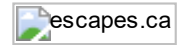


B.C. government criticized for water-rates 'flip-flop'

After promising a review, Liberals will stand pat with \$2.25 per million litres charge when new act becomes law in January

BY DAN FUMANO, THE PROVINCE NOVEMBER 15, 2015



Liz McDowell, Campaigns Director for SumOfUs.org, Emma Pullman, Larry Commodore, community advisor from Water Wealth and Ian Stephen, left to right deliver a 225,000 name petition to Environment Minister Mary Polak's constituency office in Langley, B.C. Wednesday July 15, 2015. The petition was asking the B.C. government to review corporate water rates and protect Canada's water supply by setting fair rates on groundwater extraction.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, PNG

The B.C. government will stand pat on its previously announced plan to charge large-scale industrial water users and water bottling companies \$2.25 per million litres, four months after Premier Christy Clark promised to review the rates.

In February, the provincial government unveiled a new water pricing structure that will, for the first time in B.C.'s history, charge corporations and industries that use groundwater.

Outrage about the price structure, from the public and the opposition NDP, built steadily over the following months.

[One online petition](#) attracted more than 225,000 signatures from citizens calling on the government to stop allowing "corporate freeloaders from extracting our water for next to nothing."

In July, Clark replied to a question about the petition, saying: "We are going to go back and look at

the pricing for the big water bottlers in the province and make sure that that's appropriate. What we've heard is people say they don't think it's appropriate."

The same day, Environment Minister Mary Polak also acknowledged the petition, and said: "I've asked my staff to take a look at the concerns that we've been hearing and see if there's any way we can address that in the rate structure."

Last week, responding to an inquiry from The Province, a Ministry of Environment spokesman confirmed that when B.C.'s Water Sustainability Act (WSA) comes into effect on Jan. 1, they will use the previously announced rate structure of \$2.25 per million litres.

When The Province passed that information on to NDP environment critic Spencer Chandra Herbert last week, he said he was "surprised" and "very disappointed."

"I feel as bamboozled as the public that cheered when (Clark) said she was going to act," said Chandra Herbert, who hoped the review promised in July would lead to increased rates before Jan. 1.

In an email last week to The Province, the Ministry of Environment spokesman said the government "acknowledges the public concerns about the new water fees and rental rates. The new rates were established following a detailed review of water pricing that included the principle of cost recovery — that the new fees and rentals would recover the costs of implementing the WSA including groundwater regulation."

Over the WSA's first year of implantation, the government "will be monitoring the actual costs of delivery and will be further reviewing the rates it charges for water at that time," said the spokesman.

Chandra Herbert said: "It seems to be, at least to me, a pretty big flip-flop.

"In July under intense public pressure, with massive petitions, and people demanding action, the government said they would act," he said. "Now we're in November, and nothing of the sort."

Chandra Herbert criticized the government for what he described as "classic B.C. Liberals' modus operandi."

"When the public is outraged, you mouth the words claiming you get it, and then hope they forget about it, and then delete all evidence it ever happened," he said.

Liz McDowell, campaigns director at SumOfUs.org, started the online petition that drew hundreds of thousands of signatures and caught the attention of Clark and Polak in the summer.

Upon learning that the rates would not change before Jan. 1, McDowell said: "If this is the case, it is very disappointing that the government has sided with industrial users like Nestlé and is refusing to protect our water."

McDowell said she will continue to encourage the government to review and adjust the rates, adding: "We will be holding the government to their word on this."

The issue of funding the WSA is at the heart of a new report released Monday by a group of four experts from the University of Victoria.

The report, “Awash with Opportunity: Ensuring the Sustainability of B.C.’s New Water Law,” says one of two critical “prerequisites” for the success of the WSA is ensuring sustainable funding for resources.

Co-author Oliver Brandes, leader of the UVic’s [POLIS Water Sustainability Project](#), said: “Water rates and rentals will be a critical part of those resources and will ensure the province has the ability to get the science right, to ensure on the ground monitoring and reporting, innovative planning and governance, and critically invest in the necessary protection and enforcement for water for fish, nature and communities.”

Brandes said he commends the provincial government for committing to review the rates during the WSA’s first year, and said: “This is a good first step, however it is obvious that more will be needed to ensure sufficient resources to fully implement the new legislation.”

Brandes encourages the government to conduct a thorough review of the WSA’s revenues and costs as early as next summer, and adjust the pricing as needed.

“Those benefiting from the use of B.C.’s waters need to pay for this privilege,” Brandes said. “Continuing to review the water rentals pricing is the only way to ensure B.C. is not parched for resources to get the job done, on the ground and in the water.”

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A TIMELINE OF BC’S WATER PRICING:

APRIL 2014: [Water Sustainability Act replaces 105-year-old law, with pricing to be announced later](#)

FEB 2015: BC unveils new water pricing structure

MARCH 2015: [Public outrage builds over water pricing](#)

JULY 2015: Petition calling for water pricing review delivered to Environment Minister’s office

JULY 2015: [Government responds to outrage, promises to review water pricing](#)

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