

ON THE PULSE: PUBLIC OPINION ON FRESH WATER AND WATERSHED SECURITY

Summary of the 2021 B.C. Watershed Security Survey

INTRODUCTION

Water sustainability and watershed security—the need to manage water and its sources responsibly and sustainably—are high-priority issues for residents of British Columbia. Worsening and more frequent flooding, drought, and wildfires, coupled with contaminated drinking water sources, are intensifying public concern and the call for government action.

For over a decade, POLIS and partners have conducted regular surveys and polls as part of our efforts to understand public opinions, community priorities, and emerging trends around fresh water (see Box 1: A Decade of Efforts). Building on this body of knowledge, in fall 2021 POLIS, the BC Freshwater Legacy Initiative, and the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia commissioned and developed the “B.C. Watershed Security Survey,” which was conducted by McAllister Opinion Research [1].

The purpose of the 2021 research was to gain insights into how British Columbians understand and relate to various freshwater issues and watershed security, and the range of potential policy solutions being considered. The results also help us to track changes and trends over time. The 2021 survey specifically asked questions regarding B.C. government mandates around creating a Watershed Security Strategy and Fund [2]. These questions were included to help us better understand public priorities and perceptions around related core issues, such as a health and biodiversity, and the possible policy interventions needed.

The complete survey findings are extensive and provide insights into the many nuances of how a diverse cross-section of British Columbians are thinking about fresh water and possible policy interventions and solutions. This summary provides an overview of those findings and insights and specifically points to five trends that stand out from the research that have direct relevance for advancing watershed security priorities in B.C.

About this Summary:

This summary provides an overview of the findings and insights taken from the 2021 B.C. Watershed Security Survey, commissioned and developed by POLIS, the BC Freshwater Legacy Initiative, and the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia.

This summary specifically points to five trends that stand out from the research that have direct relevance for advancing watershed security priorities in B.C.

Who it is for:

This document is for water champions at all levels, and will be of particular interest to governments and those looking to better understand public priorities and how best to frame and effectively communicate about water sustainability and watershed security.

How it is organized:

This document describes five key survey findings that highlight trends in how British Columbians view water and watershed security. It provides a short discussion of how these findings can inform policy and decision-making in terms of watershed management.

[1] The complete survey results can be found here, “2021 BC Watershed Security Survey Topline Report”: <https://poliswaterproject.org/polis-research-publication/2021-bc-watershed-security-survey/>

[2] “The B.C. Provincial Watershed Security Strategy and Fund Discussion Paper can be found here: <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/govtogetherbc/consultation/watershed-security-strategy-and-fund-discussion-paper/>



