

Study looks at Shawnigan, Cowichan water 'crisis issues'

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In a time of global warming and dwindling water supplies, a better understanding of the issues and co-ordinated work to avoid a future water crisis are required, a new study released by the University of Victoria states.

The POLIS Water Sustainability Project looked at a number of water crisis issues around the province, including Shawnigan Lake and the Cowichan River, and offered potential solutions to create water security and sustainability in the coming years.

Study spokeswoman Rosie Simms said the province's new Water Sustainability Act, which was legislated in February, provides a wide range of possibilities to deal with water issues in B.C..

But she said it will be left to local authorities to use the new legislation to develop their own, separate regulations to deal with specific water issues in their communities.

Simms said all land-use projects have impacts on local water supplies, and the process to attain regulatory approval for them shouldn't be dealt with in isolation of the water issues.

She said drinking water concerns should have been thoroughly considered before the Ministry of Environment issued the permit for the controversial contaminated soil facility in the headwaters of Shawnigan Lake.

The headwaters are a source of drinking water for local residents and, fearing contamination, many have been protesting the facility, owned by South Island Aggregates and Cobble Hill Holdings, since it opened four years ago.

"These types of issues and concerns are dealt with in the Water Sustainability Act, but using the Act to deal with existing projects retroactively can pose lots of challenges," Simms said.

"The Act is still a work in progress, so we'll have to see how it is followed through."

As for the Cowichan River, and all other rivers and waterways in B.C. impacted by low water levels, Simms said she would like to see regulations developed to regulate their water flows in a "more transparent process."

She said local authorities must establish minimum standards for water flows in threatened rivers when considering new water-use licences.

"Before granting new licences, authorities must ensure there will be sufficient drinking water to meet demand, and enough to ensure fish populations are not threatened," Simms said.

"Gaps like these are surprising in the way licensing is sometimes currently handled. But these challenges present a genuine opportunity to collaborate on solutions, including the full implementation of the new Act through the development of robust supporting regulations."

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