

Opinion: A future different from the past, B.C. needs a ministry that puts watershed security and communities first

Opinion: A proponent-driven provincial Forests and Lands Ministry for too long has put the public interest in healthy watersheds behind short-term economic gains in an extraction-focused model for resource management.

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Metro Vancouver's watershed at Capilano Regional Park in North Vancouver. Photo by Arlen Redekop /PNG files

Fires, floods, droughts, and contaminated drinking water. The four horsemen of the water apocalypse are increasingly common and have become a sad reality in B.C.

And this reality is here to stay. As global carbon emissions continue to rise, the dual climate and water security crises will only intensify.

Despite claims of being “supernatural,” trouble is mounting in B.C.’s waters. From Vernon to Peachland to Shawnigan, the province is marked by conflicts in which communities are trying to protect drinking water sources from the negative impacts of logging, water bottling, contaminated soil dumps, mining, and all manner of other activities at odds with good watershed health and security.

No one single actor or driver is to blame. These conflicts stem from a toxic mix of outdated and status quo approaches to land and water management that have resulted in neglect on the landscape, poor resource extraction and development practices, ever-shrinking government capacity to get the work done, and limited use and enforcement of legislation like the Water Sustainability Act.

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At the helm is a proponent-driven provincial Forests and Lands Ministry that for too long has put the public interest in healthy watersheds behind short-term economic gains in an extraction-focused model for resource management. The recent and ongoing protests in the Fairy Creek watershed — in the premier’s own riding — to protect old growth from ministry-approved permits are just one manifestation of this systemic conflict.

Its very name, the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development, shows just how unwieldy this ministry has become. In the past decade it has overseen both the rapidly accelerating loss of natural capital and the erosion of public confidence in the provincial government as a sustainable land manager.

The current government promises to do better, with a long list of commitments to develop provincial strategies, plans, and initiatives meant to signal a new approach to stewardship and a new, innovative path toward economic recovery. Commitments include a real emphasis on reconciliation; strategies for salmon, protecting biodiversity, and watershed security; the creation of a watershed security fund; and modernizing land use planning.

Buried in these many promises is a potential game-changer: a commitment to review and reorganize the FLNRORD Ministry to create better outcomes on the landscape and to ensure a more integrated approach to sustainable resource management.

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One option is to put forestry back in its own ministry while creating a new, integrated sustainable resource management ministry from the balance of the existing ministry — a Ministry of Oceans and Watersheds has a nice ring to it! This would allow government to find a new balance between a resilient economy, strengthened conservation and biodiversity, and reconciliation with Indigenous governments.

This type of organizational — and ultimately system — change will not just be a matter of reshuffling existing staff. An effective new ministry requires a new budget, as well as staff with the sophisticated skills needed to work in the context of deep reconciliation and integrated management that puts watershed security as a central crosscutting priority.

The new ministry should be designed to work across all existing government ministries, breaking down silos to ensure multiple values — beyond economic extraction — help drive the changes in practice needed.

The fires, floods, droughts, contaminated drinking water — and changing social values — will keep coming. We cannot stop this, but we can reduce the risk by organizing our response a whole lot better. A new ministry that takes this kind of integrated view will not only be good for the long-term economic outlook of British Columbia, but also for keeping watersheds and communities secure and thriving.

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