



Oliver Brandes and Rosie Simms: The time for water security is now

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The Water Sustainability Act, which is now over five years old, needs to be moved from good ideas on paper to action to protect lakes, rivers, streams and aquifers across the province. Photo by Maureen Garrity /THE CANADIAN PRESS

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The fact that water is vital is indisputable. Yet, water is often “out of sight, out of mind” as a political priority – and, as a result, communities are bearing growing costs from droughts, floods, fires, contamination, and watershed degradation.

The [\\$27 million](#) in provincial stimulus spending dedicated to healthy watersheds and communities provides an important early spark of change. Communities will see many benefits from dollars flowing to watershed projects, including new jobs as boots hit the ground, restored waterways, and strengthened partnerships. While certainly on the right track, the real transformative benefit of bold action on water goes beyond this initial infusion of money.

The B.C. government is approaching its first 100 days into the new mandate – an important milestone where we see early indications of how the political winds will blow. The many watershed security promises are certainly good and lay a solid foundation, but now is the time for action to lock in the real potential of this mandate.

Drawing on decades of experience supporting watershed governance and water law reform, our team at the University of Victoria’s POLIS Water Sustainability Project identifies the critical actions for the provincial government to initiate now to successfully realize its lasting vision of watershed security.

Overall, we warn against the dangers of getting stuck in a process trap. B.C. does not need to spend years developing a strategy, only for

implementation to be further delayed. Provincial action on urgent watershed protection and sustainability priorities must happen now, complementing the necessary deeper planning and engagement to roll out a sophisticated strategy.

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A first immediate priority for government is finishing the work of the Water Sustainability Act, which is now over five years old and only barely implemented. The Act urgently needs to be moved from “good ideas on paper” to action to protect lakes, rivers, streams and aquifers across the province. This starts by finishing the long-promised groundwater licensing and water planning and flow protection that better balances water for nature, fish, and communities.

Drinking water source protection is another obvious area requiring attention. It's 2021 – no community should have to live without reliable access to clean water. Yet, many rural and Indigenous communities across the province continue to fear for the safety of their drinking water, with massive implications to health, quality of life, and prosperity. A mountain of recent independent expert reports – including from the auditor-general – outline “grave concern” with existing drinking water protections and offer direction and solutions. The main conclusion? Many drinking water problems can be avoided entirely with some basic planning and follow-through on promises already made.

As the stimulus funding demonstrates, without dedicated resources, watershed projects simply don't get off the ground. Creating an independent Watershed Security Fund – as committed to in mandates – is the only way to sustain the necessary work on the ground. The benefits from infusing funds in local watershed approaches are legion – jobs for rural communities, leveraged local capacity and expertise, restoring damaged wetlands and riparian areas, and ensuring

protection, planning and conflict resolution to avoid spiralling future costs.

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B.C. is not starting a watershed security approach from scratch. Water brings people together, and B.C. has many assets and opportunities already in place. British Columbians have always understood the importance of water – and now political commitments have caught up with community priorities.

The time is right to demonstrate the serious commitment to a water future different from the past. This requires a mix of courageous early action to break the logjam of inertia, and sustained attention to support communities and people to succeed in protecting, restoring, and governing their home waters today and for future generations.

Oliver Brandes is the associate director at the University of Victoria's Centre for Global Studies and co-director of the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance. He led the minister-appointed independent expert provincial review of source water protection in the Hullcar Valley in 2017; Rosie Simms is a researcher and project manager at the POLIS Water Sustainability Project. They co-authored Watershed Security Agenda for British Columbia, which provides focus for the next mandate of the provincial government to ensure a prosperous, resilient, and secure future for water and watersheds in B.C. (The report is available [here](#)).

