

## 'Soft path' holistic water management approach

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*Tuesday, July 14, 2009*

Thinking Beyond Pipes and Pumps: Top 10 Ways Communities Can Save Water and Money is a publication of the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance at the University of Victoria. A concise guide to a "soft path" to water management, it is available for free on-line at [poliswaterproject.org](http://poliswaterproject.org).

Last week I covered the first three points on the Top 10 list. The next four points delve deeper into the reservoir of water demand management opportunities.

### 1) LINK CONSERVATION TO DEVELOPMENT

POLIS says linking development funding to water demand management is a highly effective way to encourage conservation.

For example, communities can apply innovative "water offset" bylaws to building permits. These would require proof that any additional water demand resulting from new developments is offset by reducing water consumption in existing homes (or businesses) using water efficiency measures. This helps to ensure that all "new" water is tapped from conservation in earlier developments so that growing communities stabilize their "water footprint."

POLIS cites the example of Morro Bay, Calif., where builders are required either to pay a standard hook-up fee for new developments or to retrofit existing houses to the point that the reduction in water use matches the water requirements of the new development.

Federal and provincial grants for upgrading water and sewage treatment infrastructure represent another opportunity to promote conservation.

The motivation for communities to conserve water would increase significantly if these funds were allocated only when applicants show proof of an acceptable level of action on demand management.

### 2) PRICE IT RIGHT

Municipal water rates in Canada rank among the lowest of all developed countries, which may explain why Canadians rank among the world's highest per-capita water users.

Typically, Canadian water rates fail to reflect environmental costs, and in many cases, rates do not even reflect the full financial costs of providing the service. Shifting the full cost of services into water prices encourages conservation by revealing the cost to customers.

An OECD study found that metering combined with volume-based pricing was one of the most effective measures for water conservation, with water use

reductions ranging from 20 per cent in Copenhagen, Denmark, and 33 per cent in Gottenberg, Sweden, to 41 per cent in Toowoomba, Australia, and 45 per cent in Philadelphia.

### 3) PLAN FOR SUSTAINABILITY

POLIS notes the "soft path" for water is a holistic approach to water management that takes demand management to the next level by planning for sustainability. The soft path differs fundamentally from conventional, supply focused water planning beginning with its conception of water. While conventional planning treats water as an end product, the soft path views water as a means to accomplish certain tasks. This liberates water planners to explore innovative solutions to manage demand rather than simply delivering more water to satisfy demand.

Developing scenarios that demonstrate the water saving potential of different management approaches is central to soft path planning. Scenario planning can also promote wider community engagement and dialogue around water sustainability.

POLIS recommends that strategic water planning should look 10 to 50 years into a community's future. It should involve a full range of stakeholders and place ecological health and living within the local water budget at its core.

### 4) LOOK TO THE SKY: RAINWATER AS THE SOURCE

Rainwater harvesting for toilet flushing and washing clothes can save up to 40 per cent of indoor water use. However, building and plumbing code restrictions, high initial costs and misperceptions about water quality present barriers to the utilization of rainwater. Overcoming the barriers and promoting "off the grid" water supply options requires municipalities to take an active role.

The City of Austin, Texas, offers a 30 per cent rebate of up to \$500 to promote rainwater harvesting, and in Germany, widespread subsidies and technical support helped homeowners with the costs and technical challenges of implementation.

Figtree Place in New South Wales, Australia, is a water sensitive urban redevelopment consisting of 27 residential units. The site uses rainwater stored in tanks to supply hot water and toilets. Water use was reduced by around 45 per cent with noticeable cost savings.

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