

## **A Canadian National Water Strategy: Building a Common Path Towards Integrated Water Resource Management**

### ***Introduction***

There are significant concerns about current and future availability and quality of water in Canada. A review of academic and policy writing on the subject of Canadian water governance indicates that despite ongoing recognition of this problem, little progress has occurred. This crisis has been attributed to:

- Different and competing values and understandings of water (e.g., a commodity, a heritage, human right) and the failure of the federal government to negotiate these differences (Muldoon and McClenaghan, 2007).
- Constitutional uncertainty, jurisdictional fragmentation and a lack of federal leadership. The most current federal policy is over 20 years old (EC, 1987), was never implemented, and is no longer sufficient (Muldoon and McLenachan, 2007, p 247).
- The myth of abundance (Bakker, 2007) and an ethic of limitless supply (Sandford, 2007).

This paper sets out the nature and content of a Water Strategy for Canada aimed to address the current crisis in Canadian Water governance. Given that past efforts at water policy reform have failed to bring about change (e.g., the 1985 inquiry on federal water policy), what can we do differently today? We argue that we must look elsewhere in the global context for innovative approaches, and to the strengths we have. The process of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) is one such method used with some effectiveness in the European Union Water Framework Directive (EUWFD) (EUROPA, 2007).

Drawing on lessons learned from the EUWFD we recommend a multi-stakeholder approach, based on the principle of subsidiarity with harmonization to nationally established standards. All levels of government (federal, provincial, territorial, Aboriginal, municipal), NGOs, research communities, water use sectors, and individuals have a role to play in: (1) building and maintaining momentum for a strategy; (2) shaping the strategy; and (3) implementing the strategy.

This paper begins with a discussion of the need to build momentum for change among all levels of government, civil society, and at the individual level. It then turns to discussions about the principles, goals, targets, and the process to achieve these.

### ***Building Momentum for Change***

Numerous non-profit organizations, academics, and concerned citizens have called for a national water strategy (Brandes et al., 2005; Morris et al., 2007; Sandford, 2007; Sierra Club of Canada). A united voice calling for an immediate federal inquiry into the state of Canada's water governance is urgently required to force water issues onto the policy agenda and to build momentum and awareness.

A national water strategy also requires a shift in Canadian ethic from limitless supply to conservation and value (Sandford, 2007). This shift depends on the effective transfer of institutional knowledge into public values, which in turn, influences policy decisions. A schematic of this transfer is provided as Figure 1 in the Appendix.

The challenge lies in the kick-start and maintenance of this process. Individuals (e.g. planners and other water professionals) who can bridge the gap between scientific research and public education play an important role. Knowledge can then be transferred into public policy decisions that lead to effective action (Sandford, 2007).

### ***Principles and Goals of a National Strategy***

A National Strategy requires clear guiding principles. The 1985 Federal Water Inquiry set out principles of water resource management, endorsed at the federal level, which are still relevant today (Pearse et al, 1985, p.8). Subsequent policy work has pointed to the importance of urban, market and behavioural changes (Brandes et al, 2007). Guiding principles should be:

- Pollution prevention and precautionary principles;
- Ecosystem based management –adapt socio-economic systems to fit ecosystem;
- Subsidiarity for water management responsibility (watershed level) with federal harmonization.
- Adaptive management
- An ethic of conservation (demand side management)
- The soft path (behavioural change)
- Broad participation in transparent governance
- Respect for Aboriginal rights

Broad goals (e.g., safe secure drinking water supply, healthy aquatic ecosystems, reliable quality water supplies for a sustainable economy) should be determined through a robust consultation process as part of a national water inquiry.

### ***A Nested Approach: National Water Council and River Basin Councils***

Canada lacks the necessary institutions to adequately develop and manage a National Strategy. The Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment has been largely ineffective, in part because it lacks enforcement authority (Muldoon and McClenaghan, 2007). Many provinces do have watershed based planning policies (e.g., Alberta's Water for Life Strategy), and agencies (e.g., Mackenzie River Basin Board) but there are inconsistencies and gaps (Bakker, 2007 p. 362). A multi-stakeholder National Water Council, with real authority, and with representation from all levels of government, Aboriginal government, NGOs and water sectors would:

1. Oversee and fund River Basin and watershed-planning agencies/management plans;
2. Set and enforce standards; and
3. Coordinate nation-wide monitoring.

### ***Key Targets in the National Water Strategy***

The National Water Council, in consultation with Canadians, should establish priority targets. Table 1 in the Appendix sets out key Canadian Water Management targets (Brandes et al, 2007). The targets are:

- Ecosystem based water allocation;
- Aquatic ecosystem protection;
- Innovative urban water management;
- Demand-side management;
- National drinking water legislation; and
- Watershed governance.

The practices/mechanisms needed to achieve these targets are listed in the second column of the table. Ultimately, shifts in public values and ethics will be the driving force behind policy changes. These are listed in column three. Successful progress on a National Strategy requires:

- Skilful negotiation between the federal and provincial governments;
- Leadership and innovation within the scientific community;
- Strong political leadership at all levels of governance; and
- Robust ongoing federal funding.

Setting timelines to reach targets is crucial to successful implementation. The success of the EUWFD has been attributed to the phased, long term, [timetable for implementation](#) with regular mandatory reporting on progress (Kaika, 2003). An implementation timeline for Canada is set out in Table 2 in the appendix.

### ***Conclusion***

An attempt has been made to identify and respond to Canada's water challenge in a thousand words. This was superbly challenging, but we hope we have raised some points that you agree with and maybe some that you don't – key ingredients for a discussion!

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