

Our water: the undervalued natural resource

Canada should follow through on 1987 Federal Water Policy, fill gaps in our knowledge

By NDP MP JEAN CROWDER

It is the forgotten natural resource but the only one we cannot live without. Canada has 20 per cent of the world's supply of this resource but still experiences supply problems because only nine per cent is accessible. And Canada undervalues this precious resource, with many municipalities selling it for next to nothing.

I'm talking about water.

Canadians believe that we have the largest supply of fresh water in the world and so we do not have to practice water management – there will always be more.

But as recent droughts in Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, areas of Ontario, and my own home on Vancouver Island have proved, our water availability is largely a myth.

Major cities including Montreal and Vancouver do not meter water use. Other cities use flat pricing so heavy industrial users pay the same amount as residential consumers.

Planners decide where to put new subdivisions and industrial areas without considering the long-term water needs of a region as houses and factories multiply.

Plans do not deal with the long-term accumulative impacts of storm water run-off from the newly-paved areas which may carry contaminants into surface water.

They also do not plan for how cutting down trees and paving over small streams and ditches changes a watershed and reduces the amount of water returned to the ecosystem and cuts down on future supply.

And through all of this, our use of water keeps creeping up. Canadians are the highest individual users of water in the world with each of us consuming on average over 325 litres of water a day.

Part of the myth of abundance is our lack of understanding about the different kinds of water that make up our 20 per cent of the world's freshwater. Only nine per cent of that is easily accessible, renewable sources. The rest is either too far north to use, or is in rock formations deep underground that we cannot access.

That leaves two sources of water: groundwater stored in accessible aquifers underground and surface water including lakes, rivers and wetlands.

It is easy to see water in a lake and measure its quality and quantity but groundwater is different. And though the government promised to learn more about groundwater and how to protect it, it still hasn't happened.

In fact, the Federal Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development reported in 2001 that the federal government has a poor understanding of groundwater, particularly in the Great Lakes Basin.

Without more study we do not know how quickly we are drawing down an aquifer or how quickly it can be replenished.

This is critical information for the many communities across Canada that depend on aquifers for all of their water. One large problem is that federal jurisdiction covers water on federal lands, matters related to fisheries and navigation, and the management of international boundary waters but not water supply in communities or urban areas.

That leaves a patchwork of water policies across the nation – from province to province, and community to community. The Federal Water Policy tabled in Parliament in 1987 did not generate any comprehensive legislation. Instead it was followed over the next seven years by a series of policies covering drinking water quality, water conservation plans for the federal government and action plans for water use efficiency. Action on improving water use and conservation was another victim of the Liberal cuts in the mid-90s. In fact, the Auditor-General criticized their lack of action on protecting Canada's water resources in 1995. Since then, the only significant water policy was federal legislation to ban bulk water exports.

But there is still no legislation to protect water within watersheds; to proactively promote water conservation in the home, in industry and in communities; or to provide guidelines on water use, especially through improved water-efficient fixtures and appliances.

The POLIS project at the University of Victoria is studying urban water demand management. This project studies how we can move from a model that depends on unlimited resources of fresh water, to one that improves the overall productivity of water use.

They have identified a federal action plan to promote efficiency and conservation of urban water resources. It includes:

- calls for new federal activity on water policy;
- creating guidelines and standards for consumers and other levels of government to follow, especially under the national plumbing and building code;
- ensuring the collection and distribution of data on water use and availability;
- enforcement of existing legislation, especially the Fisheries Act, to help protect water ecosystems;
- linking grants and funding for infrastructure to demand management requirements and;
- demonstrating federal leadership by improving water use efficiency in federal buildings.

We should create a new department responsible for the over 20 federal acts and regulations dealing with water policy. Then we can follow through on the promise of the 1987 Federal Water Policy and fill the gaps in our knowledge about groundwater resources, on how to preserve watershed integrity and to find innovative ways to conserve our undervalued resource.

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