



Changing Attitudes. Changing Waters. 2020 Freshwater Community Survey

Trends, progress, insights, and priorities to advance watershed security and governance in B.C.

OVERVIEW

Water and watersheds have recently re-emerged as priorities in the policy and governance landscape with bold commitments from both federal and B.C. provincial governments. The federal government is prioritizing water after many years of inaction, and has committed to establishing a Canada Water Agency.¹ Provincially, the new B.C. government is embarking on an ambitious water reform agenda,² including establishing a Watershed Security Strategy and Fund.³

This document summarizes notable findings and insights from recent surveys conducted by our team at the University of Victoria's POLIS Water Sustainability Project. It builds on ongoing work to understand perspectives within British Columbia's freshwater community on progress, challenges, gaps, and needs to strengthen water sustainability and watershed governance and security in B.C.

It is our belief that this survey work can help illuminate relevant insights and priorities from across the water community to inform and help drive important work being done at the local, provincial, and national scale. Understanding the trends and priorities of the water network builds a cycle of growth, evolution in thinking, and continuous learning to help ensure policy and law interventions, research, capacity-building supports, and programs and direction are relevant and reflect the needs and priorities of those working closest to the issues. This survey work illuminates relevant insights and priorities across the water community while identifying important trends to drive evolution in thinking for researchers, practitioners, funders, and those working closest to the issues.

Taking the Pulse of B.C.'s Freshwater Community

This survey is an extension of work started in 2015 that culminated in the report *Illumination: Insights and Perspectives for Building Effective Watershed Governance in B.C.*⁴ (POLIS, 2016). The Illumination work:



- Tested and confirmed critical enabling conditions for watershed governance. Demonstrated provincewide appetite for watershed governance and confirmed that collaborative approaches are critical for better decision-making.
- Confirmed key capacity needs that will increase the likelihood of success when it comes to shifting to watershed governance approaches.
- Confirmed interest in a provincewide "capacity builder" to help address capacity gaps and provide leadership on watershed governance.
- Highlighted key considerations and concerns from Indigenous nations.

2020 SURVEY AT A GLANCE

Approach

- POLIS designed the survey and distributed it to **428 recipients** across the water stewardship and professional community (see figure 1) using the online platform SurveyMonkey.
- Questions and analysis were informed by a series of recent surveys and polls linked to POLIS events, workshops, and webinars, including:
 - **Freshwater public opinion polls (2013, 2018).**⁵
 - **Surveys at biennial Watersheds forums,**⁶ including pre-event surveys testing key topics of interest and at-event polling.
 - **Polls at POLIS' Creating a Blue Dialogue webinars and structured meetings of the B.C. Water Leaders' Network.**
 - **A freshwater community checkup survey and synthesis, which evaluated COVID-19 impacts and the priority needs of water funders and organizations (April 2020).**

¹ See Environment and Climate Change Canada. (2020). Toward the creation of a Canada Water Agency. https://www.placespeak.com/uploads/6321/Canada_Water_Agency_Discussion_Paper.pdf and "Five Foundational Pillars for the Canada Water Agency" (n.d.). https://b6c2cd30-2352-41b7-89aa-dd8402a61ecd.filesusr.com/ugd/c12153_8dce8d50fcd64eec88ace4ace634dd40.pdf

² Brandes, O. M., Simms, R., & O'Riordan, J. (2020). Watershed security agenda for British Columbia. POLIS Water Sustainability Project. <https://poliswaterproject.org/polis-research-publication/watershed-security-agenda/>

