



Wonky Policy

RALPH PENTLAND and **NANCY GOUCHER** explain why Canada's water table is missing a leg, and how we can work to repair it.

CANADIANS REGARD FRESH WATER

as the country's most important natural resource—even over oil and gas and forestry, according to a recent Nanos-Policy Options public survey. And it's with good reason. Practically every economic sector—agriculture, oil and gas, electric power, industrial manufacturing, tourism—relies on water to sustain business.

Public surveys also show that Canadians are becoming increasingly concerned by the prospect of a fresh water crisis in Canada. In fact, in a global opinion survey undertaken by GlobeScan, and sponsored by Molson Coors, Canada ranked second behind Mexico in terms of citizens considering fresh water problems as "very serious." Surprisingly, this placed Canadian concern ahead of countries such as India, China, the United States and the United Kingdom. This level of concern should be a wake-up call for Canada's leaders and governments; the myth of endless water abundance is beginning to shatter.

Who's responsible?

Provincial governments have primary authority over water resources and have been fairly active over the last decade. A number of them have developed, or are in the process of developing

comprehensive water strategies. While they may not always have the required capacity, local governments and watershed authorities—to whom many of the responsibilities for managing water have been delegated—are also doing the best they can with the resources they have. Canadian businesses are starting to recognize the costs associated with their water footprints, and citizens are slowly waking up to the fact that water is too important a resource to take for granted.

It is time for the federal government to recognize the importance of water to Canadians.

Unfortunately, the federal government, which has constitutional responsibility for a number of areas critical to managing fresh water, has been systematically failing to deliver on those responsibilities. The situation is like a table missing a leg—as new problems get piled on top of

the table, the likelihood of it reaching a tipping point becomes ever greater.

A chronology of federal attempts

The last federal water policy was tabled in Parliament over two decades ago. This policy was never fully implemented and was effectively shelved in the mid-1990s. Since then, government and other agencies have made more than a dozen attempts to articulate or inform a new federal water strategy. While substantial bureaucratic resources have been expended to define and develop such a strategy, they have yet to be converted to actual policy or any real action on the ground. The current government made a commitment to develop a "new water strategy" in the Speech from the Throne two years ago. In 2009, Canada's Office of the Auditor General noted that negligible progress has been made on implementing this strategy.

While its numerous attempts to develop a water strategy indicate the federal government has acknowledged the need to do more on water, it is unclear why none of these efforts have ever been converted into an actual strategy. Some have speculated that it is

a lack of political will; others that it is difficult to build consensus among the 20 or so federal departments involved in water; and others that it is a fear of stepping into provincial jurisdiction. It is likely that action has been stalled by a combination of all three of these reasons as well as others.

Whatever the reasons, it is time for the federal government to recognize the importance of water to Canadians by implementing a new strategic blueprint that supports provincial, local, business, and citizen action. This is not about usurping provincial responsibility or making government bigger. This is about developing the necessary national capacity to support the activities of all levels of government and civil society. It is about rebuilding the missing leg so that the table becomes strong and resilient; capable of bearing the pressures placed on it.

Blueprint for a federal water strategy

When developing this strategy, the federal government should consider the following priority actions identified by the country's leading water experts in a paper called Changing the Flow: A Blueprint for Federal Action on Freshwater:


Enhancing national capacity for freshwater protection. The primary goal of federal action on freshwater protection should be strengthening national capacity, beginning with developing a consensus-based national vision that accounts for specific conditions, challenges and needs within Canada. The creation of a federal watersheds agency would help facilitate coordinated action from the national to local watershed scale, and a national water fund and audit process would ensure sustainability and accountability in implementation.

Respond to the impacts of climate change and energy production. A federal water strategy should consider how to help communities build resilience to the impacts of climate change by integrating adaptation (minimizing community vulnerability to impacts) and mitigation (reducing greenhouse gases) into freshwater

management. A water strategy should also adopt a precautionary approach to energy development that prevents dislocation of river basins, destruction of natural flows and contamination of drinking water and aquatic habitats.

Securing safe drinking water for all Canadians. The Canadian Guidelines for Drinking Water Quality do not

ensure equal access to clean drinking water across the country. As is the case in Europe and the United States, health-based long-term objectives and legally binding minimum national standards should be implemented through national drinking water legislation. Immediate action also needs to be taken to ensure safe drinking water on First Nation reserves.




