

## **Comment: Water-supply problems raise citizen awareness**

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When fish float belly up, algae blooms grow out of control, salmon runs mysteriously disappear and boil-water advisories become stubbornly common, it's easy to recognize and agree that "water-rich" Canada is not immune to freshwater woes.

In B.C., as elsewhere in Canada, pressures from population growth and related increases in agriculture production, conflicts about resource development and a changing climate cause mounting concerns. Questions are being raised about whether we have enough water and if that water will be clean and safe now and into the future. As a result, some communities are taking action and seeking to have greater influence over land- and water-use decisions made in their home watersheds.

The Cowichan River watershed on Vancouver Island is one example. Reduced snowpack and dry summers result in almost year-long low-water levels in this Canadian Heritage River. Some years, salmon have had to be captured and trucked upstream to where water levels can sustain them.

Citizens have become so concerned about their river almost running dry each summer that they have begun questioning the rules governing the infrastructure that controls the amount of water flowing from Cowichan Lake into the river.

Developing solutions to highly complex water issues requires a collaborative approach. In the Cowichan, local government, industry and Cowichan Tribes came together to create the Cowichan Watershed Board to better connect citizens with important water decisions. Together, they have developed watershed plans and strategies to engage different water users and decision-makers on choices about land and water use.

Last spring, B.C. passed its new Water Sustainability Act. The act introduces much-needed groundwater licensing (including pricing for some larger users), some protections for environmental flows (to keep fish alive and thriving in rivers), and the potential for shared decision-making between First Nations and local and provincial governments, with water-stewardship organizations and others.

Many details of the act still need to be worked out in regulations, but not all B.C. communities are waiting to take action. In places like the drought-prone Okanagan and the freshwater-scarce Gulf Islands, water-stewardship groups are already exploring new approaches for managing water resources.

Researchers at the University of Victoria are tracking these developments to understand the opportunities and challenges these communities face. Many water-stewardship groups struggle to find long-term funding to support their activities. In an era of shrinking government budgets and shifting priorities of major donors, securing sustainable funding to support the capacity of watershed groups is a challenge.

One of the few sectors that has sufficient funds to support community stewardship groups is industry. Therefore, many firms involved in resource extraction have the potential to make positive financial contributions to the watersheds in which they operate.

But too often, community stewardship groups and watershed boards do not want their efforts to be associated with private interests, or those that do accept are accused of being "bought off" by corporate interests. So, questions remain about how best to fund the involvement and engagement of different groups in decision-making processes.

Research findings also make it loud and clear that First Nations are demonstrating leadership and vision with regard to how

water is governed. This is true, whether looking at Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island, the Ktunaxa Nation in the Kootenays, the Fort Nelson First Nation in the Horn River Basin or the Tsilhqot'in Nation in the Chilcotin.

But, unfortunately, this leadership and vision are not widely recognized across the province — or across Canada.

Although many of Canada's rivers, lakes and wetlands are feeling the consequences of development, there are promising early signs of a shift. New and innovative ways of governing freshwater are emerging, as seen in the Cowichan. These achievements, big and small, must be celebrated.

This Sunday is World Water Day and, in honour of our aquatic heritage, Canadians have turned this celebration into a week-long event: Canada Water Week. This week, citizens and organizations across the country will applaud the many leaders who are blazing the trail in drawing attention to critical freshwater issues and taking action to ensure healthy, clean water now and for future generations.

Numerous studies show Canadians care deeply about their water. We can all take action: Volunteer with your local Streamkeepers organization, discuss water issues with your community to raise awareness or talk to your elected politicians and community leaders about the importance of healthy lakes, rivers and wetlands.

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As part of Canada Water Week, they helped organize a free screening Thursday of *Cold Amazon*, a film that explores the massive Mackenzie River basin. A discussion featuring MP Elizabeth May, and Michele-Lee Moore and Oliver M. Brandes of the University of Victoria will follow. The event begins at 6:30 p.m., Room 105, UVic's Harry Hickman Building, Room 105. More details: [poliswaterproject.org/story/798](http://poliswaterproject.org/story/798)

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