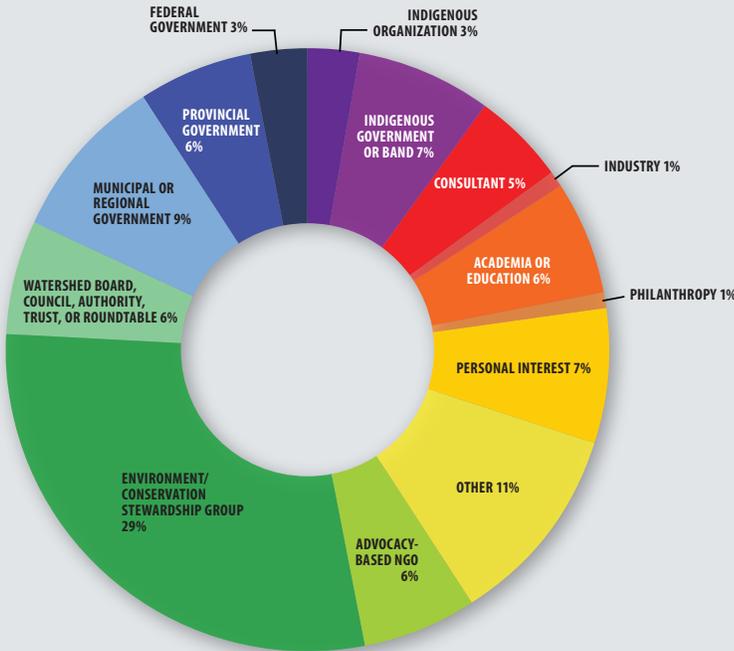
³ Horgan, J. (2020). Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy mandate letter. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/government/ministries-organizations/premier-cabinet/mlas/minister-letter/heyman_mandate_2020.pdf

⁴ Brandes, O. M., Morris, T., Archer, J., et al. (2016). *Illumination: Insights and Perspectives for Building Effective Watershed Governance in B.C.* POLIS Water Sustainability Project. <https://poliswaterproject.org/polis-research-publication/illumination-insights-perspectives-building-effective-watershed-governance-b-c/>

⁵ Morris, T. & McAllister, A. (2013, September 26). Webinar—Understanding B.C.'s waterscape: The emerging "Water Movement" & the power of the poll. POLIS Water Sustainability Creating a Blue Dialogue Webinar Series. <https://poliswaterproject.org/polis-research-publication/select-findings-and-insights-2018-b-c-freshwater-public-opinion-poll/> and <https://poliswaterproject.org/polis-event-webinar/webinar-understanding-b-c-s-waterscape-the-emerging-water-movement-the-power-of-the-poll/>

⁶ For past forum proceedings and information see: Watersheds 2020. (n.d.). <https://watershedsforum.ca/>

FIGURE 1. Survey Participation by Affiliation



Caveats and Limitations

- The insights shared in this document are based on the POLIS team’s analysis of the findings, drawing on our collective expertise and experience in this field.
- Given that a rigorous public poll is currently underway, we did not conduct detailed statistical analysis. Instead, we highlight and comment on noteworthy trends and emerging insights in relation to previous survey work and statistical analyses relevant to watershed governance in B.C.
- This new survey was not a direct replication of the *Illumination* survey conducted in 2015 and results need to be understood in light of the composition of survey respondents. Rather than a broad public pool of random participants, we purposefully designed this survey to build on previous work and, as such, engaged individuals working in water and watershed sustainability (see figure 1).

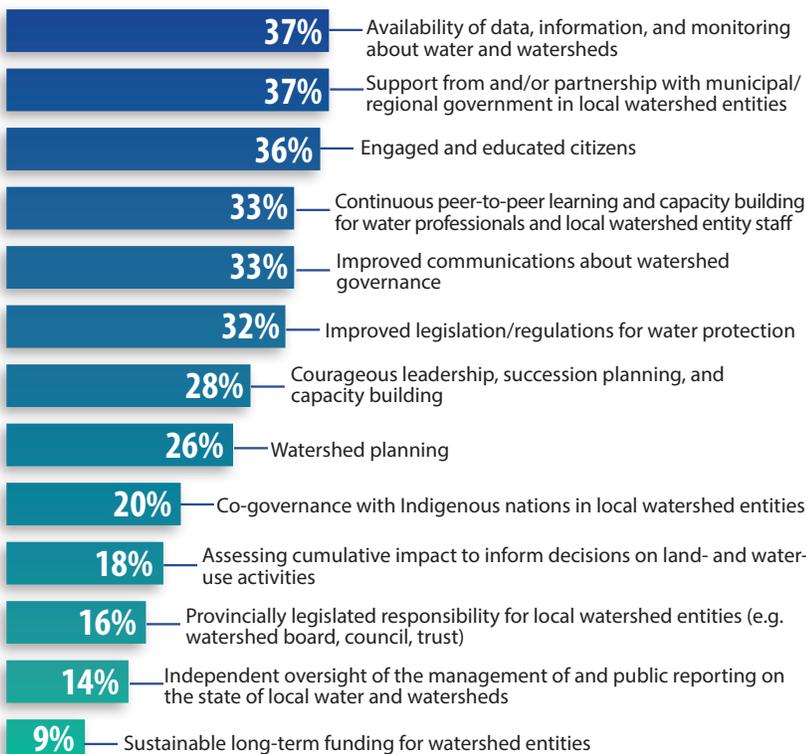
KEY FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS

