

Shuswap's Jurisdiction Maze

A Shuswap Passion column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

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One does not have to dig very deep to find out why the Shuswap watershed had never been mapped before, as there is no government agency that is completely responsible for our region. Instead, the Shuswap region is criss-crossed by a maze of boundaries that separate jurisdictional responsibilities for every level of government involved in the watershed. Consequently, no effort had ever been made to distinguish the common geographic feature that best describes our region, the Shuswap watershed.

At the regional government level, there are three jurisdictions that cover the Shuswap. The Thompson-Nicola Regional District is responsible for Chase and much of the Adams Lake region. The Columbia-Shuswap Regional District covers the majority of the watershed, but also includes a significant chunk of the Columbia River watershed. The North Okanagan Regional District includes the southern section of Mara Lake along with the entire Shuswap River sub-drainage area.

Forest management can have an enormous impact on watersheds and at one time the Ministry of Forests was organized with jurisdictional boundaries that somewhat followed the watershed borders. However, the south half of the Adams Lake area and part of the Salmon River watershed were in the Kamloops Forest District and the north half was in the Clearwater District.

The Salmon Arm Forest District covered much of the watershed, but it left out most of the Shuswap River drainage which was in the Vernon District. When the BC government restructured the forest service and gave more control over forestry to the companies, the Salmon Arm District was combined with the two Okanagan districts into one centralized forest district that extends from the top of the Seymour River drainage all the way to the border.

There is an east-west line through Mara Lake that divides Ministry of Environment jurisdiction between their offices in Penticton and Kamloops. Thus, when there was a concern with manure getting into the Shuswap River near Grindrod, MOE staff had to travel up from Penticton to investigate. Responsibility for Shuswap's provincial parks is also split between Kamloops and Penticton. Even the province's water district boundaries do not follow watershed boundaries, as the Shuswap is divided between Kamloops and Vernon.

In 2007, growing concerns over declining water quality and rapidly expanding foreshore development resulted in various levels of governmental and non-governmental organizations working together through the Shuswap Lake Integrated Planning Process (SLIPP). The issue of fragmented jurisdictional authority within the watershed quickly became one of the hot topics. The process document describes the situation as a

“complicated regulatory framework where 14 public agencies from every level of government have jurisdiction over some aspect of the lakes.”

A partial solution to the jurisdictional maze was developed by SLIPP prior to the completion of the plan through the establishment of an Inter-Agency Technical Committee. This committee has held meetings since 2008 at which planning and regulatory issues are discussed and perspectives are shared about proposed large scale developments. While decision making authority still rests with the applicable agency, the committee provides a forum for providing advice to the decision makers.

One of the key recommendations in the SLIPP strategic plan calls for the creation of a Shuswap Watershed Council that would “facilitate and support activities that enhance the quality of life and environment.” Essentially the Council would provide a governmental structure that would be able to implement the SLIPP strategic plan and thus provide funding and a structure for all levels of government to work together to ensure the long term ecological sustainability of the Shuswap watershed.

While a Watershed Council would be a new way to help manage resources in the Shuswap, a similarly structured organization, the Okanagan Water Board, has been successfully operating for over 40 years. The Shuswap Watershed Council would include a board of directors from the regional districts and from the technical public advisory committees. Funding would be needed for the Council to operate and the best source would be a small parcel tax, so that property owners would help pay the costs of doing proper water quality monitoring, recreational use studies, and other projects required to protect the watershed. It seems that most Shuswap residents would have no problem paying about \$20 per year to help protect their watershed.