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Rocky Mountain Outlook

Top Canadian water policy experts drawn to Canmore



The Columbia Glacier

by Bob Sandford

By [Lynn Martel - Rocky Mountain Outlook](#)

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Several of Canada's top water policy experts were drawn to Canmore recently, lured in part by the scientific research being conducted on the Rockies' glaciers and rivers by respected Canadian hydrologists and glaciologists.

Members of the Forum for Leadership on Water (FLOW) chose to meet in the Rockies to witness first-hand how Canmore has developed as a centre for research on water resources and climate-related matters, said Bob Sandford, Canadian chair for the UN's water for Life initiative, and co-chair of FLOW.

"The members of FLOW are interested in the U of C's Biogeoscience Institute and the Canadian Rockies Snow and Ice Initiative," Sandford said. "They are also interested in the work being done in the Rockies by researchers of the calibre of (hydrologist) Dr. John Pomeroy and (glaciologist) Dr. Shawn Marshall."

Hosting a meeting of several of FLOW's members in Canmore marks another step toward Canmore becoming a "Canadian Davos", Sandford said, referring to the Swiss mountain town that is a world centre for research of water resources and public policy related to the management of upland watersheds.

While here, FLOW members Tony Maas, director of the World Wildlife Fund's freshwater program, and Oliver Brandes, head of the Water Sustainability Project at the University of Victoria's POLIS Project on Ecological Governance, were acquainted with the work currently being carried out in the Rockies under the aegis of the University of Saskatchewan, the IP3 Cold Regions research network and the Western Canadian Cryospheric Network.

The main goal of FLOW's meeting, Sandford said, was to outline how the group will utilize the experience and influence of its nationally respected members to influence Canada-wide water policy reform.

"The goal was to have this meeting in a place that would inspire the most creative thinking and the clearest action on how to manage water resources more effectively in Canada," Sandford said.

For Maas, the meetings in Canmore marked the start of a journey

that would continue in Edmonton where he would meet with Alberta Environment Deputy Minister Jim Ellis, and then Yellowknife to meet with Deputy Premier and Environment Minister Michael Miltenberger.

FLOW is an independent group of water experts from across Canada that encourages government action to protect and steward the country's critical freshwater resources by proposing policy solutions, urging action and tracking progress towards a more sustainable water future. The organization launched in 2007 with the publication *Changing the Flow*, a comprehensive blueprint for federal action on freshwater protection. The document outlined 25 recommended actions built around seven priority areas as essential steps that would reignite the federal government's role in sustaining Canada's water resources and help guide the country to a sustainable freshwater future.

Canada's most recent federal policy on water, which was written in 1987, was preceded by a lengthy inquiry, Brandes said. Little, however, he added, has been implemented since.

"They did really good work," Brandes said. "But we've probably been stagnant on water for more than 20 years."

"We wouldn't be in bad shape if it was actually being implemented, but it pretty much ended up on the shelf," Maas explained. "It could be shored up in reference to things like climate change, but for the most part, if it was plucked off the shelf it would be good to go."

The multi-generational members of FLOW are united by a common set of values and the ability to be forward thinking, Brandes said.

"We are able to work effectively with our common strengths," Brandes said. "There is no major water workshop or conference happening in Canada without the influence of at least one of FLOW's members."

One of those members, Jim Bruce, is a Canadian Policy Representative for the Soil and Water Conservation Society and a consultant on climate change adaptation, water management and natural disaster mitigation. Bruce has been involved in setting the agenda for the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada's 2010 conference, *Canadian Water: Towards a New Strategy*, taking place in Montreal on March 25 and 26. Other FLOW members will be in attendance and sit on panels, sharing expertise and

suggestions with delegates that will include Environment Minister Jim Prentice.

One of FLOW's main objectives is to inspire Canadians to become informed and engaged in decisions being made regarding their water resources. One of the ways they hope to do this is by producing a book based on presentations and documents authored by its members. As well, they are working to create a companion project that will engage the public.

"People are concerned about water, everybody has a connection to water on many levels," Brandes said. "They sense things are amiss, and that they're getting worse. I think they also see that there are a variety of players and they're not sure who should be doing what, or even what they should be doing. Like a lot of things, when it comes to water, people are always looking for easy solutions and there are no easy solutions where water is concerned."


Canadians' own images of their connection to the natural landscape is evidence of a disconnect, Brandes said. All over the country people's images of a particular iconic place may not match the realities of nature, he explained, just as showcase gardens don't reflect the natural and often equally beautiful plants meant to grow in that ecosystem – such as the idea of having a lush green lawn in southern Alberta, rather than a yard blooming with Indian paintbrush and wild rose bushes.

"We recognize people have strong connections to water and to democracy, and the idea of people playing a role in decisions that matter," Brandes said. "In the past, people have looked for simple technological solutions, kind of with the attitude of let someone else figure it out. We want people empowered. We're seeing an increasing disconnect from the environment, from their own communities and from government. Canadians do care about things, they love fishing in their lakes, but increasingly we're losing our ability to do that."

"But we're lucky we haven't totally lost (that ability) yet," Maas added. "There's a notion of protecting what we have and restoring what we've messed up. We want people to become engaged about water in their community, in terms of the environment and with their government, and to care what's going to happen with their water."

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