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Can you see it?

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Canadians abusing water supply

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Water, water everywhere ... but never enough to satisfy our thirsty lawns and our water-consuming lifestyles. For a water wealthy nation like Canada, water supply hardly seems like a serious issue. Heck, we have SARS, wildfires, mad cow disease and power outages to worry about. But worry we should.

Just over a week ago, millions of Canadians were shocked to experience the failure of the electric power grid in Ontario and the eastern United States. But the lessons of this experience go beyond energy.

With a future of global warming, Canada's glaciers are shrinking, river and lake flows are becoming more erratic, and overall weather patterns are becoming less and less reliable.

All of which will inevitably affect the water accessible to Canadians, especially to so many living in vulnerable cities.

Water and its availability are already significant issues for much of the world. Indeed, the United Nations has designated 2003 as the year of fresh water. The lack of fresh, safe water leads to literally thousands of deaths worldwide per day.

In Canada, however, we hardly notice. We use copious amounts of water every day, blissfully washing cars, maintaining lawns in the heat of summer, and flushing it down the toilet.

With the many changes and uncertainties affecting our water future, this profligate lifestyle cannot — and will not — continue indefinitely. To avert another crisis to test our emergency preparedness, the key is to act early.

The first step is to understand, and admit, that we have a problem — that Canadians use too much water and that we are overtaxing the environment and the supply infrastructure. Put simply, our water usage is not sustainable.

Canadians are some of the most wasteful water-users on the planet, consuming an average of 343 litres of fresh water per person per day in the residential sector alone. We are currently using more than double the amount of water used by most Europeans.

Equally alarming, the numbers are rising.

According to Environment Canada, between 1983 and 1994, residential consumption increased 26 per cent, despite an increase of less than 16 per cent in the municipal population. This trend is in stark contrast to most developed nations, including the United States, which have actually reduced their total water withdrawals over the same period, resulting in the OECD repeatedly criticizing Canada for its excessive use of water.

Interestingly, a huge divergence exists in per capita water use between Canadian cities.

Montreal, Hamilton and St. John's use up to four times as much water per capita as do Charlottetown, Winnipeg and Waterloo.

Despite the scale of this variance, no simple reasons explain why this occurs. And, as importantly, more efficient cities maintain every bit as high a quality of life as the heavy users.

The perception is common that Canada has an abundance of water, so why worry?

In fact, more than a quarter of municipal water systems experienced seasonal shortages between 1994 and 1999. In many cities, residents already face water shortages and use restrictions. But these restrictions are often angrily denounced, making it difficult for municipal leaders to take more aggressive action.

Inaction will be costly. Already billions of dollars are needed to simply maintain water and wastewater systems. This amount will only increase with population growth and the corresponding increase in the intensity of urban water use.

Wastage and inefficient use result in over-extended regional water supplies and supporting infrastructure, as well as significant ecological impacts from the diversion, storage and withdrawal of water, and the subsequent discharge of wastewater.

Dams are primary destroyers of aquatic habitat, which are among the most endangered ecosystems on the planet. Water efficiency will actually save both money and the environment.

Instead, Canadians have a "supply-side" mentality, the focus always being on ways to find new water sources. To this day the motto is "if we build it, the water will flow," and the results are bigger dams, longer diversions and deeper pumps.

We need to wrap our minds around an alternative that can reallocate existing uses and improve efficiency. In the same vein as happened with the energy crisis of the 1970s, the goal must be a "soft path" for water.

The tasks are simple. Save water where it is wasted, and use all water better. Change pricing structures that encourage wasteful use of water.

Invest in smart water-wise technology. Recycle and reuse water for the right purposes. And, above all, educate Canadians about wise water use and the benefits of doing so.

Canada has an enviable water supply in comparison with many parts of the world. Yet, as we have done with our energy use, we abuse our privileged position when we squander our natural endowments. Even in the land of towering glaciers and countless lakes, Canada's future must be a wise, not wasteful, one.

Mark Twain once quipped "Whiskey is for drinking; water is for fighting." By acting now and shifting our thinking we can ensure it never comes to that.

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