

# TIMES COLONIST

## Comment: B.C. needs to better monitor water consumption

[Ben Parfitt](#) / Times Colonist

June 11, 2013

For some time, the men and women tasked with ensuring there is enough clean, safe water in Greater Victoria have understood two simple things: the water that local residents and businesses use needs to be properly tracked, and people should pay on the basis of how much they consume.

Fresh water is a critical resource. And while we might choose to believe otherwise, particularly in the wetter winter months when there's plenty of rain, the truth is that water is nowhere near as abundant as we might think.

By employing the simple related tools of tracking water use and requiring consumers to pay based on their consumption, Greater Victoria's water managers have made us better water conservers. We're less wasteful because we understand the connection between high and frequently unnecessary rates of consumption and higher water bills.

In early 2010, the provincial government launched a long overdue environmental and public health initiative aimed at modernizing B.C.'s century-old Water Act. Good work in the form of extensive public consultations and discussion papers followed. It now falls to a new government to complete what its predecessor started, with such things as a promised new Water Sustainability Act.

One of the more glaring but easily fixable weaknesses in B.C.'s current approach to water management is around accounting for the water that is used in the province, particularly by major water consumers. In that regard, B.C. could take a giant step in the right direction by emulating what water managers in Greater Victoria do.

Currently, the provincial government neither collects nor publishes data on actual water consumption by major consumers. In many cases, it does not even require that major water consumers meter their water use. Only one pulp-and-paper mill in the province, for example, is required to meter its water, and even then, that lone exception is of little consequence, as there is no provincial repository for such data.

This does not bode well for responsible management of our most important natural resource — a resource fundamental to our health and well-being, our environment and our economy. Add to the mix worries over how climate change will affect the timing and duration of water flows and the serious prospect for big increases in water consumption by mines and natural-gas companies, and the absence of comprehensive water accounting by the province becomes even more problematic.

Linked to this is the critical question of whether the provincial government is sending a strong enough signal to major water consumers that they must be responsible users and conservers of this critical public resource. Municipalities like Victoria understand this. It's time the provincial government followed their lead.

As one example, natural-gas companies operating near Dawson Creek use a lot of water in their hydraulic fracturing (or "fracking") operations. Dawson Creek sells water from its municipal supply to industrial water users at a rate that amounts to more than \$11,000 for every Olympic swimming pool's worth of water, and about half that amount if

companies elect to use treated wastewater instead. The same companies withdrawing the same amount of water from nearby lakes and rivers under water licences issued by the provincial government pay a mere \$2.75.

Sustaining our precious water resources begins with a commitment to track all water use and to ensure that water users pay adequately for what they use. The costs to set up a provincial accounting program are not onerous. The province's Oil and Gas Commission, for example, began requiring in 2011 that natural-gas companies report on at least part of their water use, and the commission is committed to capturing all of the industry's water use in the months ahead.

It's time the provincial government did the same across the board by doing three simple things.

First, grant one provincial agency sole responsibility for gathering and reporting all information on water use and have an independent auditor periodically verify the agency's performance.

Second, require that all major water users meter the water they consume and report that data to the province.

And third, increase water use fees and use a portion of the revenues collected to pay for a province-wide water-use database and increased environmental monitoring and enforcement efforts.

Enacting these simple policies would do much to help sustain B.C.'s water resources in future years. The evidence that they would work is right here in Victoria.

Ben Parfitt is a research associate with the University of Victoria's POLIS Project on Ecological Governance, a resource policy analyst with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and author of *Counting Every Drop: The Case for Water Use Reporting in B.C.*

© Copyright 2013