

# Federal budget a failure when it comes to addressing the water crisis

By RALPH PENTLAND, EMILY LORRA HINES, OLIVER M. BRANDES, AND BOB SANDFORD    APRIL 18, 2022

The Liberals did not place any real sense of urgency on freshwater issues in their funding proposals and are not delivering on the promises so boldly made for a Canada Water Agency.



Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault's mandate letter tasked him to establish a Canada Water Agency and implement a strengthened Freshwater Action Plan. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

The climate crisis is a water crisis — affecting everything from prosperity and public health to food availability, energy, security, salmon, fisheries, and ecosystems.

The recent flooding, drought, and fires show all Canadians the reality of a very chaotic future where these kinds of events will not only be more common, but also increasingly severe, impacting community safety, agriculture, and local prosperity everywhere. This last year has given us about all we can handle — and it will only get worse from here.

Canadians are starting to understand how bad it may get. Yet this should not really surprise anyone, especially government, as accelerating climate chaos, with consequences far beyond those early projections, is arriving as predicted, perhaps only earlier than expected. The connection between water and climate is deadly obvious in Canada and beyond.

For example, in 2021, Canadian climate disasters led to the deadliest and most expensive year for droughts, fires, and floods in the country's history. Flooding in British Columbia alone cost Canadians more than \$425-million, punctuating the notion that unchecked climate change will ultimately cost us our collective future prosperity.

More than two years ago, the current federal government made a commitment to establish a Canada Water Agency as one measure to help us respond to the realities of a climate-changed future and its effect on water. The clear intention was for this government to work together with the provinces, territories, Indigenous and local communities, scientists, and others to find the best ways to keep our waters safe, clean, and well managed. More than 50 non-governmental and academic organizations from across the country applauded and have since invested heavily in supporting this effort.

The [government's consultations](#) provided the necessary guidance on an appropriate form and functions for the proposed agency, as well as a clear path forward. Most in the freshwater community agree with the government's initial conclusion—stated in numerous platforms, mandate letters, and budgets—that the immediate path forward must include an independent, standalone Canada Water Agency addressing both freshwater and environmental priorities.

The urgency is clearly mounting and government has gotten all the direction it needs. Therefore, the recent budget came as a shock to many of those same groups and indeed the broader water community when the government did not spell out that path

forward. The Liberals did not place any real sense of urgency on freshwater issues in their funding proposals and are not delivering on the promises so boldly made.

As is stated time and again, a strong federal role in freshwater is urgently needed. A refresh is clearly needed on the institutions that have been static and declining in effectiveness for several years, all despite the fact that current and emerging issues continue to escalate at a rate well beyond our capacity to address them effectively.



A Canada Water Agency and a serious federal commitment to freshwater is not just good for water but is fundamental to how we adapt to a climate in flux, write members of the Forum for Leadership on Water. *Pexels photograph by James Wheeler*

With respect to freshwater, climate uncertainties are only amplified by a myriad of governance and management challenges facing our nation—many of our own making. We can start with Canada’s slow recognition and lack of respect for Indigenous peoples’ water rights, the link to cultural self-determination, and, crucially, their role in governance and decision-making. This continues to lead to

extremely costly friction and impasses between resource -project proponents, development, and Indigenous needs and priorities.

Other significant concerns include an increasingly fraught relationship with our neighbours to the south that is stress testing our ability to protect economic and environmental priorities in shared international waters. These include, among many others, transboundary pollution affecting Lake Winnipeg, water apportionment in the St. Mary–Milk and other shared basins, painfully slow Columbia River Treaty renegotiations, and the unpalatable prospect of eventual large -scale water exports.

External threats abound, but we don't even have our own house in order. Institutions, decision-making, and management of water is highly fragmented both within and between the federal and other orders of government. Federal water policies and laws are firmly entrenched in a totally inadequate and outdated status quo and are fundamentally unable to deal effectively with today's challenges.

The cost of failing to address these challenges today will only add exponential costs to tomorrow's bill. For example, the short-sighted decision to eliminate the relatively inexpensive national flood damage reduction program 30 years ago has likely at least doubled Canadian flooding potential — and increased costs significantly today.

The current promises by government are wonderful, but action is what is needed now. We know the agency can build from existing strengths in government and move forward quickly with new resource. To be effective it needs to not be buried in government as a branch but stand alone and be independent with clear guidance from a renewed federal Freshwater Action Plan. [The 50-plus organizations across the non-governmental community](#) support the basic findings in the government's own consultations, and are in vigorous agreement on the fundamental pillars that should guide the new independent agency.

More resilience and a better approach to water security will require reconciliation built around shared decisions and authority in water, better predictions, better institutional and intergovernmental arrangements, better monitoring and research to support effective adaptation, better designed and maintained infrastructure, and more disciplined freshwater management within watershed focussed partnerships to help navigate the rocky waters ahead. Early progress towards all these goals can be realized through the creation of a standalone independent and resourced Canada Water Agency and follow through on the promises already made.

Immediate opportunities for federal action are in the Great Lakes and Lake Winnipeg, where the issues and risks are already well enough understood to increase funding and protection efforts without further delay. As the Great Lakes go, so goes water security and the rest of Canada.

A Canada Water Agency and a serious federal commitment to freshwater is not just good for water but is fundamental to how we adapt to a climate in flux. We reiterate: the climate crisis is a water crisis. The bottom line is that we will not achieve climate resilience without commensurate investment in the sector that impacts Canadians the most: the water sector.

*Ralph Pentland is a member of the Forum for Leadership on Water (FLOW) and former director of water planning and management in the Canadian federal government and the architect of the Federal Water Policy. Emily Lorra Hines is a graduate of Oxford University and co-ordinator for FLOW. Oliver M. Brandes is co-director of the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance at the University of Victoria's Centre for Global Studies and the chair of FLOW. Bob Sandford holds the Global Water Futures Chair in Water Security at the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health and is also a member of FLOW where they have collectively contributed to numerous publications related to federal water law and policy, including the [Five Foundational Pillars for the Canada Water Agency](#).*