#1 OBSERVED PROGRESS AND CHANGES IN WATERSHED GOVERNANCE OVER RECENT YEARS

Progress on winning conditions

FIGURE 2.

How much progress/change –if any– have you observed on these conditions in your region/area of focus?

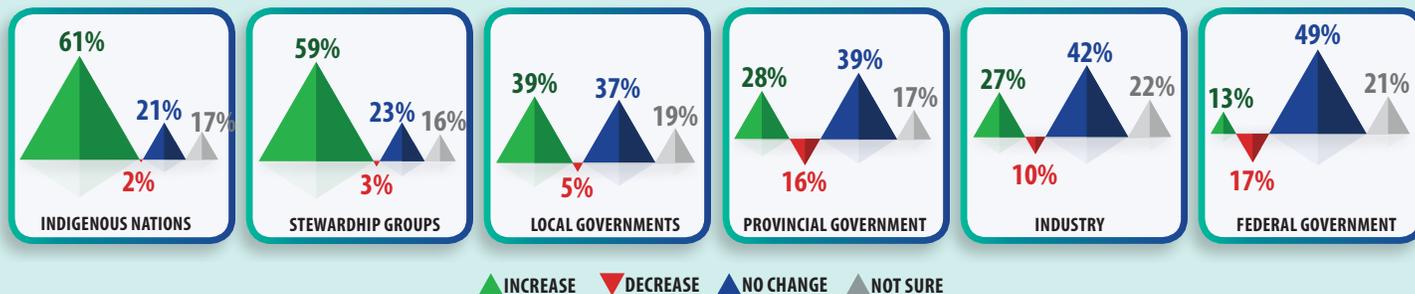


INSIGHT #1: Modest progress on winning conditions is occurring in community or locally driven areas (e.g. support/partnership from local government, community-based monitoring, engaged citizenry). However, foundational priorities that require significant roles and leadership by senior (provincial and federal) governments have stalled (e.g. sustainable funding, independent oversight, legal regime implementation). This lack of progress is concerning considering the mounting challenges around water and watershed security across the province.

Observed changes in level of engagement of different actors in watershed governance

FIGURE 3.

Key actors in watershed governance are Indigenous nations, the provincial government, local governments, federal government, stewardship groups, and industry. To best of your knowledge, how has the engagement/involvement of key actors in watershed governance changed in your region in recent years?



Main changes observed to advance water priorities and watershed governance in the past 5 years

FIGURE 4.

Overall, what are the main changes you have observed/experienced with respect to organizing teams and groups to advance water issues/watershed governance in the past 5 years?

POSITIVE CHANGES

(noteworthy responses)

Growing engagement and collaboration by many actors

"Increasing engagement across the board."

"Broader public interest and public engagement."

"More awareness, more activity, more interest."

"Participants are passionate, committed and tenacious and in it for the long haul."

"More awareness, more activity, more interest."

"More support from city and regional government."

"Better interagency efforts to participate and contribute expertise."

Growing collaboration and co-governance with Indigenous nations

"With the implementation of UNDRIP the way First Nations are being involved in water governance is in the process of changing. I have observed more co-governance groups being organized in the past couple years."

"Recognition of Indigenous rights, laws, policies and the need for reconciliation to occur to ensure freshwater protection."

"The provincial government and federal government have both made more of an effort to listen to, discuss and respond to Indigenous communities concerns over the fresh and marine waters. The mandate to implement UNDRIP seems to have been part of this change."

NEGATIVE CHANGES/CHALLENGES

(noteworthy responses)

Senior government leadership and implementation gaps

"We are all trying but I see decline lack of any governance or leadership from decision-makers."