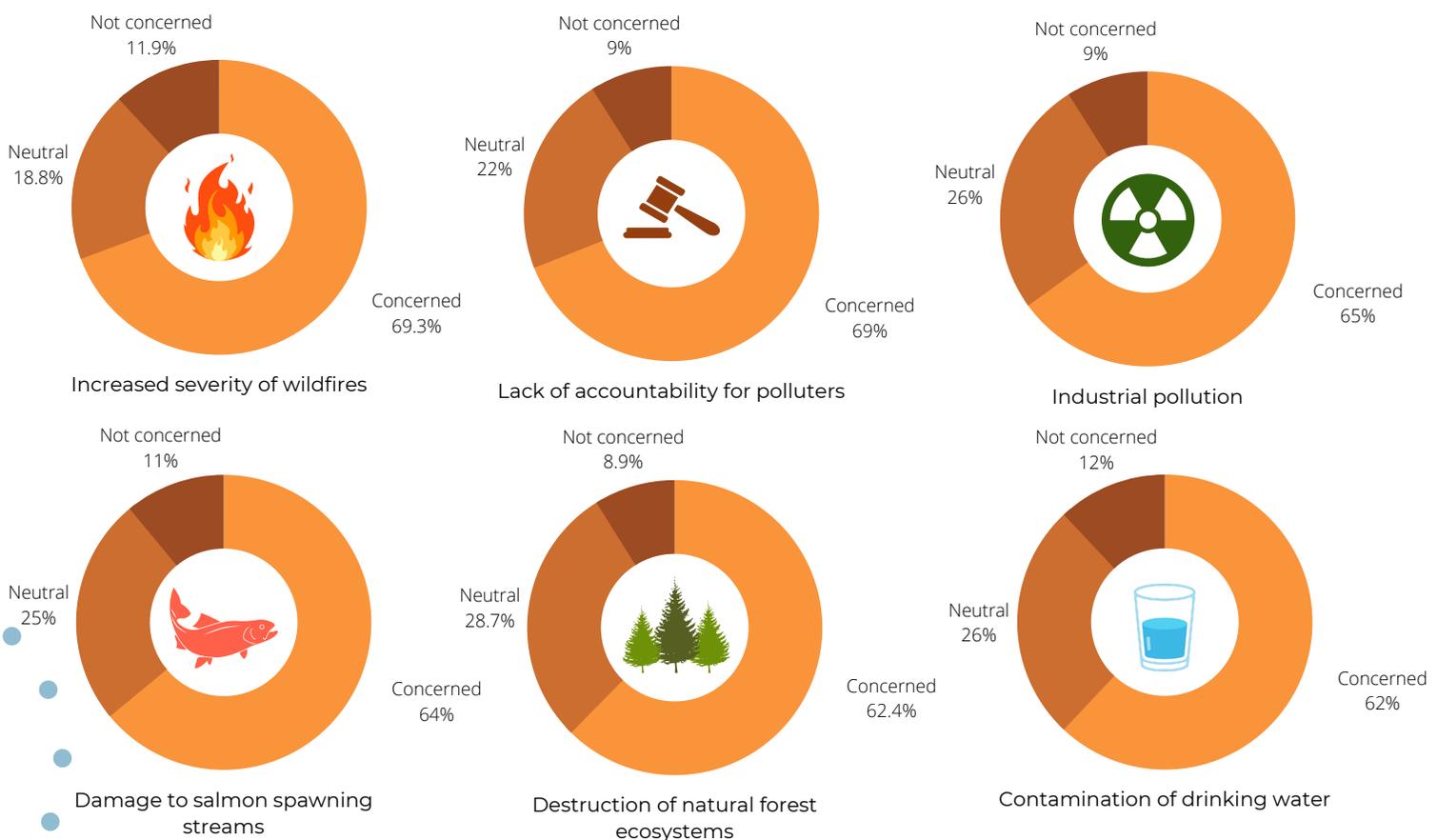
FIVE KEY POLL FINDINGS & INSIGHTS

In this section, we highlight five key findings that stand out from the 2021 survey results that have direct relevance for advancing watershed security priorities in B.C. The graphics illustrate overwhelming concern about climate change and watershed issues, illuminate public understanding of watersheds and the benefits they provide, and show strong support for watershed investment and protection.

KEY FINDING #1: TOP ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES ALL CONNECT TO WATER.

The survey results emphasize that water is a cross-cutting environmental priority in B.C., and British Columbians have a growing understanding of how water connects to climate security and other crucial environmental issues.

Six in ten (62%) B.C. residents say they are concerned about pollution of lakes, rivers, and streams—topping the list of concerns about interrelated environmental issues, including climate change (59%), declining salmon stocks (59%), and deforestation (55%).



Box 1: A Decade of Efforts to Understand Freshwater Opinions and Priorities

The 2021 B.C. Watershed Security Survey builds on ongoing work that began in 2012 to better understand public perspectives and changing attitudes over time on progress, challenges, gaps, and needs around water sustainability and watershed security in B.C.

