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**TODAY'S PAPER**



**Low-priced water is sucking us down the drain**

By DAVID BOYD

Thursday, August 14, 2003 - Page A13

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It's summertime, so Canadians are watering lawns and gardens, washing cars, and frolicking in swimming pools. We're a water-wealthy nation, so what's the problem?

Contrary to conventional wisdom about our endless supply of water, Environment Canada points out that fresh water in southern Canada, where most of us live, is "heavily used and often overly stressed." The drought-stricken Prairies and B.C.'s fire-ravaged forests aren't the only thirsty regions: One in four Canadian cities has experienced water shortages in recent years.

A new study from the University of Victoria identifies rising per capita water consumption, urbanization, our growing population, pollution, and climate change as key drivers of these shortages. The study reveals that water use in 20 Canadian cities ranges wildly, with Montreal using four times the amount of water, on a per capita basis, as Charlottetown.

Canadians are among the world's most profligate users of water because the price of water is so cheap. Low prices encourage overconsumption, as anyone who has dined at an all-you-can-eat-buffet can testify. Canadians pay more for a beer or coffee than we pay for 1,000 litres of treated drinking water (generally less than \$1 per 1,000 litres).

Pricing structure is also important. Canadians who have home water metres and pay for each unit of water use an average of 269 litres of water per day. Canadians who simply pay a flat rate for water, regardless of how much they use, consume 457 litres daily -- 70-per-cent more.

Industrial and agricultural water users also pay rock-bottom prices. Groundwater in most of Canada is free. Some provinces collect royalties on water taken from public land for commercial use, but generate scarcely a drop of revenue. British Columbia charges companies that bottle publicly owned water \$8.50 for roughly 1.7 million litres. The only place where water is cheaper than Canada is the United States. And the only people who use more water than Canadians are Americans.

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We pay half as much as Europeans for water and use twice as much. Canada withdraws three times as much water per capita from lakes, rivers, and groundwater as Germany, five times as much as Sweden, and more than eight times as much as Denmark.

We're getting worse. Total water withdrawals in Canada increased 26 per cent between 1980 and 1997, a period in which many European nations improved their water efficiency. Total water withdrawals fell 52 per cent in the Netherlands, 31 per cent in the United Kingdom, and 20 per cent in Denmark. Even in the United States, total water withdrawals fell 5 per cent between 1980 and 1997, despite economic growth and a large population increase.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has scolded us for our heavily subsidized use of water and our refusal to charge prices that reflect the costs of water-supply infrastructure. In a striking departure from its usually conservative language, the OECD describes Canadian water as "cheaper than dirt."

Canada's low prices and flat rates for water discourage conservation, reduce incentives for innovation, cause waste and increase environmental damage. And maintaining the supply by building dams, reservoirs, water-treatment plants, and wastewater-treatment plants costs billions of dollars. The more water we use, the bigger and more expensive these facilities become. To upgrade existing water and wastewater-treatment plants could cost anywhere from \$16-billion to \$100-billion.

Local governments are starting to see that it makes more environmental and economic sense to manage demand and conserve water than to keep adding supply by expanding municipal water infrastructure. Cochrane, Alta., deferred a multimillion dollar pipeline to import water by giving away toilet dams, low-flow showerheads, and faucet aerators. Port Elgin, Ont., avoided a \$5.5-million expansion of its water-treatment plant by spending \$550,000 on installing residential water metres and an intensive conservation program. It's estimated that if Winnipeggers cut per capita water use by 5 per cent, the city could defer the construction of new facilities costing \$350-million for 13 years. Ontario recently passed a law requiring municipalities to use full-cost pricing for water, meaning that subsidies will be phased out, and hidden environmental costs finally recognized.

Raising the price of water, eliminating flat-rate pricing, and increasing the level of water metering are only a few of the many steps that we should take. At the same time, rebates and other programs could help us protect the right of all Canadians to clean water, particularly people living in poverty.

Benjamin Franklin once said, "When the well runs dry, we know the worth of water." Canadians must recognize water's irreplaceable value before such a crisis occurs.

*David R. Boyd is an environmental lawyer and senior associate with the University of Victoria's POLIS Project on Ecological Governance.*

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