"The laws are in place but the implementation, trust, awareness and understanding lag way behind!"

"WSA has provided tools for creating watershed management teams or groups, but those tools haven't been widely used yet."

"The provincial government has created and delegated a local watershed association to respond to water issues, yet have not given appropriate time, consultation, information or authority to this group."

Lack of resourcing and capacity

"Lack of consistent resources to implement and monitor plans."

"Lack of resources, lack of water as a standalone priority."

"As a province we rely heavily on volunteers to watch over our local environments and strive for positive change. Volunteer burn-out is high."

"Not enough government resources to process applications."

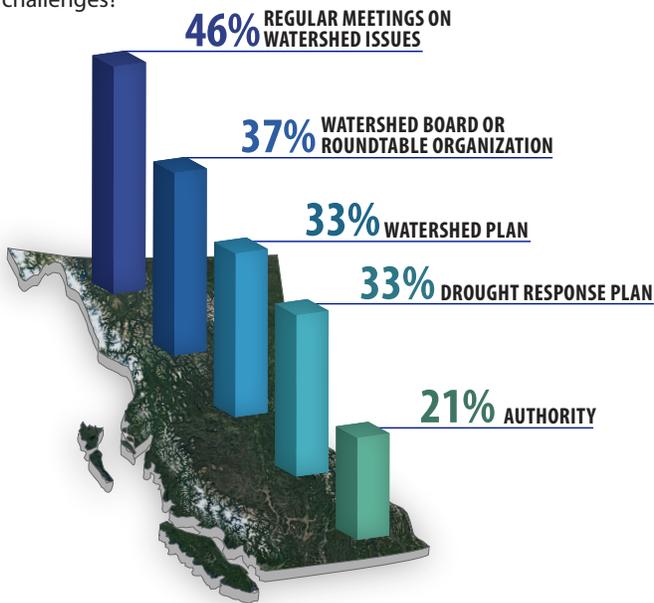
INSIGHT #2: Respondents highlighted Indigenous nations and stewardship groups as having the greatest increase in engagement in watershed governance. A fundamental shift is underway across the province, with leadership increasingly coming from Indigenous nations and leaders and local champions, and an emerging understanding that implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) will be key to driving water policy innovation and co-governance models in the future. comments consistently noted the following key challenges **lack of senior government leadership, slow progress on Water Sustainability Act (WSA) implementation, and resourcing and capacity constraints.**

#2 CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON WATERSHED ENTITIES⁷ AND THEIR ACTIVITIES AND ROLES

Presence and effectiveness of existing entities/processes

FIGURE 5.

Does the watershed or region where you work have any of the following local or regional water management or governance bodies/processes for making decisions related to water? If so, how effectively do you feel these are working to address water challenges?

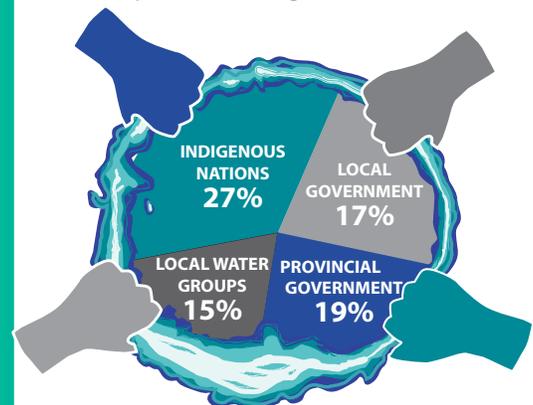


INSIGHT #3: A growing “bottom-up” approach is taking root, with a range of local governance bodies and processes engaging and building solutions in their regions. Yet, in the absence of an integrated provincewide approach, the current “locally” driven approach is piecemeal at best. Provincial funding and support for government-to-government co-governed watershed entities and plans that support a robust community role (beyond the handful of provincial watershed governance pilots initiated to date) will be critical to enabling lasting change.

Who is best positioned to lead?

FIGURE 6.

Watershed governance by definition assumes a high level of collaboration and coordination among the many governments and groups in a watershed. How a process or table forms and who leads it (e.g. roundtable) are important determinants of eventual impact, influence, and authority. From your perspective or experience, which group(s) do you think are best positioned to initiate and be involved in ongoing leadership of watershed governance?