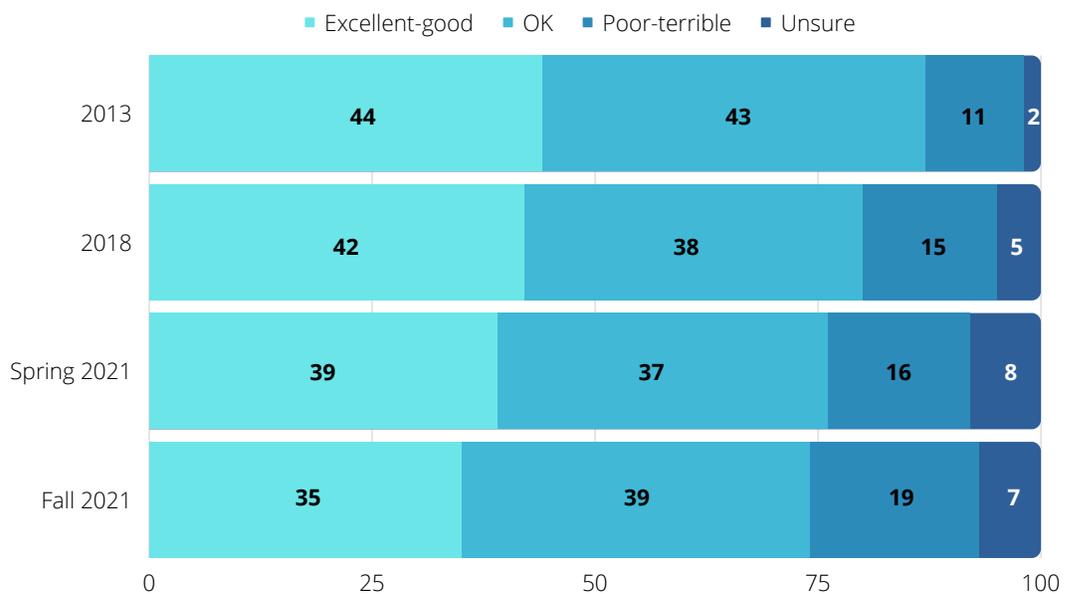
- 2013: [The State of the Water Movement in British Columbia: A Waterscape Scan & Needs Assessment of B.C. Watershed-Based Groups](#)
- 2016: [Illumination: Insights and Perspectives for Building Effective Watershed Governance in B.C.](#)
- 2018: [2018 B.C. Freshwater Public Opinion Poll, Illumination: Insights and Perspectives for Building Effective Watershed Governance in B.C.](#)
- 2020: [Changing Attitudes. Changing Waters. 2020 Freshwater Community Survey](#)

KEY FINDING #2: OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS, BRITISH COLUMBIANS' CONCERN ABOUT THE HEALTH OF WATER AND WATERSHEDS HAS INCREASED

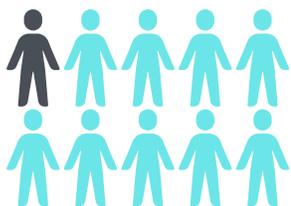
The survey reveals increasing concern about local water sources (such as lakes, rivers, and streams) where, over the last decade, the percentage of those rating freshwater health as excellent or okay has decreased and the percentage rating freshwater health as poor or terrible has increased.

Over the past ten years, the percentage of British Columbians who believe bodies of fresh water are in "excellent/good" health has dropped by 25% and two in three British Columbians (66%, up from 57% in 2018) now say they are concerned about the potential for a major water crisis in their community in the next few years. Concerns are highest in the largest population centres in the province, specifically Vancouver Island, the Lower Mainland, and the Southern Interior. This reveals a significant increase in concern about the overall health of local water sources in the province.

How would you rate the OVERALL HEALTH of freshwater lakes, rivers and streams in and around your community today?



The percentage of people would rate the health of water and watersheds as "poor" or "terrible" has doubled in less than a decade



