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Putting Water Security on the Agenda

Oliver M. Brandes + Ellen Reynolds

Water, not oil, is the strategic resource of the 21st Century. Yet, Canadians and our political leaders continue to struggle under the myth of water wealth, convinced that the proverbial well will never run dry. It's time to point out the lack of leadership to secure our water resources. This lack of leadership should be reversed, as demonstrated by water security receiving prominent mention in the next Throne Speech.

Pollution, growing populations, overuse and poor management conspire to create water scarcity in many regions of Canada. These threats to our water are further complicated by the uncertainty of climate change. Ensuring water security must be a national priority.

At 20 years old, Canada's federal water policy is stale and outdated. International water sustainability commitments are no more than words quickly proclaimed and then ignored at home. Recent experiences with the US over the NAFTA ruling on softwood lumber sets Canada's collective hearts racing in fear that we will be forced to manage water as a private economic commodity rather than as a shared public good.

Canadians must act now to address these issues; we cannot sit and wait for the water crisis. This requires political leadership. The process for an updated water policy—one that is more than just federal, but truly national in scope—must be initiated.

Water security means safeguarding water sources—protecting fundamental ecological function; ensuring access to good quality water that is locally managed and not-for-profit; and insisting governments, industries and communities take a long-term perspective in managing this precious resource.

Water quality debacles, such as in Walkerton and for the Kashechewan First Nation, signify a disturbing trend in Canadian water management. And one in four Canadian municipalities have reported water limits and shortages.

Water resources are not as secure as we may have believed in the past. Jurisdictional squabbles add to the problem, often leaving water management deeply fragmented and piecemeal at best.

Water governance must integrate ecological realities and emphasize that limits exist. The federal government must ensure that minimum water quality standards apply to all communities and that water withdrawals are controlled and sensitive to ecosystem requirements. The government must also promote source protection at the watershed level and create institutions that promote and embed water conservation across sectors. A final critical step is for the government to make a firm commitment that bulk water will not (and never will) be exported.

The foundation of any comprehensive approach to water management requires commitment to water conservation as the best source of "new" water for the future. But water conservation does not just happen—it requires planning, resources, commitment and leadership. Instead of consuming as if Canada is water rich, we are better off recognizing our limits and working toward water security.

It's time for Canadians to demand that our government renew its commitment to a national water strategy—to turn this looming water crisis into an opportunity to move towards the path of long-term water sustainability.

Oliver M. Brandes is the Project Leader and Ellen Reynolds is the Communications Director for the Water Initiative at the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance, University of Victoria. To learn more about the potential of a national water policy for Canada see: *At a Watershed: Ecological Governance and Sustainable Water Management in Canada*, available at www.watdersm.org.