Percent of respondents that selected each as best positioned to lead

INSIGHT #4: Indigenous nations and local governments are seen as best positioned to lead, but local water groups and the provincial government are not far behind. While senior governments (including provincial policy, law, and funding) are critical for success, this reveals the importance of taking a place-based approach.

When it comes to watershed governance, solutions must be driven by Indigenous authority holders and local actors and champions who are closest to the issues and have real local credibility and capacity. These responses demonstrate real opportunities for new leadership approaches and innovation as watershed governance in B.C. grows and matures.

⁷ “Watershed entity” is a generic term that refers to the organizations and governance arrangements that exist at the watershed scale; this includes authorities, boards, trusts, roundtables, regional bodies, or other watershed partnerships.

Current areas and levels of activity versus desired roles

FIGURE 7.

How active are you or is your organization/department in the following areas that affect watersheds or water?

46%

ADVOCACY

46%

EDUCATION

42%

MONITORING AND/OR ASSESSMENTS

FIGURE 8.

Statement(s) that most closely aligns with you or your organization/department's desired level of activity in watershed governance. Select all that apply. Would like to:

51%

Provide sound data and other information about local water resources for better planning and decision-making

48%

Advance best management practices within the industry/private sector, going beyond regulatory compliance and participating in collaborative watershed governance initiatives

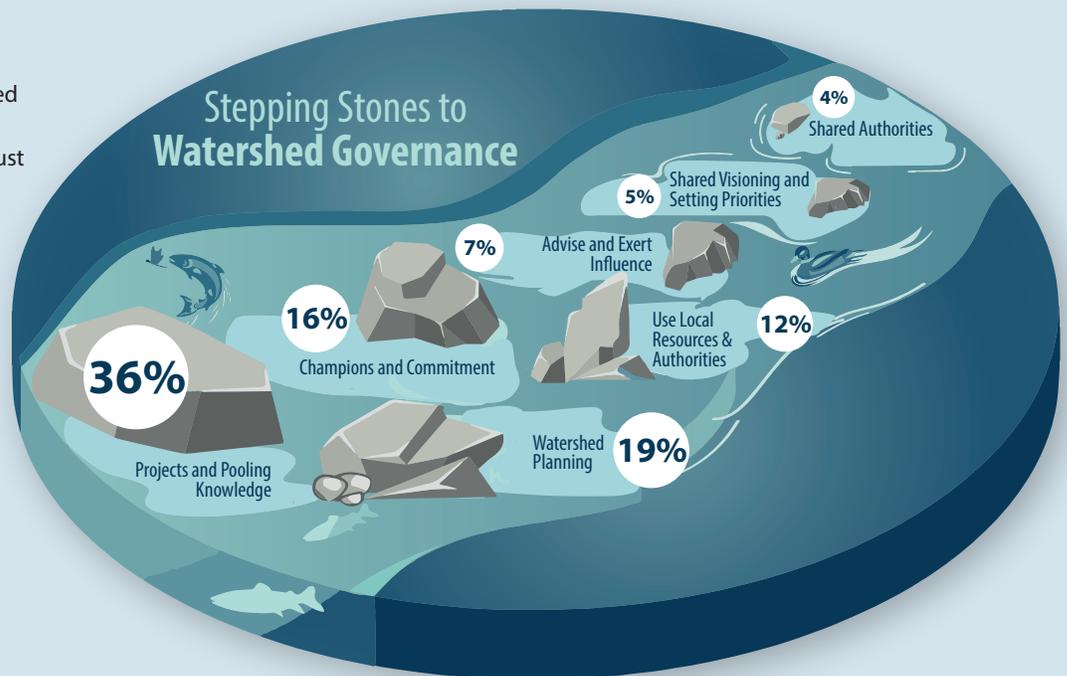
45%

Be actively involved in a watershed governance dialogue (e.g. roundtable, regular convening) to pursue more formal governance arrangements at a regional scale

INSIGHT # 5: Gaps exist between the current primary activities of respondent organizations (e.g. advocacy, education, monitoring) as compared with their desired activity (e.g. providing sound data for decision-making/planning, being actively involved in a watershed governance dialogue, advancing best practices with industry). This suggests that more impact would be possible with sustained resourcing (e.g. via a Watershed Security Fund) to help groups close the gap and to leverage their impact.