2013
11%



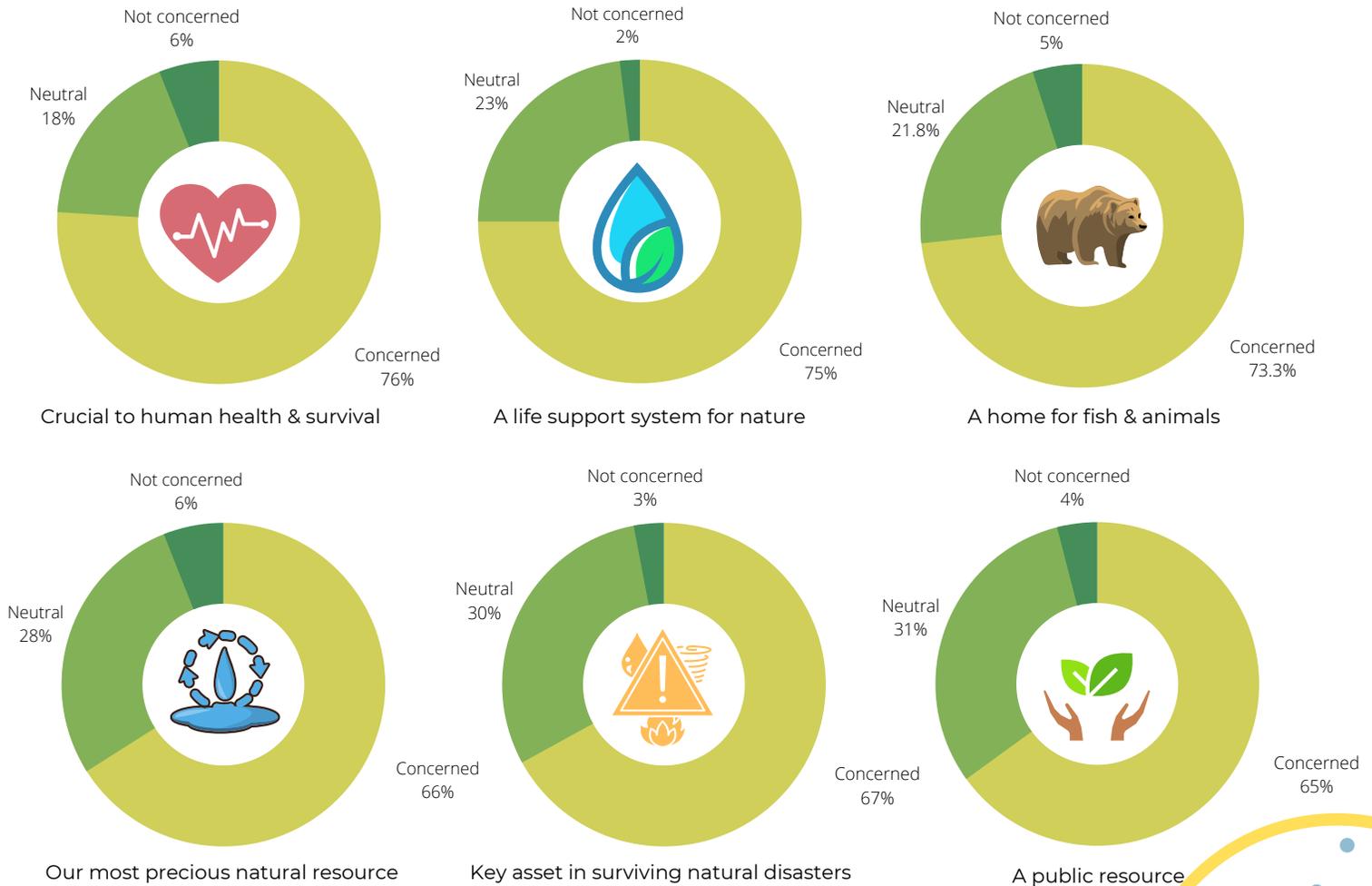
2021
19%

A note on methodology

Survey results were based on an online survey of 1,012 English-speaking B.C. residents aged 18 years or older, fielded September 17th to September 20th, 2020, inclusive. The online survey platform was programmed for both mobile and desktop response. Respondents for this survey were recruited using a professional online panel sample, and accurately replicate a cross-section of the B.C. population. Weighting is applied to the data according to Statistics Canada figures on economic region, age, and gender. Online panels however are not strictly a probability sample, and therefore Bayesian inference is used to estimate a credibility interval, an analogue of margin of error. The credibility interval for a total sample of n=1,012 is $\pm 3.1\%$ at a 95% confidence level.

KEY FINDING #3: “WATERSHED SECURITY” RESONATES—AND CAPTURES MORE THAN AN “ENVIRONMENTAL” FRAME

Survey results reveal that British Columbians have a strong understanding that watersheds and watershed health are linked to other crucial priorities, including human health, security, resilience, and public ownership. Three in four believe that watersheds are crucial to human health and survival (76%), a life support system for nature (75%), and functioning ecosystems (74%). Two in three believe that water is our most precious natural resource (66%) and key to surviving natural disasters (67%). Watershed security is understood not just as an environmental issue, but as a fundamental underpinning of community health, security, and prosperity. It is the common theme that links the top issues of our time.



Box 2: The importance of co-governance with Indigenous Nations

64% of survey participants believe that recognizing the rights of Indigenous communities to manage watersheds within their traditional territories is an effective way to protect and manage fresh water. Local First Nations ranked in the top five trusted sources when it comes to decisions on freshwater management—ahead of Crown governments, industrial leaders, and land developers. Indigenous co-governance and regional collaboration will be a crucial component of successful holistic planning, management, and protection of local watersheds.