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Protecting aquatic ecosystems and Aboriginal water rights. Governments should improve the enforcement of laws to protect the lakes and rivers that facilitate economic and social prosperity in Canada. To do so, the federal government should work with other levels of government to develop effective frameworks that maintain in-stream flow needs. As part of a water strategy, the federal government should recognize Aboriginal water rights and the special relationship between First Nations and land and water.

Promoting a culture of water conservation. To encourage water conservation, financial and legal incentives can facilitate the move towards a soft path management approach. As opposed to a traditional approach of seeking new supplies, the soft path relies on reducing demand for water through community engagement, long-term planning and innovative policies. Further specific actions could include creating a national education program to dispel the myth of water abundance and reducing

water demand through a water efficiency Act with mandatory efficiency standards for products and appliances.

Preventing interjurisdictional conflicts and bulk water exports. The federal government should support the International Joint Commission, an underutilized binational body created to resolve water disputes with the United States, with the capacity it needs to meet new challenges. The federal government should also alleviate public concern regarding the prospect of bulk water exports by prohibiting the removal of water from Canada's major river basins through national legislation. For interprovincial issues, a dispute resolution process that ensures fair and sustainable agreements would help to avoid and resolve conflicts over transboundary waters.

Developing world-class science. Effective decision making requires science-based knowledge that is detailed and current. However, over the years, the federal government has cut back on its water science programming—reducing the

number of observation stations, cutting staff and terminating studies. As water security issues become more prevalent, we need additional capacity in areas such as national water inventories, aquifer mapping, data coordination and long-term studies that are consistent over time. Results should be translated for use by policy makers and made available to the general public.

Uncertain times

During times of economic recovery, governments tend to treat environmental protection as secondary to economic progress. Past experience shows us that deep cuts to water programs occur during times of recovery and deficit-slaying. However, rebuilding the economy and contributing to freshwater security are not mutually exclusive objectives. In fact, there are major economic benefits to be derived from progressive water management and serious economic costs associated with fresh water abuse.

For example, government incentives for water-efficient technologies such as water

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recycling and reuse could pay substantial dividends in the rapidly growing global water technology market. New York-based Lux Research has stated that the world's water-related business revenues will rise from \$522 billion in 2007 to nearly \$1 trillion by 2020 and predicts that a world faced by water shortages will need a new "water cultivation" approach characterized by efficiency, reuse and source diversification. A recent article in the New York Times supports this prediction. Entitled "China's Water Needs Create Opportunities," it explains that considerable sums of the Chinese government's \$585-billion stimulus package went towards clean technology, with a particular focus on water treatment and reuse technology because of the desperate state of some of the waterways in that country. With government support, Canadian businesses could become leaders in this new market, having already established a strong reputation internationally.

On the other hand, as a new report by the United Nations Environment

Program, The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity, suggests, the degradation of natural resources such as water "can negatively impact on public health, food security, consumer choice and business opportunities." Inadequate water monitoring and poor planning for extreme events and changing water supplies could prove extremely costly. Out of the ten costliest natural disasters in Canadian history, six have been drought. The Prairies drought of 2001-2002 cost the country's economy nearly \$6 billion and 41,000 jobs were lost.

Typically, farmers are on the front-line when drought hits but the costs of mismanagement impact all aspects of Canadian economy. For example, we could see rising health care costs from worsening water quality, increasing property damage from more frequent floods, and significant costs associated with neglected water infrastructure, much of which is already old stock on borrowed time.

Canadians are becoming aware of the failures of the federal government to

deliver on its responsibilities regarding water security and are expecting more. In the recent Nanos-Policy Options public survey, Canadians ranked a new national water strategy as their favourite policy option for freshwater protection.

Isn't it time to stabilize the table with a fourth leg? Our economic stability and environmental health depends on protecting the country's most important resource. The first step in rebuilding the federal presence should be the development and implementation of a federal water strategy that protects ecological services and the integrity of our aquatic systems. Failure to act now will result in substantial near-term costs for all Canadians—and even higher costs down the road. *wc*

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