

Comment: World Rivers Day: taking stock of water wealth and woes

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Today is World Rivers Day, an annual event that draws millions of people across the world to celebrate — and reflect upon — the health and future of rivers, streams and watersheds.

In B.C., there is much to celebrate: We are blessed with water wealth that continues to support thriving and healthy fish, wildlife, ecosystems and communities. Nine in 10 British Columbians see water as B.C.'s most precious resource — more than oil, gas or lumber.

Yet, as British Columbia families head to their home waters this weekend, the picture is not all rosy. And a public opinion poll released just last week suggests that British Columbians are aware there is trouble in the water: A whopping 87 per cent believe we're going to face problems if nothing is done to improve water management.

It is all too easy to forget about this year's unbelievably hot, dry and fiery summer with the arrival of fall rains — and to shrug it off as an anomaly.

But the thing is, there is no more normal. This summer was a portent of the kind of erratic seasons we can expect in the future.

The climate is changing and it is wreaking havoc with hydrology. Extremes are getting more extreme, with devastating floods and droughts sweeping through B.C. communities within months of each other.

B.C. just suffered through a flood year of historic proportions. At the peak of flooding in May, more than 2,800 people were forced to evacuate their homes in the Boundary region alone. Twenty-three communities in the province were under a local state of emergency, and the military was called in to assist. Yet, as these communities battled rising floodwaters, on June 1, B.C.'s River Forecast Centre warned of imminent below-normal summer flows. Drought was on the horizon.

While many of us whiled away summer days, a host of concerned water managers were grappling with deteriorating drought conditions. By Aug. 14, eastern Vancouver Island was in Level 4 drought: a code red under the provincial drought system. Ten days later, the northeast, northwest, Stikine and Skeena-Nass areas and all of Vancouver Island also reached Level 4.

Both drought and fire have lasting implications for watersheds and drinking water. Droughts can damage streams, affect fish populations and draw down aquifers. Wildfires that scour landscapes and decimate forests have massive implications for watershed condition and the ability to provide clean drinking water.

The economic consequences of drought are also increasingly apparent. This summer, water shortages threatened operations at the Mount Milligan copper mine in central B.C.; hot and dry conditions resulted in rising costs for B.C. farmers; and the Oil and Gas Commission required industry to suspend all previously approved water diversions in several rivers, streams and lakes within the Peace and Liard river watersheds.

Relative to severely drought-stricken parts of the globe (such as Cape Town or Australia), B.C. is in a fortunate position. We still have options, and time to prepare to address the water challenges on our doorstep.

B.C.'s water law, the 2016 Water Sustainability Act, is a key source of water-sustainability and security tools to protect fresh water, but most of the act's main mechanisms have yet to be deployed. More work is needed to get the right policies and regulations in place, but we should not let perfect be the enemy of good. B.C. must begin to use these new tools now and learn by doing.

In particular, B.C. communities need the ability to more easily trigger critical-flow protections, and create robust local water objectives and enforceable watershed plans with real vision and legal teeth.

We have to make sure that when drought hits, we are ready and able to use the necessary management and legal tools to ensure water users appropriately cut back water use.

None of this will happen without political leadership and resources for government staff, Indigenous nations and local communities to really get involved.

Beyond these necessary local solutions, we have to keep the big picture in mind. This includes revitalizing B.C.'s provincial water strategy, and refreshing B.C.'s approach to water security and source-water protection.

We must start now to avoid lurching from crisis to crisis — floods, to droughts, to fire, to contaminated drinking water. As World Rivers Day reminds us: Taking care of our home waters matters. It is our only future.

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