Local investments in watershed projects through the Healthy Watersheds Initiative over the past year have demonstrated that Indigenous led and co-led project have had high rates of community engagement, employment, and sustained health of watersheds. The recent joint decision by Cowichan Tribes and the B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development to pursue a Water Sustainability Plan for the Xwulqw’selu (Koksilah) watershed is one important step for reconciliation and community-led efforts in watershed security.

KEY FINDING #4: BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT EXISTS FOR BOLD POLICY SOLUTIONS

Broad public support exists for stronger water laws, better enforcement, industrial water rentals, local watershed governance, and the creation of a new B.C. Watershed Security Officer position.

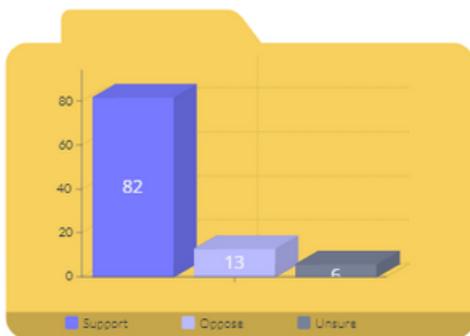
Highlights include:

- 82% of British Columbians believe it is crucial to enforce water laws against industrial pollution and damage to lakes, rivers, and streams by enforcing jail time and corporate fines to polluters.
- 78% believe that certain watersheds should be completely off limits to development to protect sources of drinking water and sensitive ecosystems.
- 77% believe it is necessary to make industry pay more to restore and secure B.C.'s freshwater sources.
- 3 in 4 want more local decision-making power for the right to say "no" to unwanted local development in their watersheds and freshwater sources.

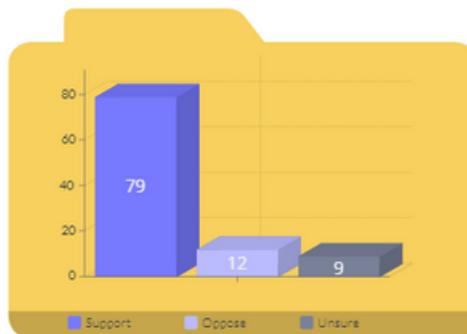
These findings point towards substantial support for more regulations, policies, and oversight as ways to benefit the health of water and communities. Further, these results demonstrate that the general public supports the idea that industry actors should (at least partially) pay for water protection, management, and restoration.

There are various ways in which B.C. could update its approach to protecting and managing fresh water. What do you think about the following...?

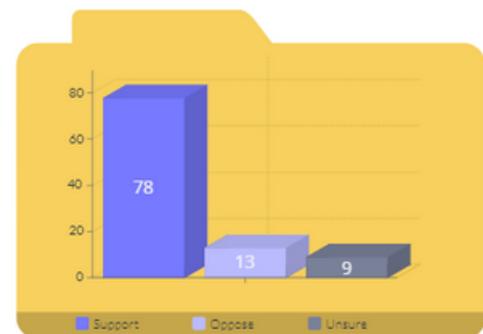
Jail and fine corporate polluters



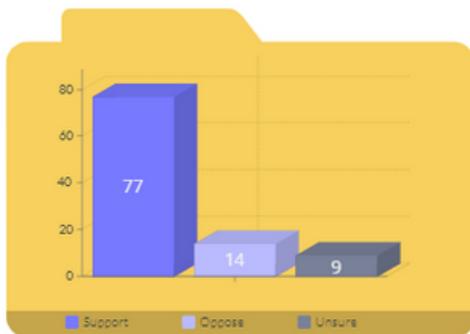
Rebuild wetlands



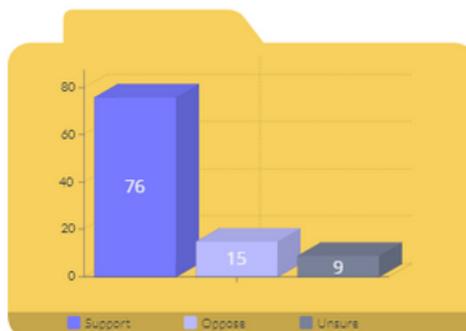
Make sources of drinking water completely off-limits to development