FIGURE 9.

The Stepping Stones to Watershed Governance is an approach that illustrates the milestones that must be in place to move towards shared watershed decision-making. While it is set up as a progression, it is not linear; each "stone" (phase or step) represents an essential component with value on its own, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Please select which "stone" (phase or step) do you think you or your organization are on.



INSIGHT #6: The majority of survey respondents indicated that "projects & pooling knowledge" is the stepping stone⁸ (stage of watershed governance) where they are currently operating. This demonstrates that while watershed governance is still maturing, most groups and community efforts are starting from a very practical place of addressing local concerns. They are engaging in building wider community understanding of the issues and solving immediate problems, while working incrementally through projects to build collaboration and a community of action and practice based in place.

NOTE: 33% of survey respondents were stewardship groups who often fill the niche of leading projects, monitoring, restoration, etc. As such, the data for this question is weighted towards their priorities and lived experience.

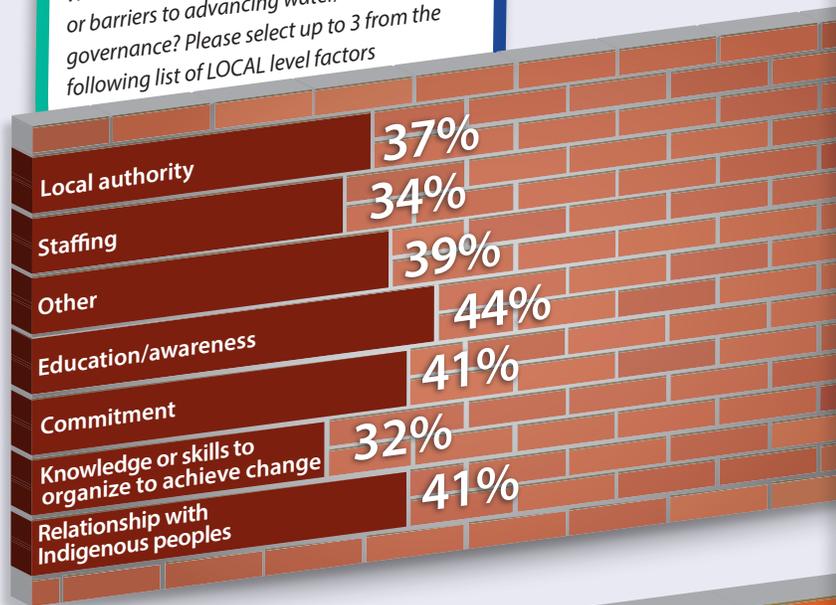
⁸ Overduin, N., Morris, T., Simms, R., et al. (2019). Handbook for water champions. POLIS Water Sustainability Project and the Center for Indigenous Environmental Resources. <https://poliswaterproject.org/polis-research-publication/handbook-water-champions/>

#3 WATER COMMUNITY IDENTIFIED BARRIERS, TOOLS, AND CAPACITY NEEDS

Most persistent barriers – local and provincial

FIGURE 10.

What are the most persistent challenges or barriers to advancing water/watershed governance? Please select up to 3 from the following list of LOCAL level factors



INSIGHT #7: The top identified local barrier to advancing watershed governance is the lack of local authority and clarity on roles and responsibilities. This speaks to the challenges that local governments and actors face when trying to influence and make water and watershed decisions. Addressing these barriers will be critical to achieving watershed governance in B.C. **This requires action by the provincial government.**

The main identified provincial barrier to advancing watershed governance is the absence of an ecosystem-based, integrated approach to planning and decision-making—in other words, the lack of whole-of-watershed approaches that consider land and water together. **This reveals the urgent need for “de-siloing” and a watershed security perspective to help drive an integrated approach to resource management, planning, and governance in all regions of the province.**

