

A RENEWED OUTLOOK FOR BC'S FRESHWATER

By Oliver M. Brandes, Rosie Simms
and Jon O'Riordan

As BC's new government embarks on the hard work of fulfilling its platform commitments and ministerial mandates, there will be no shortage of pressing issues demanding the attention of our new leaders. Water, however, is one issue that unites British Columbia as the foundation of healthy and resilient communities, economies, and ecosystems. This article explores the critical elements of a revitalized water agenda for BC, including opportunities within the province's *Water Sustainability Act*, which came into force in February 2016.

Until recently, considerations of water sustainability were only secondary to the priority of building the province's resource-based economy. In the process, watersheds have become fragmented and natural capital has been degraded. No shortage of evidence exists demonstrating the consequences—from salmon that are unable to reach their spawning grounds during periods of low flow, to communities without reliable access to safe drinking water, to extreme swings from devastating flooding in one month to rampant forest fires the next.

Further, the government institutions that exist to make and enforce decisions about BC's freshwater future are largely under-resourced, uncoordinated, and ill-equipped to build public confidence or manage risks.

A CRITICAL MOMENT

With strong public support for enhanced freshwater protection, an increasingly sophisticated freshwater constituency in BC, and new legal tools in the *Water Sustainability Act* for advancing water management and governance, BC is in a critical moment of opportunity. Our new leaders will not be starting from scratch. A policy framework for addressing BC's water issues has already been established.

Almost ten years ago, the provincial government responded to many of the province's emerging water challenges in its visionary *Living Water Smart* water strategy. The commitments and outlined actions in *Living Water Smart* ushered in a fundamental change in water policy with stronger emphasis on sustainability, cooperation, and integrated management—with a real emphasis on partnerships. *Living Water Smart* led



directly to the development and passing of the *Water Sustainability Act*.

In addition to this new, overarching legal framework, BC is now also a signatory to two innovative bilateral water agreements for the Mackenzie River Basin, completed with the Northwest Territories and the Yukon in October 2015 and March 2017, respectively. These agreements commit each jurisdiction to cooperatively managing water in the shared Mackenzie

River Basin, with a focus on maintaining ecological integrity through commitments to water quality, quantity, and aquatic ecosystem health.

Progress on water issues in BC will require a partnership approach that engages all levels of government, including Indigenous nations, watershed groups, and communities. This will be a major shift in how the province has historically operated on resource management.

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With a new provincial government, BC has a fresh opportunity to bring renewed energy to the water work started a decade ago, reinforcing water as the foundation of a more sustainable economy and the lynchpin of a sustainable resource management regime.

To help guide freshwater policy priorities, the POLIS Water Sustainability Project, based at the University of Victoria's Centre for Global Studies, has set out a practical ten-step plan outlining the necessary elements and actions required to implement a bold new water agenda for BC.

The first priority is a comprehensive implementation of the *Water Sustainability Act* through the next wave of regulations. In particular, protecting environmental flows in law will be critical to guarantee a minimum level of ecological protection and provide transparency and consistency in how decision-makers consider nature's water needs.

In addition to full implementation of the Act, this 10-step plan provides direction to:

- Ensure sufficient funds to deliver on a comprehensive water policy program through appropriate water rentals;
- Acknowledge Indigenous water rights and engage Indigenous governments in a nation-to-nation approach as partners in governing and managing fresh water;
- Build resilience to droughts and floods through concerted conservation, floodplain reconnection, and natural capital valuation;
- Implement water-centric land use (watershed) planning, with a focus on quality and quantity that builds public confidence and better engages local communities. These plans should shape land use decisions through an explicit water sustainability lens. Protection of community drinking water sources must be used to prioritize other resource development activities;
- Develop an overarching water science strategy that incorporates traditional knowledge and community-based monitoring, providing the necessary science and information to make informed, evidence-based decisions; and
- Review and modernize the professional reliance model to build better oversight and accountability and empower a provincial body to provide independent oversight of BC's land and water to ensure accountability and drive the necessary government changes.

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Through this suite of policy solutions, BC can position itself as a freshwater leader in Canada and beyond. With this new agenda, the province can expect growing water security, increased public confidence in evidence-based decisions, decreased conflicts as natural capital is protected, and greater ability to adapt to the oncoming changes in climate, setting BC on a course towards a sustainable freshwater future.

Oliver M. Brandes is co-director of University of Victoria's POLIS Project on Ecological

Governance at the Centre for Global Studies. Jon O'Riordan is the former deputy minister of the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management and POLIS' strategic water policy advisor.

Rosie Simms is the water law and policy researcher with POLIS.

A Revitalized Water Agenda for British Columbia's Circular Economy report is available online at poliswaterproject.org.

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