

Okanogan Valley - Community Drought Meeting

Wednesday, July 22nd, 2026 | 6:00pm-7:30pm

Tonasket Community Cultural Center (CCC)

Summary Notes -

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

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 a few project examples and participants were asked to work in groups at their tables to discuss their drought experiences and project ideas.

The categories for projects 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:

Farmer inputs are high and we can't afford to upgrade the infrastructure needed. To get the funding to do this, local taxes must go up. This is a barrier to being able to afford needed enhancements. Another comment was about orchards and the need for removing materials, a potential project was to secure more chippers to reduce the need to burn. This is a need expressed specifically in relation to orchard removal with large volumes of material that are usually burned.

Creating a cohesive plan that's effective locally. The need for engineering and research studies to find what projects would be most effective for our area. For example, how much water do we need to store, how big of a reservoir, to make it through the driest parts of the year. The project would be the need for a water storage plan and engineering to make this possible.

It was mentioned that Tunk is an important area to focus on to increase natural water storage through beaver dam analogues to slow water on the landscape. Another community member mentioned that there's silos between stakeholders all talking about the same water, the conversations are happening, but there's not enough coordination between the groups. The project would be a policy change or program development to connect stakeholders into a local working group.

Involving essential partners such as the Department of Ecology and local partners that control water flow and water retained, and cooperation with Canada because that's where the water comes from. The project would be around policy and community outreach and education to communicate water needs and control the flow of water with consideration of capacity limits and regulations in water bodies.

One community member mentioned an essential tool for them when it comes to farming has been a soil moisture probe. They spoke on how this can result in 20-25% water savings

and has greatly benefited their orchards. They have utilized a program that's about \$900 a year and had technical experts install the probes at the appropriate depth to meet the root zone for trees, this would be different for hay or other crops. Wilbur-Ellis Probe Source.

One person emphasized that there are conflicting priorities around what's beneficial for water, one could think that paying to maintain lawn and a green field is a waste of water while others could say it's a priority for a green barrier to fire protection and a cool habitat for wildlife. The group also discussed the issue of inadequate fire barriers and how much of a toll that takes on firefighters and the ability to save a home, while maintaining defensible space and a green barrier is helpful. Orchards can be an example of well-maintained green space that helps slow fire or defend areas when it comes to wildfire.

Another community member shared the need for increased prescribed burns to help when it comes to burn severity and results in less intense fires. This can also help with water conservation savings. Culturally, caring for the land included more frequent and less intense burning, we need to get back to that, the change in regulation that came into play to keep fire off the landscape was harmful. The need for more prescribed-burn education across the community was emphasized.

Water storage is a project focus for program development, emergency response, and infrastructure updates to help communities through cost-share for community water storage tanks. An example was shared that a community member put in a pool for the purpose of fire protection and that this couldn't be included or recognized as that use. Sharing that a policy change may be needed and it comes to insurance. A rent a bladder program could be a program development project idea, a water storage option that doesn't require a pond permit.

Communication, outreach, and education around irrigating efficiently and not over irrigating. The fact that there needs to be a balance and without this can harm crop yield and soil health resulting in excess minerals and nutrients. Another need is cooperative water management, timing, and communications.

The Nature Conservancy manages a 1300-acre reserve and discussed thinning and prescribed burning on Barker Mt. Another community member mentioned they would like to see more goats. Someone asked about Enloe Dam and the opportunity for water storage there as a potential reservoir. It would be highly effective if there were an additional four feet added to the height. The fact that this could be potential reservoir should be considered. If the Dam is removed, timing should also be considered for holding and releasing the water in August or September to allow for more water availability during that

time. Palmer lake was also discussed as a potential increased water storage area by raising the lake level.

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 attend the final, online community meeting, share with family and friends, and submit project ideas by submitting them into 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 7:30pm.

2026 Drought Community Meetings

Tonasket Community Cultural Center

July 22nd, 2026

Name

Location

Marc Egerton

Jon Neal

Dale Swedberg

Herman Flamenco

Ed Naillon

Baker Mountain

Oroville

Marcia Naillon

Oroville

David Gregusk

Tonasket

Dave Stangland

Tonasket