VIEW: Weighing two new proposed paths for protecting our water

By **CHRIS WOOD**

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The water on most British Columbians' minds right now may be clinking in a glass as ice or lapping at a beach. But for those with a deeper interest in the subject -- which turns out to be a remarkable number of us -- it's been an unusual week for the release of two major reports about the security of our water in as many days.

Both are surveys -- one of water pollution from coast-to-coast, the other of the astonishingly large and varied "ecosystem" of water-related citizens' groups in B.C. alone -- but they reach opposite conclusions. While one gives Canadians permission to chill, the other calls for British Columbians to get off the bench and become more active.

Economist Joel Wood (no relation), writing for the Fraser Institute, counsels complacency. In "Canadian Environmental Indicators -- Water," released on July 16, Wood surveys dozens of individual studies tracking the changing presence over time of scores of specific contaminants in water sampled at many locations across the country. Declining counts of heavy metals, and generally stable counts of other contaminants like bacteria and chemical nutrients, he finds, show that the quality of Canada's water is improving, or at worst holding its own.

Although the study acknowledges that the water available annually in southern Canada has been declining for some decades, it claims that at the present rate it would take 300 years to exhaust the supply. Should we ever run out in the south, Wood argues, "infrastructure can be built to tap into the abundant annual supplies of renewable freshwater in Canada's sparsely populated north."

In "The State of the Water Movement in British Columbia," released a day after the Fraser study, Tim Morris and Oliver Brandes examine a different part of what the two legally trained water scholars call our "waterscape," in a report co-sponsored by the Real Estate Foundation of B.C. and the University of Victoria's POLIS Project on Ecological Governance.

The pair conducted an online survey and interviews directed at 230 non-profit and non-governmental organizations with an interest in water active in B.C. (industry and professional associations were excluded). The consensus they report: the next five years will be "critical" for the protection of British Columbia's water.

The two researchers elicited views from organizations ranging in scale from small local groups focused on restoring or caring for single streams, to substantial agencies like the Okanagan Basin Water Board that are taking on a growing role in local water management, on up to international NGOs active in the province, such as the World Wildlife Fund.

At the top of respondents' list of "hot button" issues was the stalled process of modernizing B.C.'s century-old *Water Act.* The future security of water in the province, the groups' concurred, rests heavily on how fully a long-awaited new Act, still being drafted, reflects views that many of the same groups presented during a months' long consultation held before the election. The second and third-ranked "hot buttons" the researchers found: clarifying and fully activating First Nations' rights to participate in decisions about water, and the impacts of climate change on the province's water resources.

Done right, Morris and Brandes say, a modernized *Water Act* could make the province "a global leader in freshwater protection." Critical to accomplishing that, they say, will be the extension across the province of "locally tailored watershed boards co-managed with First Nations and strong provincial oversight, support and enforcement."

The three biggest hurdles facing that achievement, they add, are uneven local capacity, coming up with ways to fund the envisioned boards, and the fact that the provincial government has unilaterally "lost significant capacity for freshwater protection in recent years."

The Fraser Institute's report is a valuable addition to the literature drawing together what its author aptly describes as "widely dispersed and often difficult to obtain" primary data about the presence of certain contaminants in water samples across the country. But its credibility is diluted by a narrow focus on available sampling, and some striking omissions. While it reports a decline in concentrations in most Canadian waterways of phosphorus, a potent nutrient that contributes to algae blooms and eventually oxygen-depleted "dead-zones" in lakes and oceans, for example, it's silent on the record-breaking algal blooms that have blossomed in recent years in two of Canada's most important lakes, Erie and Winnipeg.

The prescriptions that Wood offers are in keeping with Fraser Institute consensus, but simplistic. Placing a higher price on water would find wide support among water experts. And putting water allocations up for open-market bidding has been shown to provide economic advantages, but is far more complicated than Wood acknowledges. And his suggestion that water from Canada's far north could be piped to its thirsty south defies Herculean challenges of geography, cost, environmental impact and not least, popular protest (Canadians have resoundingly rejected previous proposals to flow water in bulk from the north as far south as Los Angeles, Las Vegas and even Mexico's Chihuahua state.)

"Environmental Indicators" should prove useful to a handful of researchers, so long as they don't take its policy insights very seriously. "The State of the Water Movement" should go to the top of Environment Minister Mary Polak's summer reading list.

A final note. The difference between the two reports' perspectives is captured in what each means by the word "infrastructure". Morris and Brandes use the word to describe investments in people: in education, inclusion and empowerment. To Wood, it means a pipe.

Chris Wood is coordinating editor for the Tyee Solutions Society and the author of several books on water including, most recently, Down the Drain: How We Are Failing to Protect Our Water Resources, with Ralph Pentland. Disclosure: at different times Chris has provided editorial consulting to both the Fraser Institute and the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, with which Tim Morris was formerly associated.

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cyberclark • 17 hours ago

Harper turned over the authority to export water or not to the provinces. This in conjunction with doing away with any number of lakes that were covered under the Navigable Waters act thereby almost eliminating the Federal authority on any water exports.

The goal of water exports is to turn water into a commodity and with wall to wall conservatives in place now that is entirely possible.

The Fraser Institute had Harper as their poster boy the on his first run as PM. The Fraser Institute is like the Conservative totally in favor of water as a commodity and are writing any number of glossary subjects to lead to that conclusion.

Another in this mix of companies and parties after your gold (Yes your water price will increase dramatically) is the RBC. The Royal Bank is holder of several water export licences that they have not used yet.

The RBC is only the tip of the iceberg. Many companies are lined up to cash in.

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cyberclark ➦ cyberclark • 17 hours ago

It comes to mind as an afterthought Bechtel commercial water operations in Africa. The story told of people being turned away from the single faucet in their town because they didn't have the nickel for the pail of water. There was a long lineup in the photo that was put forward.

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Talk • 27 minutes ago

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