

## **Western Wheel March 30, 2010**

### **Citizens' water issues need to be recognized**

24 March 2010 by Rick Northrop - Staff Reporter

Whether it's protecting the South Saskatchewan River Basin (SSRB) or another ecosystem, more citizen involvement is needed.

That's according to Joe Obad, associate director of Water Matters, who delivered his conservation message at a meeting of Priddis-Millarville residents March 20. Obad and other water management experts from Alberta Environment and the University of Calgary spoke to a gathering of nearly one hundred people about the future of clean water in the Priddis-Millarville area.

Heather Sinton, of Alberta Environment, speaks at the Priddis-Millarville Residents Association meeting March 20 at the Millarville race track

"If we are not looking at ground water in the same comprehensive way we are surface water, we are going to create undo pressures on it and as a resource it's much harder to understand than surface water," said Obad.

The Water Matters Society of Alberta is a non-governmental organization founded in 2007 by citizens concerned about watershed protection in the province.

According to Obad, ground water tables in Alberta are being pressured due to a cap on surface water usage implemented in 2006. Water Matters is promoting a plan where a baseline of water much be maintained at all times in Alberta rivers. Anything above that level will be set aside for use by water license holders.

In good times, plenty of water will be available for all Albertans. In times of drought, all citizens must conserve much like a bank account.

"A lot of folks will look at it as, 'You are trying to take my rights away,' but what the shared system highlights is what water rights could be in relation to basic ecological need, in relation to basic ecological function," said Obad.

The Calgary Regional Partnership completed a study in June of 2009 showing a bleak future if water conservation efforts are not undertaken today.

"If we don't do that, if we essentially look the other way and assume it will be ok because it always has been, the incremental trend lines, the cumulative effects will catch up with us," said Obad.

The trend towards low-density development, especially in southern Alberta, disturbs hydrological function said Obad. Albertans will have to decide, through meetings like the one held March 20, a plan for the future of water conservation.

“These things require a lot of public participation, if it’s the same five per cent of folks who show up we are going to an outcome based on their input and folks may be very disappointed later,” said Obad.

Masaki Hayashi, PhD and associate professor with department of geo-science at the University of Calgary, hasn’t studied ground water in the area specifically. He is not sure if water resources in the Priddis-Millarville area are in danger but the population isn’t expanding as fast as other areas of the province

“I think that people still have the time to plan ahead and react so I don’t see that it is in imminent danger,” said Hayashi.

Residents will think twice about wasting water after listening to speakers at the meeting said Hayashi. He was contacted by an area resident asking to have the water level in the resident’s well monitored not long after the meeting.

“I think it generated some interest and this may result in some positive actions of the part of people to look after their ground water resources,” said Hayashi.

“Even though there isn’t any imminent danger, sustainability is key in any rural development.”

In late 2006, the Alberta Environment published the South Saskatchewan River Basin Water Management Plan, which called for a moratorium on new water licenses in the Bow, Oldman and South Saskatchewan Rivers.

The plan also called for committees to promote coordination of water management across the SSRB.

Water Conservation Objectives (WCOs) were established that stated river flow should be 45 per cent of natural rates or the existing rate plus 10 per cent which ever is greater.

Local Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils were encouraged to match priorities with the SSRB plan.

[rnorthrop@okotoks.greatwest.ca](mailto:rnorthrop@okotoks.greatwest.ca)