

## **Taking the initiative to protect our drinking water**

**By Mayor Holmes**

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There's a saying that "we all live downstream". This is especially true for Summerland where almost all our drinking water comes from the upper reaches of the Trout Creek watershed.

A watershed is an area of land that drains or "sheds" water from streams, lakes, aquifers, snow melt and rainfall into a larger waterbody.

The Trout Creek watershed covers more than 72,000 ha and is the second largest tributary to Okanagan Lake. We also draw from Eneas Creek to provide irrigation water to Garnett valley. Its watershed covers an additional 5,800 ha.

While we may sometimes take our water for granted, there's a lot of human activity in both watersheds that could affect us downstream – forestry, resource extraction, development, livestock grazing and agriculture, recreation, transportation, and septage.

Natural occurring events also affect water quality, including wildfires, declining forest health, landslides, flooding, and algae blooms.

Interconnections between the risks are complex, and climate change increases their frequency and severity. We're seeing an earlier spring freshet with larger peak flows coupled with more rain. As a result, there's increased sediment (turbidity) in the runoff, and already unstable slopes are further at risk of sliding.

An earlier freshet also reduces snowpack depth which, together with warmer and drier summers, decreases water availability in the summer. Longer and drier summers increase the risk of wildfires, and falling ash contributes to algae production.

The District of Summerland has well-trained staff who manage the risks to our source water, especially around our 12 dams and reservoirs that store water for when the community needs it.

Last year, Summerland Council adopted a Water Master Plan that provides an overview of our water distribution system and establishes priority projects, one of which is a \$200,000 grant-funded project just getting underway to upgrade and widen the spillway at Isintok dam.

More recently, on Feb 27, Council received a water source assessment that details the risks in the watershed. The assessment is a prerequisite for a Response Plan that will provide actions such as public education, best management practices, land use restrictions, and response preparation.

The Response Plan will also lay out responsibilities.

Most of the watershed is in Crown land over which the District has little regulatory control. There are 23 pieces of legislation that govern water involving multiple branches of government. There is no hierarchy of authority or lead provincial agency for source water protection, and not much inter-agency coordination.

Because the District is responsible for providing clean drinking water to residents, we need to take the initiative to bring together the various government agencies, First Nations, and industry stakeholders including forestry and agricultural interests.

Given the competing interests, the challenge will be to establish a common understanding that everyone shares a responsibility in protecting our source water.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board has a source water protection toolkit that will help us, and there are examples from around B.C. of local initiatives created with provincial government support, not the other way around.

By creating strong and lasting partnerships, we can protect our source water not only for current use but for well into the future.

*Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland.*