ONLINE Community Drought Meeting

Summary Notes -

Welcome & Presentation:

17 people attended. Jack Owen (Okanogan CD) discussed recent trends, local drought conditions, fire conditions, and research data. Okanogan County is in its fourth consecutive year of declared drought. Following the presentation, Jordana Ellis (Okanogan CD) provided an update on the Local Drought Preparedness Project (LDPP) thus far, the framework for assessing drought risk, and summarized identified risks for Okanogan County.

There are eight identified drought risks in Okanogan County:

1. Agricultural & irrigation supply
    - Drought reduces surface water, groundwater, and snow-fed storage that irrigated agriculture depends on.
2. Municipal & domestic supply
    - Drought threatens drinking-water and domestic supply for towns / rural households, whose systems are largely groundwater / well-based.
3. Instream flow, ecological, and habitat
    - Drought and low-stream flows degrade aquatic habitat, fish, and ecological function — instream needs competing with out-of-stream uses.
4. Water-quality (low-flow)
    - Low flows and higher temperatures degrade water quality (temperature, dissolved oxygen, algae, sediment).
5. Wildfire-compounded drought
    - Drought and wildfire – drought dries fuels and lengthens fire season, while fire damages watersheds, water quality, and infrastructure.
6. Equity / overburdened community
    - Drought impacts fall disproportionately on overburdened communities/vulnerable populations.
7. Energy / hydropower
    - Altered streamflow timing and volume affect hydropower generation — the regional Columbia system and the county PUD's own supply.
8. Recreation & tourism
    - Drought reduces recreation and tourism through two pathways: snow drought curtailing winter recreation, and low flow / high temperature curtailing summer recreation.

Community Brainstorming Workshop & Group Discussion:

Davis Clark presented previously suggested project examples in the LDPP table. Participants were asked to share their feedback on the current project ideas listed and provide any further ideas for drought mitigation.

The categories for project ideas fell into six areas:

1. Infrastructure Enhancements
    - Build or improve storage and conveyance
    - Upgrade or expand water systems
    - Improve irrigation efficiency
    - Develop backup and alternative supplies
    - Enhance monitoring and data systems
2. Program Development
    - Create or expand cost-share programs
    - Provide technical assistance
    - Support drought planning and readiness
    - Develop monitoring and assessment programs
    - Strengthen local and regional coordination
3. Policy
    - Adopt water conservation policies
    - Update land use and development policies
    - Establish drought response protocols
    - Support water rights and regulatory clarity
    - Integrate drought resilience in planning
4. Community Outreach & Education
    - Increase public awareness and education
    - Offer workshops and training
    - Promote water conservation practices
    - Share resources and success stories
    - Engage youth and community leaders
5. Restoration
    - Restore rivers, floodplains, and wetlands
    - Replant native vegetation and riparian areas
    - Improve watershed health and forest resilience
    - Reduce erosion and sediment
    - Enhance habitat for fish and wildlife
6. Emergency Response

- Develop drought contingency plans
- Ensure emergency water supplies
- Establish community systems
- Coordinate wildfire and drought response
- Strengthen community preparedness

Discussion: (What drought risks are you experiencing or noticing? What are project ideas?)

The group discussed project ideas. Participants were encouraged to both share general ideas or identify specific area locations if they wanted to see work done there. Also, if they felt comfortable enough to share specific experiences with drought and project ideas that could help. The group discussed and shared the following:

A community member from the Economic Alliance said that their organization oversees the process in which the County Commissioners put together and rank a list of infrastructure projects needed. Every few years, there is funding for these projects, along with grant-writing resources to support the projects. People who are interested in submitting a project can contact the Economic Alliance to learn more or begin the process. They noted that the projects are primarily ranked by their economic impact. This process is run every year, but funding is only awarded every four years. This coming cycle is a year in which funding is awarded.

Someone from the Methow Watershed Council mentioned that they have been connecting with FireWise coordinators who have been talking about installing tanks or portable water sources that would be helpful for firefighters.

A community member from the Colville Tribe noted that they have seen a lot of the water cycles come and go over the years and that they are scared for the future of our watersheds due to the diminishment of streams, which are habitat for salmon, drying up. They note that we need to take a new look at how water is stored in our watershed, and how we receive our water because of climate change. The reduction in snowpack is changing how our water is stored in the winter and spring. They noted that we need large scale storage changes, which include going through each watershed and thinking about what is available and needed. We need to revamp the way we store our water; however, it is difficult to figure out the right way to do this, thinking about where we can implement these activities. There are examples from other communities, particularly in Colorado such as capturing water high up in the system to build up water supply. They suggested that to kick this type of work off, people could gather and observe Google Earth to start the conversation and think about what areas would be most viable. This would be a watershed-wide assessment on a large scale to consider possible opportunities.

