

'Historic achievement' as B.C. replaces its 105-year-old Water Act

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Environment Minister Mary Polak hailed the Water Sustainability Act as an historic achievement for B.C.

Photograph by: Stuart Davis Stuart Davis, PROVINCE

The Water Sustainability Act, which will replace and update B.C.'s century-old Water Act, was passed Tuesday afternoon in the B.C. legislature.

In an email to The Province, Environment Minister Mary Polak described it as “a historic achievement for British Columbia.”

Polak said Wednesday that when the Water Act was passed 105 years ago, “Those were different times with different demands on our water resource. B.C.'s entire population was only 350,000 ... Today, our provincial population is 4.6 million.”

One expert who has advised the government on the modernization of the Water Act over the past five years said B.C. has lagged behind the rest of Canada in its water regulation for too long.

But, said Oliver Brandes, co-director of the University of Victoria's [POLIS Project](#), the passage of the [Water Sustainability Act](#) is a much-needed step in catching up.

Several key details — such as the tricky issue of how much to charge for water use — remain to be hammered out by legislators in regulations that will support the bill.

“We can’t relax now,” Brandes said. “We have to stay vigilant, because there’s lots of work ahead. But this is definitely a milestone worth celebrating.”

In September, Polak released a statement affirming a commitment to update B.C.’s water laws. In the statement, Polak said: “We recognize one of the greatest weaknesses of the existing Water Act is that groundwater — with a few exceptions — is not currently regulated in B.C.”

This lack of groundwater regulation has allowed large-scale commercial and industrial users of groundwater in B.C. to withdraw the resource without licensing, reporting, or paying for the resource.

The regulation of groundwater will be a top priority under the new legislation, the government has said, which will include licensing and charging for extraction, but the details and prices remain to be determined.

Polak said new water fees and rentals will be established before the act takes effect in the spring of 2015.

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