

B.C. needs to get water rules right

BY OLIVER BRANDES AND ROD DOBELL, SPECIAL TO THE SUN NOVEMBER 24, 2010



As the years flow by, access to fresh water is quickly becoming one of the world's most critical concerns.

Photograph by: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun

As the years flow by, access to fresh water is quickly becoming one of the world's most critical concerns. That is perhaps a fact not much acknowledged in water-rich Canada or out on its wet West Coast.

Nevertheless the recently released McAllister Opinion Research public opinion poll commissioned by the Vancouver Foundation and WWFCanada confirms that indeed British Columbians as a whole see the coming challenges surprisingly clearly.

Some of the results from this poll are not surprising: 91 per cent of respondents say fresh water is B.C.'s most precious resource and 86 per cent think fresh water is extremely important to the prosperity and quality of life in the province. There is general recognition that fresh water is the key to life and health, livelihoods and nature. But almost eight in 10 say that water shortages will become a moderate to major problem even here within the next 10 years. All of this is not really news, but it is interesting to note the high level of consensus rarely found in B.C.

A few results are more surprising. For example, almost 75 per cent think that in times of scarcity

securing nature's need for water is more important than water for industry or economic growth. After assurance of adequate drinking water, the next most important priority in water use is for healthy watersheds, fish and wildlife, and natural ecosystems. This confirms that it may indeed be water -- not oil -- that will define B.C. and our collective social, economic and environmental prosperity in coming years.

Another important insight gleaned from this survey suggests that British Columbians are not at all confident about the rules that now govern how we make decisions about water use and management.

Slightly over two years ago, the B.C. government (not just the minister of environment) committed itself to developing and implementing a visionary water strategy, including a commitment to update existing water laws for the province. Under the quaintly bureaucratic title of WAM (Water Act Modernization), the government set out to revise, with an almost unprecedented degree of public participation, the century-old Water Act as the centrepiece of its ambitious water reform.

Thus the current B.C. Liberal government itself has acknowledged the importance of water, both to us all as living beings and also as the foundation of our economic and community success. Yet resources, staff and commitments -- and perhaps most importantly the political will -- to follow through on the promised reform seem to have been swamped by budget cuts, worries about harmonized sales tax recalls and leadership conventions. Politically, these distractions of course seem important, but inevitably they will pass. Getting our freshwater system right, on the other hand, is a lasting foundational challenge for this generation in building a sustainable future.

Getting our water rules and management right has the potential to make everyone involved look good. Our political leaders made the promise; following through will demonstrate they are up to the task. Recognizing that investing in healthy and functioning watersheds is sound economics shows that government and citizens understand what is really important to our economy, our communities and our collective future. Water is our most important asset and investing in this "natural capital market" will ensure benefits for all of us now and into the future.

From a policy perspective some answers are clear. Experience elsewhere suggests much of what is needed and possible. To be successful the focus must be on both efficiency and conservation. On watershed-scale decision-making that prioritizes ecological health and function and treats ground and surface water as one connected resource. On full cost accounting that takes into account environmental impacts. And a real commitment to public engagement in decision-making that increases transparency, accountability and compliance. In B.C., these preconditions to success are simply not yet the practice.

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