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BC entering era of water insecurity, say legal scholars

British Columbia faces an increasing number of conflicts in balancing the demands of water management and those of clean-energy production, amongst other water conservation challenges, according to a new report by a pair of legal scholars.

A survey of court cases, tribunal proceedings and media reports released this week by researchers with the [POLIS Water Sustainability project](#) at the University of Victoria documents fresh-water issues in the province from a public policy perspective. Much work has already been performed on isolated issues, but the [report](#) brings together for the first time a comprehensive catalogue of the water-management concerns across the province.

The report says that the province is entering an era of fresh-water insecurity. In 2015, severe drought conditions were experienced across much of the province, while in June this year, southern Vancouver Island suffered what was designated a 'Stage 4 drought', the earliest summertime date the classification has been applied, and for the second year running. The authors highlight a Sunshine Coast community that was two weeks away from running out of water and Vancouver Island rivers running so low that salmon [require trucks](#) to get upstream, as well as degraded water quality in rivers, lakes

and aquifers that limits drinking water supplies and fish and ecosystem. In addition, groundwater is at risk of contamination from land-use practices and saltwater intrusion. They blame both climate change and current water management practices for the situation, and recommend a series of policy responses, including increasing financial support for municipalities facing increased drought and flood risk; the establishment in law of a precautionary minimum rate of flow standard for streams, rivers, and aquifers with an eye to restoring what they call a “natural flow regime”; and the introduction of a federal level prohibition on altering, disrupting or damaging fish habitat.

The authors describe a situation where data on the province’s freshwater supplies are sparse, with uncompleted aquifer-mapping, and hydrometric monitoring stations (which perform a bulk quantification of water resources) that do not cover all of BC’s watersheds. As a result of this lack of tracking, there is insufficient data to enable policymakers to make fully informed decisions.

The reports notes that there are watershed stewardship bodies that have attempted to fill in the information gap via community-based water-monitoring programmes, but there is no integration of these different efforts, with data that is sometimes not reliable or comparable across different regions. As a result of both the data deficit and duplication, the authors warn of the potential for over-allocation by “decision-making in the dark”, which could in turn result in conflict between competing freshwater users.

Responding to the concerns raised in the report, hydrologist Markus Schnobus of PICS’ sister research organization, the [Pacific Climate Impacts Consortium](#), agreed that it is fair to say that certain specific locations may be entering an era of scarcity. “But from a climate-change perspective, this is a localized phenomenon. It’s premature to suggest it will occur right across the province.”