

# Opinion: B.C. needs to prove water matters

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A Gitanyow environmental scientist conducts hydrology surveys using an acoustic Doppler current profiler on the Cranberry River. The project is in Gitanyow Territory, led by the Gitanyow Fisheries Authority and supported by the Indigenous Watersheds Initiative. Photo: Mark Cleveland and Dustin Grey/Gitanyow Fisheries Authority

May you live in interesting times. This phrase is often interpreted as both a blessing and a curse. And we are currently facing some very interesting times indeed: economic warfare, sovereignty threats, droughts, floods, wildfires, and greedy and power-hungry forces eyeing

our home waters in B.C.

Last month, Finance Minister Brenda Bailey announced B.C. Budget 2025. Released amid the mounting storm of U.S. tariffs, it came as no surprise that this year's budget is focused less on spending and more on fiscal restraint. Priority budget areas include strengthening and diversifying the B.C. economy, while providing services needed on the front lines in communities — as well as a very healthy contingency fund to help deal with the wild range of potential uncertainties ahead.

Sadly, Budget 2025 has no direct investments in watershed security. Despite the current economic instability, this lack of spending is a real concern.

Water can't be an add-on or a "nice-to-have" — prioritized some years and forgotten in others.

Across ancient wisdoms, water is respected as the source of life. Water is fundamental to all the current issues of our times.

Through a contemporary economic lens, healthy water and watersheds are the backbone of economic prosperity in B.C. We need water for agriculture, health care, forestry, mining, manufacturing, tourism, energy production and, perhaps most importantly, community health and wealth. And the watershed sector — the thousands of people working to support the maintenance, restoration or improvement of healthy watersheds in B.C. — is critical to all of this.

In these troubled times, we must double down on what is most important locally: Investing in protecting our water and watersheds creating jobs, building resilience for the uncertainty ahead, and bringing peace of mind and some stability to our communities.

Water must always be a priority.

In 2021, the [full economic impact](#) of B.C.'s watershed sector was mapped for the first time. It contributes about 47,900 jobs and \$5 billion annually to the B.C. economy. These are substantial numbers, representing a sector larger than agriculture with significant potential to grow.

Climate adaptation and resilience, security, economic recovery, public health (including safe drinking water), wild salmon and biodiversity protection, and reconciliation are all clear government mandates and are some of the most urgent priorities it will need to tackle. Emphasizing and valuing water will be fundamental to success.

Water as a provincial priority has been growing in recent years. A new B.C. water ministry was created in 2022, early efforts are underway to use key water legislation to fuller potential, and the province has made initial commitments to work better with communities to help address droughts and floods.

In March 2023, the provincial government also made a significant step forward with the launch of the \$100 million Watershed Security Fund. This fund was established through collaboration between the province and the B.C.-First Nations Water Table. This is historic and has real potential to grow.

However, since the launch of the fund, water champions across B.C. have articulated how this must only be the start. The fund needs more money to be effective over the long-term. For example, the most recent round of granting was oversubscribed by six to one. Over \$30 million in viable projects went unfunded — projects that can produce good local

jobs and have significant watershed security impacts.

Beyond bolstering the Watershed Security Fund, many other important water investments are also needed.

Investing in good local water management will buffer us against threats from the south. Government must prioritize ensuring that communities are resilient and empowered. This means having local expertise, resources and, critically, collaboration across levels of government and with community leaders to create and implement local solutions.

The province also needs to complete foundational work to ensure groundwater is effectively regulated; that an effective provincial plan and legislative tools are ready to respond to droughts and floods; that source drinking water is protected; that we have monitoring and information systems to understand the state of our watersheds; and that a system of watershed boards is in place across the province to enhance local partnerships and make critical local decisions.

All of this costs money, yes. But, more importantly, all of this will also create positive watershed impacts and local jobs that will yield a significant return on investment.

Even in the face of uncertainty, we must continue the hard and rewarding work of respecting and prioritizing water by creating local solutions and new collaborative approaches to decision-making. In terms of provincial budgeting, this means keeping healthy water and watersheds high on the agenda, even in — perhaps especially in — the midst of economic warfare and fiscal restraint.

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