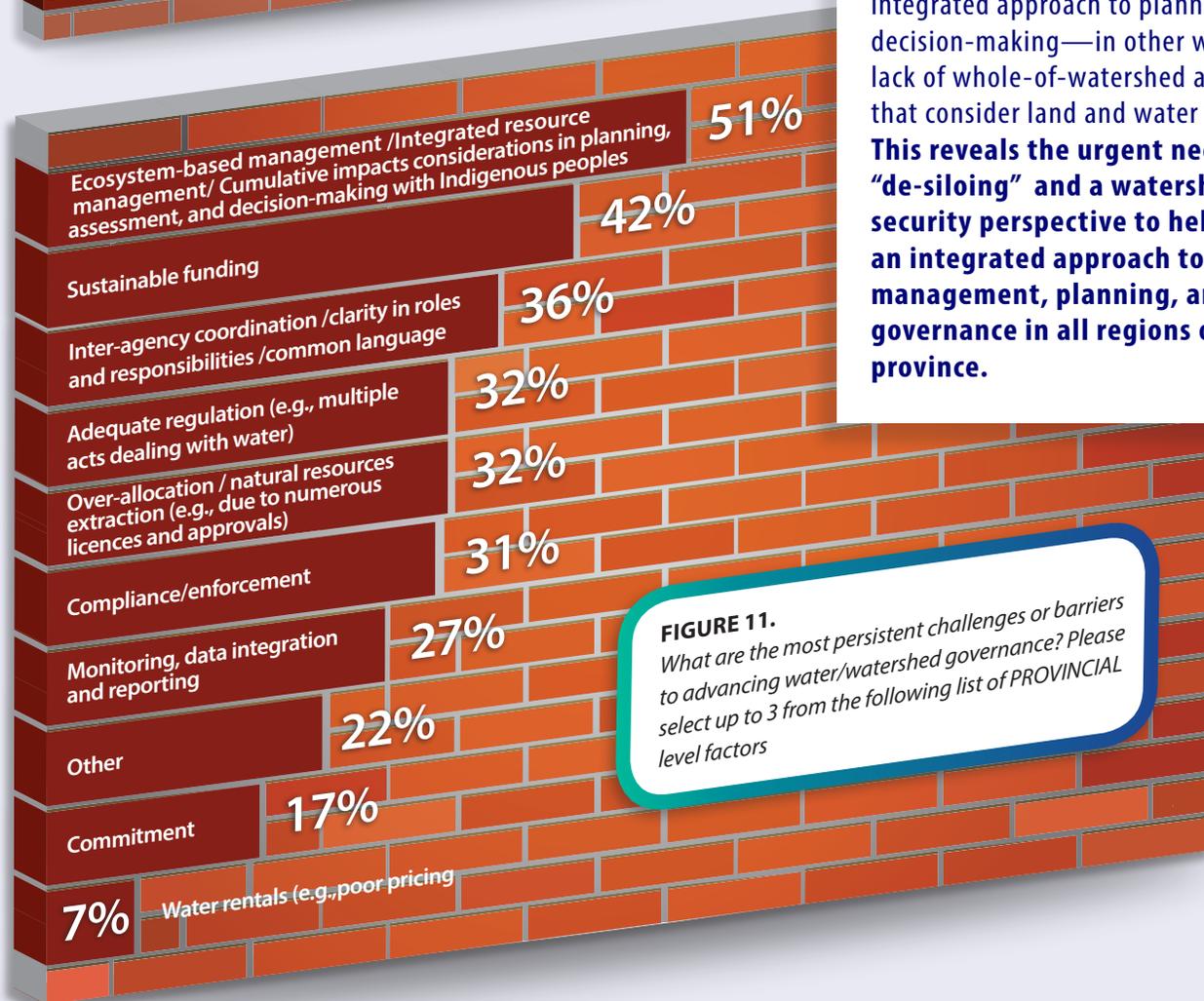


FIGURE 11.

What are the most persistent challenges or barriers to advancing water/watershed governance? Please select up to 3 from the following list of PROVINCIAL level factors

Where does the provincial government need to amplify its efforts on the WSA and water?

FIGURE 12.

What do you think are key areas where provincial government will need to amplify its efforts on the Water Sustainability Act implementation or water more generally?

