

Freshwater Declaration

Freshwater Expert Roundtable, Global Issues Project, 8-9 Nov 2008

Freshwater, a critical and limited element, is the very basis of ecosystem health and of Canada's social and economic security. Water sustains life. It has a deeply spiritual association both within and outside of all our religious and aboriginal communities. It defines our national identity. But, Canadians have taken it for granted.

We are noticing changes to this precious natural renewable resource. Freshwater shortages are becoming more common, mighty glaciers are disappearing, and pollution problems are worsening. We see disturbing alterations to the landscapes of our northern regions; lakes and rivers are polluted or otherwise threatened. The mistreatment of our water resources jeopardizes the health of our citizens, threatens our country's magnificent biodiversity, and places the well-being of our nation at risk. Many aboriginal communities endure conditions of Third-World poverty; their drinking water remains under indefinite boil-water advisories. We fail the test of sustainability by overuse and abuse of freshwater in many regions. In some parts of Canada, natural systems have reached a crossroad, beyond which recovery may not be possible.

We can restore life to our threatened lakes and rivers and groundwater, generate innovative solutions to our water problems, protect the health of our citizens, and build social and economic prosperity, but only on the foundation of healthy functioning freshwater ecosystems. To accomplish all this, we must have strong and enlightened governance. Canadians will have to work together. From all levels of our government we require leadership that empowers and enables local action coordinated at regional and national scales. Further, Canada must, in its own self-interest, work internationally to alleviate the global water crisis.

THE MAIN CHALLENGES

- Freshwater governance in Canada is severely fragmented, and uncoordinated between levels of government
- Water governance is not attentive to ecological foundations
- Freshwater is at risk due to erosion of science policy, severe reduction in programs of research and data collection; and diminished emphasis on regulatory safeguards and formal oversight
- There is a communication problem between scientists and elected members of parliament, largely because of their very different backgrounds; this culture gap must be bridged for Canada to prosper in an age where decisions must be informed by good science
- There is no clear role for citizens in freshwater governance or sufficient support for the role of citizen's watershed conservation groups
- The Canadian climate is changing rapidly and this will have significant consequences for the water cycle and freshwater resource management
- Globally, Canada shares in a collective responsibility for access to clean water and sanitation

MEETING THE CHALLENGES

WE CALL UPON ALL GOVERNMENTS IN CANADA TO:

- transcend the jurisdictional barriers that have impeded progress
- give priority to participatory management and governance of freshwater resources, engaging municipalities, aboriginal governments, key stakeholders, and civil society
- utilize known options for reducing freshwater use, establishing these as normal practices

- manage risk to help our adaptation to rapid climate change, population increase and urban growth, thus protecting our economic and social well-being
- begin a broader dialogue to develop a unifying vision for a **CANADA-WIDE FRESHWATER STRATEGY**, founded on key principles: **a conservation ethic, putting citizens at the centre, water as a public trust, and watershed thinking**

Water must be a public trust, and not a commodity. The traditional “hard” approach seeks to manipulate natural systems. Watershed boundaries seldom coincide with political boundaries. Watershed based management and decision making would recognize healthy ecosystem function as insurance that nature will continue to provide critical ecological goods and services for society; it would appreciate the complex interactions that occur between the natural hydrological system and human activities. We should satisfy human, agricultural and industrial needs through efficiency, reclamation, and conservation. It is the mandate of governments to protect and preserve freshwater resources for the needs and enjoyment of **all** Canadians.

WE CALL UPON THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO:

Fulfil federal responsibilities by giving priority to the following actions:

- **Protect human health** — enforce drinking water protection across Canada
- **Stimulate a blue economy** — link funding for freshwater and wastewater infrastructure to plans that incorporate conservation, efficiency, and innovation
- **Manage transboundary water issues effectively** — protect the long-term interests of Canada; be aware of and manage “virtual” export of water
- **Keep water in place** — prohibit bulk water removals from Canada’s water basins
- **Protect ecosystems; strengthen regulatory frameworks** — develop effective frameworks to protect and maintain the water needs of nature. Develop a federal freshwater policy that is integrated with the **CANADA-WIDE FRESHWATER STRATEGY**
- **Respect aboriginal peoples** — honour aboriginal water rights
- **Improve knowledge** — invest in science and monitoring; bring climate change adaptation into the mainstream of water policies
- **Re-establish Canadian leadership in international water research and monitoring** — maintain and strengthen Canada’s role in UN agencies; restore Canada’s past status as a centre for world-class water research
- **Engage provinces** in co-operative reform of freshwater resources management, founded on evolving eco-social hydrological understanding
- **Direct its foreign aid** to ameliorate freshwater crises abroad, in the self-interest of Canadians, and as our global responsibility
- **Internationally, promote** the concept of water as a public trust, whereby equity of distribution is essential to fulfil basic personal and domestic needs

WE CALL UPON CANADA’S PREMIERS AND PROVINCIAL/TERRITORIAL PARLIAMENTARIANS TO:

Show leadership and cooperation by building on existing efforts within the context of a pan-Canadian freshwater strategy

- together with the federal government, create nested watershed frameworks for Canada’s five major river basins
- **respond** to the climate change crisis by creating a Canada-wide freshwater conservation plan that includes drought preparedness and flood protection plans; **promote** water soft-path activities; **plan** source protection, water supply assessment, monitoring and reporting, education and outreach

PARTICIPANTS WHO VOTED TO ENDORSE THE STATEMENT:

Oliver Brandes, Director, POLIS Project on Ecological Governance, University of Victoria

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Gordon Young, Ph.D., Former Coordinator, United Nations World Water Assessment Programme and President-Elect, International Association of Hydrological Sciences

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