

Mid Okanogan - Community Drought Meeting

Wednesday, August 13th, 2025 | 6:30pm-8:30pm

Okanogan PUD Auditorium

SUMMARY NOTES:

Welcome & Purpose

10 people were in attendance for the meeting. 7 in-person, 3 online. Partners included Okanogan CD, Methow Watershed Council, WSU Water Research Center, Washington Water Trust, and Trout Unlimited.

Jack Owen (Okanogan CD) introduced the Local Drought Preparedness Project (LDPP) and goals for tonight's meeting. Jordana Ellis (Okanogan CD) continued with a project overview presentation discussing local drought conditions, research data, and future trends for Okanogan County.

Community Storytelling Workshop

Participants broke into small groups to discuss three prompts focused on experiences with drought, risks to water availability and local supply, and impacts in the community.

Prompt 1: What made you realize water is a limited resource?

One participant shared that in 2005 the Okanogan Valley received 29% of normal snowpack, Peak discharge in Omak Creek was less than half of what it usually is. In 1998 their mother was visiting from Michigan and mentioned that everyone irrigates here, Irrigation is necessary to grow most crops here.

Another participant remembers their mom would yell if the faucet was left on. Their mom grew up in LA, a drought prone area. This reminded another of their parents who grew up during the depression; waste was not an option when it came to anything, including water.

One participant, during their master's program, said they learned about the San Joaquin River going dry and needing to truck fish upstream to migrate.

The Yakima River was popular for floating and fishing, beginning in the 60's, there were years when the river so low that the raft couldn't make it over riffles and sandbars.

One participant remembers in the 1980's, when some restaurants started charging for water.

One memory that stood out to an online attendee was public announcements from government in Arizona to not bathe everyday or not flush the toilet every time.

Another online attendee mentioned that their well would run dry in the summer if they weren't careful.

Prompt 2: What concerns you/how might you be impacted by drought?

Green Lake is likely to have cyanobacteria and would rather not bring dogs there because of risk of illness.

Our garden is not doing well this year, and we don't want to increase water use.

Water use is minimal, not personally at risk of drought; however, there is a large concern over the ag community because it is the largest industry here. If agriculture becomes less viable, the Okanogan valley community could suffer. High concern for fruit tree growers since they are a higher vulnerability to drought, unable to come back after a bad year.

Growth outpacing supply. Penticton used to be small and native vegetation was everywhere. Penticton and Kelowna have grown both with agriculture and industry, increasing water demand upstream.

River levels: Okanogan River Drains a huge area for it to be as low as it is, Likely due to climate change and more "straws in the ground".

Livelihood: May need adaptation of ag crops to fit shifts in weather. It may be smarter to begin large scale crop type change.

Forests are also changing species composition due to fires. Areas like Mazama where there is a dangerous density of trees and nobody is interested in taking measures to reduce risk of wildfire.

Mapping Activity & Group Sharing

Participants placed dots on maps of the subregion in areas where the community may be vulnerable to drought and where community members are seeing drought impacts. The attendees were asked to consider the impacts as being in one of three main categories if possible: Social/Human Health, Economic, and Environmental impacts. For impacts or vulnerabilities on a larger scale/ scope too large for a dot, participants were asked to share a thought on posterboard.

Online attendees:

Social/ Human Health dot placed in Mazama community for changes in scenic beauty and impacts from fires.

Environmental dot placed on the Methow River for low flows affecting fish habitat.

Economic/Livelihood dot placed on the valley bottom for ag producers and water supply for irrigation.

In person:

Environmental dot placed in the mountains for Lynx's and Snowshoe Hares (animal species that depend on snow).

Environmental dot placed on the forests are over concern for health of the trees.

Environmental dot placed due to concern over the Okanogan River temperatures for adequate dissolved oxygen. There is a thermal barrier created in the Okanogan River, higher temps impede the migration of salmonids; it typically sets up second week of July, now it's setting up in June, hurting populations that spawn higher up in the watershed. When the temp barrier does break, the fish don't migrate as far because they have spent more time waiting in Lake Pateros. The thermal barrier sets up 1.25 days earlier per year.

Social/ Human Health & Environmental Concern for loons up at Lost Lake (water quality) and nesting habitat.

Environmental concern for the Similkameen River which is historically low. These conditions could be a harbinger of things to come.

Environmental & Social/Human Health concern for Mazama area due to excess tree density and consumptive use, and the fire danger it poses.

Social/ Human Health & Environmental Concern someone mentioned was the effects of the dust bowl and how climate change is mirroring this problem.

Social/ Human Health & Environmental at Green Lake due to blue-green algae, poor for human & animal health.

Social/ Human Health & Environmental concern for Okanogan's unique alkaline lakes.

Environmental concern for invasive species able to overcome native species due to reduced water availability.

Takeaways & Questions

The attendees were vocal about their concerns over the environment. Several individuals mentioned that there needs to be a change in crop type grown here.

The Venn diagram really shows how this problem is interconnected among all aspects.

One individual felt that climate change seems to be accelerating, and our population is still increasing, especially in the Okanogan. It's important to study and know the recorded history of our environmental conditions and how it has affected us before.

Big change in population upstream of here (Canada) that has continued increasing.

One individual suggested to start a "WaterWise" program to educate the public of risks. FireWise was created in response to catastrophe, it would be smart to get ahead of the problem before there is a crisis.

Ranchers use wells that over the years need to be drilled deeper and deeper. This is a big warning, and could be monitored.

There are wells in California drilled over a mile deep, using fossil water that took millennia to establish. Big takeaway is education, we need to be smarter managing what we have.

Conversation shifted to what projects could be done. Suggestions included:

- Vegetation management on a wide scale, particularly forest management and reincorporating fire.
 - Forests have a large draw on groundwater and intercept precipitation before it hits the ground.
- Permeable surface area is another problem contributing to excess runoff.
- Putting solar panels over the top of irrigation canals to reduce evaporative loss and generate power.

Next Steps & Closing

Jordana thanked all for coming to the meeting and listed ways to stay involved in the project.

- Sign up on the communication list to receive updates.
- Take the survey coming out soon!
- Ask neighbors, family, friends, dog-walker... To get involved!
- Stay tuned for upcoming opportunities to participate in development of projects.

Meeting adjourned at 7:51pm.

2025 Drought Community Meeting

Okanogan PUD Auditorium

August 13th, 2025

Name

Location

Randy & Rae Jean Kelley
Craig Nelson

Okanagan

Craig Nelson

Okanogan

Christopher J. Fisher

Riverside

Brent Smith

Onak

Elianna Rosenthal

Female

Sam Nivani

Okanogan

Susan Crampton (online)

Methow Valley

Amber Jackson (online)

Dep. of Ecology

Stuart Crane (online)

Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation