

Water smart? We won't be if the promises aren't acted on

BY LINDA NOWLAN, RANDY CHRISTENSEN, OLIVER BRANDES AND CRAIG ORR, SPECIAL TO THE SUN MARCH 17, 2009



We need to ask our leaders if they're willing to safeguard our water.

Photograph by: Steve Bosch, Vancouver Sun files, Special to the Sun

Eight months have passed since the province released its new water plan, Living Water Smart, but the promises delivered with great fanfare on the banks of Musqueam Creek have yet to turn into action, and British Columbia risks becoming bogged down.

We continue our profligate ways and are among the highest per capita water users in the world. Our ecosystems rely on clean and abundant supplies and key species like salmon may well be the fish out of water if our regulations don't catch up to the state of scientific knowledge.

Living Water Smart could be a blueprint for the change that is so desperately needed. Where are the financial and resource commitments to turn the rhetoric into reality?

A coalition of leading groups urges the province to commit to water sustainability and asks all B.C.'s political parties to answer these questions before the provincial election.

- Safe drinking water: Canada has no national drinking water safety law. The non-binding Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality address microbiological, chemical and radiological contaminants, and concerns with physical characteristics of water, such as taste and odour.

Should the non-binding Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality be made binding in B.C. as has been done in other provinces such as Alberta, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Quebec?

- Groundwater regulation: Groundwater and surface water are linked through the hydrological cycle. B.C. is the sole province in Canada that does not require a government license for groundwater extraction.

Does your party support the regulation (licensing) of groundwater withdrawals?

- Water allocation: In many places, it has become necessary to deliberately set aside a proportion of

the available water so that the environment and its ecosystems can continue to function; for example, so salmon will have enough water throughout their life cycle.

Does your party support the establishment of legally protected environmental water allocations that have priority over individual water extraction licences?

- Independent power projects: In recent years, more than 600 creeks and rivers have been staked for the development of privately owned power generation projects ("independent power projects" -- IPPs).

Do you favour instituting a moratorium on private power development until these issues are addressed? If you don't support a moratorium, how does your party propose to deal with these issues?

- Water governance: British Columbians are increasingly concerned that climate change, rapid urbanization, intensification of water withdrawals and rampant resource development are degrading the health and function of B.C.'s watersheds and undermining the flow of ecological goods and services flowing from our water resources.

Do you support the creation of an independent oversight office that will provide regular public reporting on the health of our watersheds and ensure water resources are managed for the public interest of all British Columbians?

- Water use efficiency: Reducing water demand provides the cheapest source of "new" water and can be implemented more quickly and in a less environmentally damaging manner than any other supply alternative.

Does your party support the creation of legal binding water use efficiency and reclamation standards for agriculture, industrial, commercial and residential use?

It's time to ask our leaders if they are willing to take the next steps to make Living Water Smart a reality. The answers to these questions, and the actions taken to meet these commitments, will in large part determine whether our priceless water is safe and is there to meet our needs in the future.

Linda Nowlan is an environmental lawyer; Randy Christensen is with Ecojustice; Oliver Brandes is with the Project on Ecological Governance; Craig Orr is with the Watershed Watch Salmon Society.

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