

Conservation, innovation best sources of 'new' water
Leech River watershed a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done

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Water is a hot topic these days in the capital region. We're hearing about exciting new opportunities to secure our water supply -- opportunities such as sewage treatment with resource recovery and water reuse and recycling. And don't forget the green building developments that are popping up like mushrooms after a heavy rainfall.

Most recently, the Capital Regional District has shown the foresight to purchase a portion of the Leech River watershed, taking a long-term perspective on securing our water supply for generations to come.

Globally we are on the cusp of a real water crisis. Even closer to home, a changing climate and a relentless appetite for development will make water security and sustainability even more of a priority.

The CRD's purchase of a significant portion of the Leech River watershed shows real foresight and our leaders should be commended for thinking not just about the next electoral cycle, but about the next generation and beyond.

But let's hope we don't lose sight of the real issues ahead. Purchasing parts of the Leech River watershed is only a first step. Only a serious commitment to water conservation will provide our best source of "new" water. The water saved through a comprehensive approach to conservation and new approaches to water management, including rainwater harvesting and reuse and recycling, represent the real untapped potential.

Let's start by clearing up a few things about the Leech River land purchase.

First, it will take at least a generation -- and more likely two -- along with a fair amount of restorative work before the watershed is sufficiently healthy and recovered to provide



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Jack Hull, general manager of the regional water supply, looks at the water level of the Sooke Reservoir. Expert Oliver M. Brandes says only new approaches to water management will ensure supplies in the future.

even a drop of good clean water for drinking. This means we need to be thinking strategically now about how we get from here to there.

Second, the purchase will not double our water supply as some members of the regional water supply commission may suggest. In fact, the Leech River land really doesn't expand our water supply much at all.

All this purchase does provide is an insurance policy. Once the river has sufficiently recovered, it will provide a source that can be used to top up our existing Sooke Reservoir (the primary source of drinking water for the CRD).

However, issues around storage capacity, the health of the downstream ecosystems and water-sharing commitments mean we can likely only access a limited portion of this water and primarily during the wet winter season.

Those of us living in the CRD should not get too caught up in all the "new" water that the Leech River will provide. Instead we need to complement this acquisition with a commitment to water conservation, sustainability and living within our local water budget.

The water in the Sooke Reservoir is all we have. Sure, 50 years from now the Leech River will help by improving the probability that it is full at the start of spring, but the supply that's there is all we are going to get. And with a rapidly changing climate our summers are more likely to be a little longer and whole lot drier.

This means that there is real work ahead for the regional water commissioners and the water services department. They have done an excellent job of developing the foundation for a progressive water-demand management program. But we can't rest on our laurels.

The water advisory committee, consisting of experts and citizens representing a broad range of interests, advises the commission and has made a number of detailed recommendations to keep our water-management practices innovative and help us remain focused on a sustainable water future. It has recommended, for example, amendments to the CRD's Strategic Plan for Water Management to create clear water sustainability targets and commit to offset all growth in water demands through conservation, rainwater harvesting and reuse and recycling.

The advisory committee is also providing suggestions on how to get there through its report *Outdoor Water Conservation: Options and Opportunities for New Water in the CRD* released this summer. This provides a blueprint for the CRD and municipalities in addressing wasteful outdoor water-use practices. This focus on conservation and innovative practices is critically important.

With the arrival of the cool autumn winds and the inevitable rains that follow, it's easy to forget about the need to conserve and steward our water resources for health and community prosperity.

The CRD and our politicians have shown us that when it comes to water security they are willing to provide leadership. These first steps are good, but now is not the time to back off. Instead it's time to take the next step and continue to lead our community down the path towards water sustainability.

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He is also a member of the CRD water advisory committee.

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