

# THE PRINCE GEORGE CITIZEN

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EDITORIAL

## It's time to modernize BC's Water Act

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Special to The Citizen

Shortly after the 2009 BC election, a commitment was made to modernize the province's century old Water Act to meet the challenges of a new century.

It was one of the government's most important environmental initiatives, yet remained unfulfilled as the last mandate ended and a new government was elected last month.

Too often, British Columbians falsely assume that we have no end of fresh water. But we don't. And there's every reason to believe in the coming decades that our water resources will be under increased strain due to rapid population growth, major industries clamouring for more water and residents and businesses alike demanding more power from hydroelectric sources.

If this isn't reason enough to get serious about how we manage our most precious natural resource, climate change could bedevil even the best water management plans by altering the intensity and duration of peak and low water flows.

All of the above underscores the need for Premier Christy Clark and her government to follow through on the commitments made four years ago. British Columbians deserve a new Water Sustainability Act now, before a raft of proposed new mines and liquefied natural gas plants are built.

Clark has underscored many times her commitment only to approve energy projects once environmental concerns are properly addressed. Committing to completing the Water Act renewal work that her predecessor began would be a great place to start, because right now the provincial government often operates in the dark as far as our water resources are concerned.

In what will come as a surprise to many, BC collects almost no data on water used by major industries in the province. It's a glaring hole in environmental stewardship. In fact, in some cases the BC government doesn't even require big water consumers to measure what they withdraw from rivers, lakes and streams. In the pulp and paper industry, for example, only one mill - that's right, just one - is required to meter the water they take.

In the natural gas industry, where large volumes of water are required for use in controversial hydraulic fracturing (fracking) operations, a number of companies are similarly off the hook for metering under the terms of government-issued water licenses. More troubling, the water used is subsequently rendered so toxic that it can never be safely discharged back to where it came from.

In response to increased public criticisms about the impacts that the natural gas sector could have on our waters, the provincial Oil and Gas Commission began in 2011 to require at least partial reporting on the water used by the industry, and it is committed to fuller reporting in the months ahead.

But this is the exception to the rule. British Columbia has no central repository where the most basic information

on water use is housed. Consequently, no one can say with certainty how much water is withdrawn from what water body at any point in time.

Compounding problems, we are not being compensated adequately when major industries use public water resources. For example, right now under the terms of their water licenses, natural gas companies pay the province token “fees” of just \$2.75 for every Olympic swimming pool’s worth of water withdrawn. In Dawson Creek, by comparison, the same amount of water sold by the municipality to some of the same companies involved in fracking operations fetches more than \$11,000.

With fracking likely to skyrocket under a scenario where one or more liquefied natural gas terminals get built in BC, the need to properly monitor our water resources is urgent.

The provincial government can remedy this situation immediately by doing three simple things.

First, grant one provincial agency sole responsibility for gathering and reporting all information on water use and have an independent auditor periodically verify the agency’s performance.

Second, require that all major water users meter the water they consume and report it to the province.

And third, increase water use fees and use a portion of the revenues collected to pay for a province-wide water use database and increased environmental monitoring and enforcement efforts.

The time has come to bring our water legislation into the 21st century. The right place to start is to insist that we know what is being used and that users pay their fair share for what they take.

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