

BRWP – My land, our water

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A safe and secure long-term water supply is crucial for the quality of life of all residents of Bonnechere River watershed. It is a key factor in ensuring economic prosperity and healthy communities. A healthy watershed means clean drinking water and an adequate water supply for agriculture, other businesses, wildlife, and recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, canoeing and hiking.

The Bonnechere River watershed is a series of interconnected ecosystems including forested rocky uplands, fertile farmed lowlands, urban centres, wetlands, streams, lakes and rivers. The connectedness among these areas means that what happens uphill and upstream, will affect areas downhill and downstream. We also need to realize that the amount of water we have to use is finite, because what flows through our property comes from the global water cycle.

It takes about five days for a drop of water to travel from the headwaters of the Bonnechere River in Algonquin Park to its mouth at the Ottawa River at Castleford. Our actions can have a direct impact on the health of that water droplet. Both surface water and groundwater can be easily degraded and contaminated. Even if the degradation or contamination at one place is small, the combined

impact across a watershed can be significant.

About 80 per cent of the land in the Bonnechere watershed is privately owned, and rural residential and agriculture are the primary land uses. Most rural residents obtain their water from private wells. Thus actions to protect surface and groundwater need to occur at the individual and farm property levels.

Best management practices (BMPs) are proven, practical and affordable approaches to conserving water, soil and other natural resources. Undertaking appropriate BMPs on our properties will help to protect water quality in our own backyard as well as in our community. Numerous BMPs have been developed to help reduce water pollution and protect the quantity of water available for use.

For agriculture, BMPs include protecting remnant wetlands and forest cover, having an environmental farm plan, reducing and carefully timing application of fertilizers (e.g. not spreading manure on frozen ground), maintaining a minimum 30 per cent residue cover in fields, retaining or planting buffer strips between streams and agricultural land, tree planting, fencing livestock from water courses, keeping surface water away from barnyards and manure storages, and using retention ponds to mitigate peaks in tile drains.

BMPs for rural homeowners include protecting remnant native habitat (e.g. grassland, wetland, forest), containing pets, regular inspection and maintenance of septic systems, upgrading and maintaining well-heads, testing well water regularly, and decommissioning abandoned wells.

Water is considered to be the main channel through which the impact of climate change will be felt and therefore is the key to developing successful adaptation strategies. Regardless of future greenhouse gas emissions trends, a certain amount of climate change is already upon us. Changes in freshwater systems, like the Bonnechere, are already being observed around the world.

Water-related issues – whether there is too little water, too much, too unreliable, or of poor quality – are expected to increase. Failure to adapt to our changing climate can jeopardise water security over the long-term and make it more costly for property owners and governments to respond, for example, by having to build additions or retro-fit water-related infrastructure.

With better understanding, wise use, and adaptive planning for our surface and groundwater, we should continue to have enough clean water even as our climate is changing. While we may own the land, water is truly a community resource!