND BASIN-WIDE MONITORING AND MODELLING**

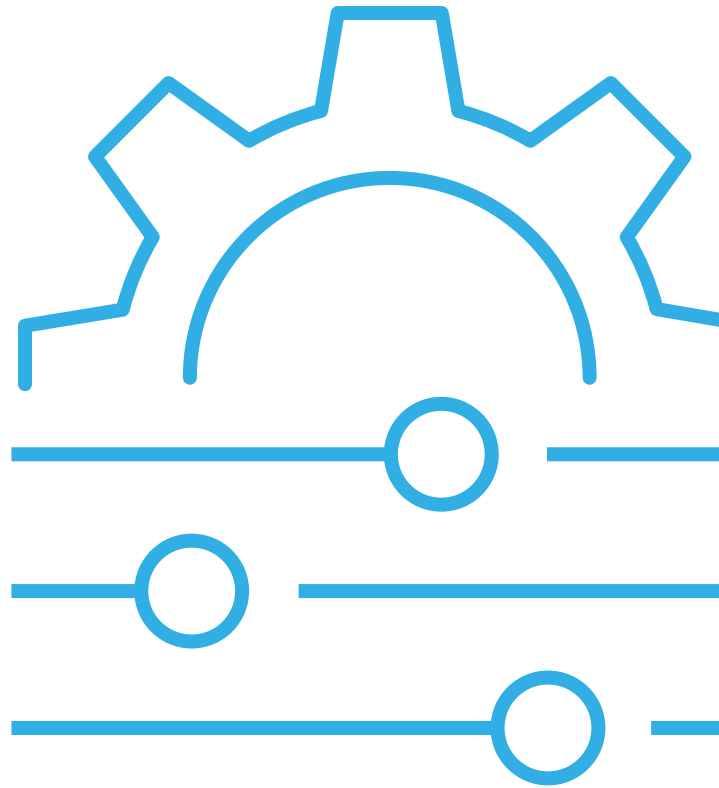
Invest in hydrometrics, groundwater monitoring, and modelling tools to ensure the Okanagan has the science needed to adapt to climate variability, economic shifts, and population growth.

▶ **PROTECT AND RESPONSIBLY MANAGE WATER DATA**

Safeguard long-term water data and ensure information generated through OBWB initiatives is preserved, responsibly managed, and accessible to partners and the public.

▶ **ADVANCE INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING**

Identify and evaluate solutions and technologies from other water-stressed regions, as well as locally developed innovations, to determine their relevance and applicability in the Okanagan.



Elinor McGrath and team working on the Environmental Flow Needs (EFN) Project

Strategic Priority 2: Building Partnerships and Capacity in the Watershed

Strong water management depends on strong relationships. OBWB builds partnerships, strengthens local capacity, and supports and coordinates collective action across governments, Indigenous communities, water suppliers, researchers, and community partners.

▶ **STRENGTHEN THE WATER STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL**

Continue to invest in the Water Stewardship Council as the Board's independent technical advisory body and as a respected forum for learning and collaboration. Evolve Council structures and practices to ensure both technical expertise and community perspectives are reflected and effectively connected to the Board.

▶ **LEVERAGE AND SECURE FUNDING**

Attract and leverage provincial, federal, and other funding to support water initiatives in the Okanagan, using OBWB's convening power and grant programs to maximize regional impact, create economies of scale, and reduce financial pressure on local communities.

▶ **BUILD CAPACITY ACROSS THE WATERSHED**

Support local governments, Indigenous governments, water suppliers, and place-based groups by coordinating efforts, sharing expertise, and strengthening the collective capacity to address complex water challenges.



*The Environmental Flows Conference 2024
held March 13-15, 2024 in Kelowna, B.C.*

▶ **ADVANCE RECONCILIATION THROUGH RELATIONSHIP**

Build respectful, ongoing relationships with the Okanagan Nation Alliance and individual Syilx Bands. Work collaboratively to support coordinated approaches to watershed planning and water management and serve as a resource to evolving co-governance efforts in the basin.

Strategic Priority 3: Educating, Advocating, and Advising on Good Policy

Water sustainability depends on informed communities and effective public policy. OBWB works to strengthen water literacy, provides evidence-based policy advice, and elevates Okanagan water priorities with senior governments.

- ▶ **FOSTER A SHARED WATER ETHIC**
Strengthen public understanding of the Okanagan’s water reality and cultivate a shared water ethic that supports responsible water use, long-term stewardship and restoration.
- ▶ **ELEVATE OKANAGAN WATER ISSUES**
Increase OBWB’s influence with provincial and federal governments, raise the profile of Okanagan water priorities, and invest in dedicated government relations capacity to advance regional interests.
- ▶ **TRANSLATE SCIENCE INTO POLICY ADVICE**
Monitor emerging legislation and consultations that affect the watershed, translate science and local knowledge into practical policy advice, and provide informed, non-partisan recommendations to support sound water management.
- ▶ **STRENGTHEN REGIONAL WATER COMMUNICATIONS**
Provide clear, credible, and timely communication about the state of water in the Okanagan, reinforcing OBWB’s role as a trusted regional voice and helping communities understand risks, trade-offs, and solutions.



TOP: Make Water Work, Plant FireSmart™ campaign launch on May 21, 2025 in Armstrong, B.C. BOTTOM: Second-annual meeting of the Okanagan-Interior Invasive Mussel Working Group held Nov. 14, 2025 in Kelowna.



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