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Report on water puts nature's needs first

by Patty Pitts

The final report in a series examining water use in Canada calls for governments to re-orient the country's water management and allocate domestic and industrial use based on what's needed to maintain basic watershed health.

The report, *At a Watershed: Ecological Governance and Sustainable Water Management in Canada*, by UVic's POLIS project on ecological governance, urges governments at all levels to embed conservation and water sustainability as a core principle in all water management plans.

"Governments and businesses must think differently about how they manage water," says Oliver Brandes, project leader and co-author of the report. "We need to switch from the supply-side approach and unleash the full potential of managing demand. We're approaching the worldwide tipping point on ecosystem protection and water is the strategic resource for the 21st century. Canada needs a national strategy that ensures basic watershed needs first, and allocates the rest using efficiency and conservation as the guiding approach."

The report urges more aggressive integration of new technology into water-management plans. Brandes points out that plumbing codes were recently changed in B.C. to incorporate low-flush toilets, long after the technology was first available and widely accepted in much of the world.

In many parts of B.C. installation of water-saving devices is still voluntary. Governments must set definite water conservation goals and make the necessary policy and legislative changes required to meet those goals, says Brandes.

Dr. Michael M'Gonigle, the eco-research chair at UVic, POLIS director and one of the authors of the report adds: "We're truly 'at a watershed' concerning water management in this country, and we all have choices to make. Discussion is

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underway in many cities across the country about expanding reservoirs into neighbouring watersheds. We can keep going down this unsustainable supply path, but when does it end? Or we can choose to follow a new path based on conservation and managing demand, but all levels of government must start planning now to make this happen."

At a Watershed follows up on a series of three reports that, in turn, examined water use in Canada, diagnosed the country's ailing urban water management system, then provided the prescription —practical action plans for all levels of government.

This latest report represents the final step, providing "the long-term plan for healthy living" by presenting best practices for maintaining healthy water sources, and successful examples from around the world where other jurisdictions have made the commitment to effectively manage water demand.

The project received financial support from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation to produce At a Watershed. It's available for download online at www.waterdsm.org.