

[Home](#) / [Policy & Politics](#) / California's Dry Advice

California's Dry Advice

BY [Laura Brandes](#)

Dec 2015 | [Out of the Box 41.5](#)

Categories: [Water](#) - [Energy Policy](#) - [Climate Change](#) - [Best Practices](#)



Photo via [Shutterstock](#)

DROUGHT CAN BE SCARY, and there's no doubt that recent headlines about the potentially cataclysmic drought in California has us all a little uneasy. Groundwater has long been California's "safety net" in times of drought, but so much groundwater has been taken that land is sinking under people's feet, and aquifers are at serious risk of being depleted (if they aren't already).

It's difficult to believe that up until last year, when and where wells were drilled, and how much could be pumped from them was basically unregulated in most of California.

Prior to last year, British Columbia also did not regulate its groundwater. In fact, it was the only province in Canada without any groundwater regulations. In 2014, however, both BC and California passed legislation to address this problem: the [Water Sustainability Act](#) and the [Sustainable Groundwater Management Act](#), respectively. BC's act is not yet in force, but will be by 2016. This new legislation provides real opportunities to better manage groundwater use in the province, and the provincial government is currently drafting the first regulations for pumping and allocating groundwater under the act.

New research from the University of Victoria's POLIS Project on Ecological Governance and Ecojustice shows that British Columbia can learn valuable lessons from its neighbours to the south as it drafts its new groundwater regulations. It's rare for two jurisdictions with this level of similarity to be undergoing such significant changes at the same time, and there are some really rich learning opportunities that simply cannot be ignored.

1. Local planning and control are important, but take time – so start now.
2. Voluntary programs are not good enough when water supplies start to run dry.
3. Watershed or aquifer plans must have clearly defined minimum performance standards, timelines, and accountability for local decisionmaking bodies.

Randy Christensen and Oliver M. Brandes' new report [California's Oranges and BC's Apples?](#) Lessons for BC from California Groundwater Reform analyzed California's legislation while taking into account the climatic, social and legal differences between the state and province. They say that by employing a proactive approach and learning from California, BC can avoid a crisis situation.

One big insight for BC is that local planning and control are important, but they take time – generally measured in decades. As such, it is critical that local groundwater planning in BC start now, even though it is not yet required in the new legislation.

Other important lessons include the fact that voluntary programs – even those with the best of intentions – simply are not good enough when water supplies start to run dry. Having binding plans is critical. Any watershed or aquifer plans that are put into place must have clearly defined minimum performance standards, timelines, and accountability for local decisionmaking bodies. The California drought offers a genuine glimpse into what could be the future for some of BC's watersheds and regions. The good news, though, is that it's not too late. Over the next few years, BC will be developing the necessary regulations to create and enforce measures that are desperately needed to protect our water. BC has the rare and positive opportunity to avoid California's errors and benefit from its successes. But the province must act now because when a water crisis hits, it will already be too late.