There was a comment that Chelan County made a big move forward last week on a wildfire-fighting project that has been in the works for about four years. The Board of County Commissioners awarded a $523,886 bid last week to Frac Tanks Inc., an Illinois company, for the delivery and potential placement of up to 20 refurbished shipping containers that will be used as mobile water storage tanks.

A community member from Osoyoos, BC Canada who is also on the Board of Control for Osoyoos Lake/ the Okanogan Basin Water Board. They have working to promote water conservation practices in their community to use water wisely and have been using the slogan "Make Water Work!". This is a local community competition for people to creatively conserve water. This includes actions like using less water on the lawn and checking irrigation. Two things are using water-smart plants and being fire smart. The fire departments are specifically thinking about how the community can use the water wisely. One idea was to use rain barrels. In Osoyoos, outdoor watering is reduced to 1 day a week to preserve water. They also recommend turning water off inside the house and to take short showers. Rain barrels are a really useful way to store rainwater; this can even be an informal basin like a bucket.

A local agricultural producer from the Methow noted that water use for agriculture has been curtailed, which can make it difficult to produce on a large scale. She wonders what can be done about this? Can we upgrade and purchase more water-efficient machinery?

Jordana Ellis (Okanogan CD) responded that many agricultural producers have reached out and asked about irrigation improvement but that there are some challenges in this process since we are limited by funding and the number of projects that we are able to complete each year.

A community member from the Methow Beaver Project highlighted the need to utilize wetlands and leverage Beaver Dam Analogues (BDAs). This could build off of a current ground truthing project being conducted by the Methow Okanogan Beaver Project that is identifying areas that could be good for BDAs and using that information to create and improve a model.

There was a comment noting their agreement to the previous comments about convening a group of experts to consider the best location for high elevation water storage.

The Bonapart Meadows purchase and restoration project was brought up and highlighted as an important project opportunity. This project could play an important role in retaining water in the local ecosystem, especially if the peat is able to remain in the ground. The need for policy change was highlighted; there is currently no Beaver Management Plan at a statewide level. For example, if a beaver habitat is restored, nothing currently stops

someone from going in and trapping the beaver. We also don't currently have a way to track how many beavers are being trapped and killed in the state or their current population numbers. Two years ago a Beaver Management Plan was proposed at the statewide level, and it was close to being passed with a wide amount of stakeholder support but it wasn't able to make it over the finish line. Part of what is needed is more communication and outreach about living with beavers and how they contribute to the ecosystem. If more community members supported beavers, then it would be much easier to conserve their habitat.

A representative from the Methow Watershed Council suggested working with our legislators. For example, she noted Shelly Short's role in restoring wildfire funding in the last session. We need to talk more with our legislators to communicate community needs.

Support for working with Short about supporting a Beaver Management Plan was vocalized.

Someone commented that policy in general could include legislative 'tours' with experts on the ground in the highest areas of concerns or the areas of highest potential

There was as further comment about the wildfire mitigation impacts of beavers, and said that we need to use the natural environment such as beavers to keep our community safe.

A community member from the Methow Beaver Project mentioned that changes to policy for BDAs such as now requiring permits from the Army Corps of Engineers make it really difficult to implement this small, science-based practice. They noted that they just spent two years waiting for permits for a recent project. All of the agency staff are 'swamped,' which makes it difficult to work through the process. They suggest a system where certain projects, or experienced practitioners, could have a more streamlined process.

Jordana Ellis summarized the comment that we need to connect with our legislators more. She suggested that maybe we need a District 7 legislative advocacy group with tours and meetings with legislators. Part of this campaign could be creating a gradient of severity for a more streamlined permitting process.

There was a statement agreeing that we need to build these connections early and emphasize our needs before the legislative session gets busy.

Another project suggestion was provided, "Another project idea related to wildfire resilience is that research is being done on using virtual fencing to graze fire breaks on the landscape."

Next Steps & Closing:

Jordana shared that next steps include compiling and capturing these project ideas and continuing to collect projects over the next two months. Participants were encouraged to visit the Okanogan CD website to submit project ideas by filling out the community drought survey.

It was shared that the local drought plan will be published at the end of December. The goal is to capture community feedback and all the project ideas possible into the plan so in the future, partners can seek funding to get these projects on the ground – emphasizing that an approved community plan is a crucial first step in to apply and receive grant funding.

Adjourned at 7:25pm.