

Summary

TAKING THE PULSE: B.C. FRESHWATER POLICY MONITOR

ROSIE SIMMS AND OLIVER M. BRANDES

POLIS PROJECT ON ECOLOGICAL GOVERNANCE, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA • DECEMBER 2018

Full report at: <https://poliswaterproject.org/polis-research-publication/taking-the-pulse/>

Purpose and overview

- This review assesses Provincial progress for implementing and advancing freshwater policy commitments and priorities in British Columbia.
- Several drivers are making water an increasingly urgent priority for B.C., including accelerating climate change; intensifying cumulative impacts on the land base that affect community drinking water security; and degraded habitats and ecosystems. Government has also made recent commitments to improve how water is managed and governed—from protecting wild salmon, to implementing the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)* across all Ministries.
- This study reviewed commitments and recommendations specific to fresh water from several different sources, with a primary focus on *Living Water Smart*: the Province's decade-old water plan which still stands as B.C.'s official provincial water policy.
- To provide a fulsome and updated examination of freshwater commitments, this study also evaluated a series of recommendations and commitments made in related government policies and Auditor reports.
- This review is organized around four themes guiding the strategic work of water leaders and funders in B.C.: Policy Innovation, Place-Based Governance, Pooling Water Knowledge, and People: Public Engagement. The theme of reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the Crown is woven through each of these areas.
- This project provides insight into the importance not only of government *making* commitments but the equally important need to ensure there is *follow through* on these promises. Accountability and moving from commitment to implementation are ultimately needed to ensure positive change happens.
- We aim to help hold government accountable to their commitments, provide B.C. freshwater leaders and funders with an up-to-date snapshot of progress, and establish clear direction for future priorities.

What we found

Findings reveal a mix of success and identify clear areas where more work is needed to implement freshwater priorities. In the past decade, B.C. has made substantial headway on several of the *Living Water Smart* core commitments and other policy recommendations. Nineteen commitments from the Provincial plan (42%) can be considered achieved or underway. The Province (with support and coordinated action from other partners) has advanced the critical commitments around legislative and regulatory reform—including passing the *Water Sustainability Act* and important provisions like extending water licensing to groundwater and formalizing environmental flow protections. Despite the progress that has been made, 14 (31%) commitments have not been started or advanced effectively. Key gaps include supporting communities, including First Nations, to engage in collaborative watershed planning; reviewing water pricing; and regular state-of-water reporting.

What next: Revitalizing the B.C. Water Agenda

- A decade since *Living Water Smart* was released, B.C. has an opportunity to refresh its provincial approach to water through a revitalized water agenda to reflect current government's mandate and commitments and a changing water landscape.
- This review reveals three priority commitments that reinforce the foundational concepts and principles associated with the provincial water strategy from 10 years ago. These commitments are directly linked to the current government's core mandate, and will begin filling the water gaps that need urgent attention:
 - Comprehensive *Water Sustainability Act* implementation with Indigenous co-leadership.
 - Review Provincial Water Rentals.
 - Develop an overarching water knowledge strategy.

LIVING WATER SMART PROGRESS AT A GLANCE¹



ACHIEVED: 18% (8 of 45 *Living Water Smart* commitments). In particular, B.C. demonstrated leadership in developing and passing the *Water Sustainability Act* in 2016, which follows through on a number of the commitments related to water use and ecological protection.



IN PROGRESS: 24% (11 of 45 *Living Water Smart* commitments). These priorities will have significant positive impacts if they are fully implemented—with the potential to provide a high level of protection for ecological needs, build more resilient infrastructure and communities, and shift towards effective governance.



MINIMAL PROGRESS — PRIORITIES NEEDING URGENT ATTENTION: 31% (14 of 45 *Living Water Smart* commitments). Yes, others must act, but the Province and other governments have the resources and jurisdiction, so must do their part to initiate, support, and set up the opportunity for success on these commitments.



UNKNOWN: 27% (12 of 45 *Living Water Smart* commitments). These commitments cannot be assessed due to lack of information or the commitments are no longer relevant.