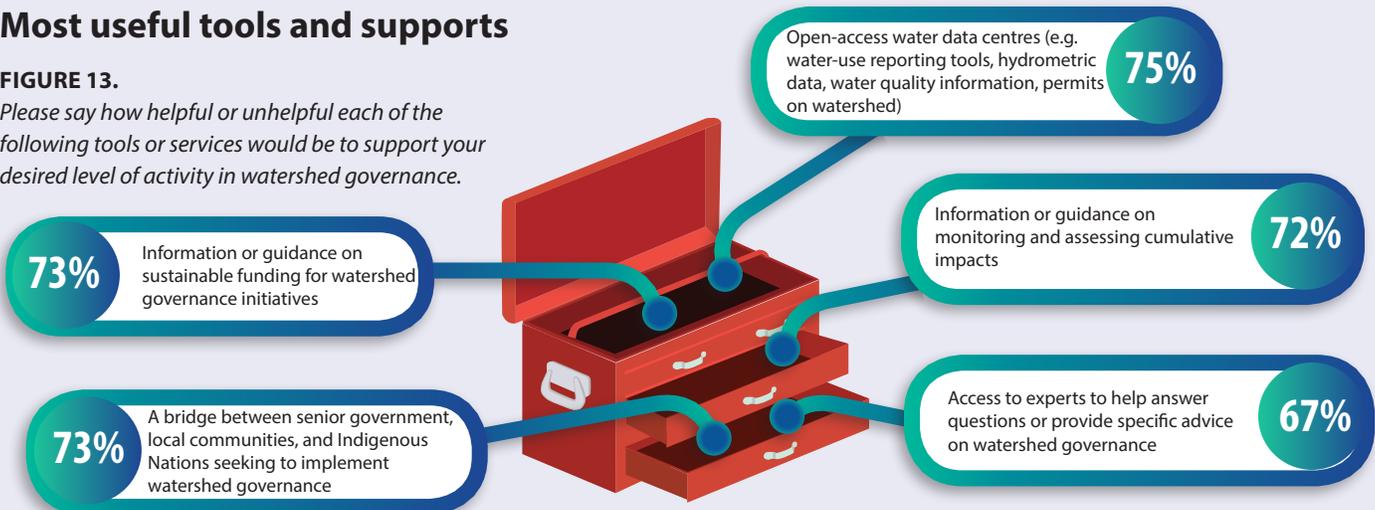
INSIGHT #8: Respondents indicated that the provincial government needs to amplify its efforts in all identified areas, with the top four being sustainable funding, Indigenous partnerships, land use planning, and greater on-the-ground enforcement. This demonstrates that the current provincial mandate is on the right track with regard to addressing these concerns, but follow-through and action on implementation are now needed.



Most useful tools and supports

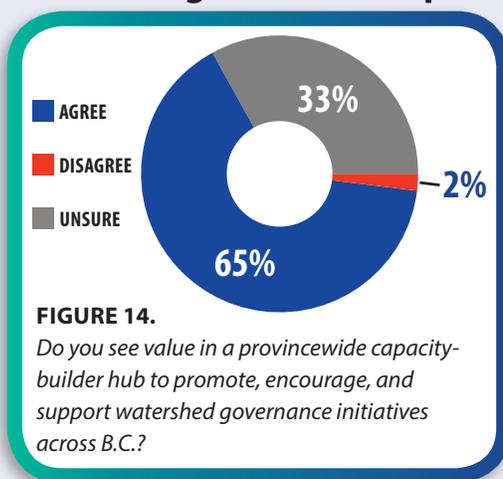
FIGURE 13.

Please say how helpful or unhelpful each of the following tools or services would be to support your desired level of activity in watershed governance.



INSIGHT #9: Respondents indicated that almost all of the tools are extremely or very helpful, which demonstrates the appetite and need for a range of capacity-building supports and tools with more investment and coordination in the water sector and network.

Watershed governance capacity builder



INSIGHT #10: Since the Illumination survey was conducted in 2015, support for a provincewide capacity-builder has remained steady. This affirms the need for institutional infrastructure and targeted capacity-building resources and services.⁹ It reinforces the previous recommendations to create a provincewide approach to promote, encourage, and support the creation and implementation of watershed governance across B.C. It also demonstrates the potential of the provincial government's early investment in watersheds under the Healthy Watersheds Initiative and the ongoing need to support communities to build capacity in their own regions. In the long term, a provincial Watershed Security Fund will be critical to continue to build and sustain community capacity.