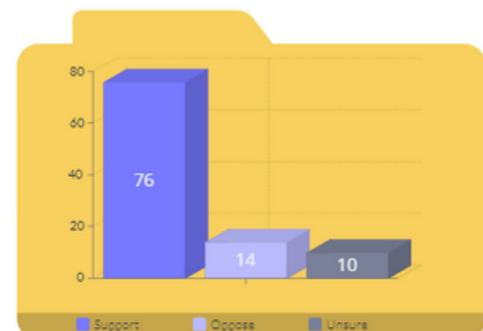
Make industry pay more to secure and restore BC watersheds



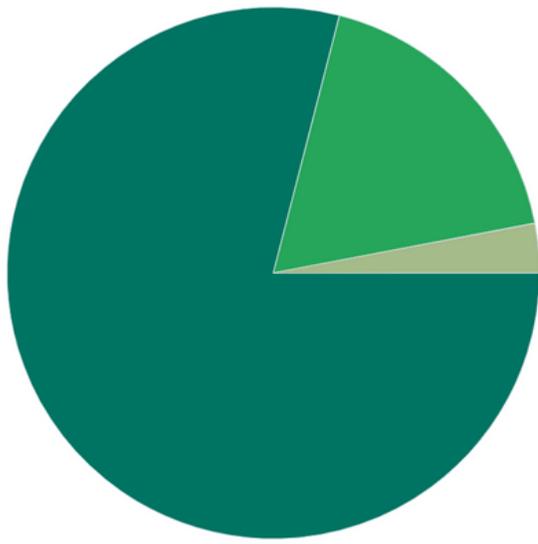
Appoint a Provincial Watershed Security Officer to enforce laws protecting BC's fresh water



Give local communities the right to say "NO" to unwanted development in their watersheds



KEY FINDING #5: MAJOR INVESTMENTS IN WATERSHED SECURITY HAVE 8 IN 10 SUPPORT



- B.C. needs to make major investments in watershed security 79
- B.C. has plenty of clean fresh water: more taxes, red tape, and government spending on clean water are unnecessary. 18
- Unsure 3

British Columbians support significant investments in watershed security, with eight in ten believing that the province needs to make major investments to protect watersheds. Furthermore, a B.C. Watershed Security Fund would be a popular infrastructure investment and more widely supported than other major B.C. infrastructure projects (even with a \$1 billion dollar price tag). 65% believe that the investment would be a good idea, and highest amongst other infrastructure projects such as the

Victoria Sewage Treatment Plant (64%), Patullo Bridge (53%), Massey Tunnel replacement (48%), Broadway Subway Line (45%), and the Site C Dam (39%). This demonstrates the public understanding that watersheds are valuable assets that require sizeable investments to be protected and infrastructure investments that can sustain communities province-wide (as opposed to select communities and urban centers).

Public Funded public Infrastructure projects/initiatives in BC

Good idea/bad idea/unsure



WHAT THE SURVEY RESULTS REVEAL

The trends over the past decade reflect the growing consensus that fresh water cannot be taken for granted and the most recent results indicate a growing concern around watershed security. The findings reveal that British Columbians— across demographics, rural/urban geographies, and the political spectrum—view water as a valuable resource. The 2021 survey indicates that investment in watershed security is not only a widely supported policy decision, but something British Columbians see as critical to sustaining community health, security, and well-being into the future.

From POLIS' perspective, we believe policy-makers, water leaders, and influencers can take away three strong conclusions from this work:

- 1. Watershed security is a high priority for British Columbians.** The public wants action, including through government investment, bold policy interventions, and stricter enforcement.
- 2. Public attitude is that strong connections exist between watershed security and other concerns, such as quality of life, health, prosperity, community resilience, and local environmental priorities.** Given these strong connections, the framing and messaging around watershed security should explicitly link to the health and wealth of communities, in addition to environmental and other related concerns.
- 3. Significant investments in watershed security are broadly supported.** British Columbians understand that water needs to be prioritized, and that substantial, ongoing funding will be necessary to advance watershed security.

Our final general conclusion is that the results of the 2021 survey, consistent with previous such surveys and research, continue to demonstrate the demand and the need for timely action on the issues that communities care about: safe drinking water, more local say in decision-making, thriving wild fish and ecosystems, and security (personal, economic, community) as the climate changes. The findings demonstrate support for bold action by the provincial government on the Watershed Security Fund and other legal, policy, and planning interventions to safeguard our most precious resource—fresh water.



THIS SURVEY WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY

