

What Should Be the Nature and Content of a National Water Strategy for Canada?



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I. Identify the Unique Problems and Challenges Facing Canada

For Canada to develop an appropriate national water strategy it must first identify the problems that exist and the issues it seeks to address. Only when these are clearly defined, can a proper strategy be proposed. It is likely that some principles of national water management strategy apply generally across the board. However, some specific principles may be more appropriate to certain countries. So in order to develop an appropriate national strategy, Canada must first identify its specific problems, and select the specific management principles to meet these challenges.

Many researchers agree that Canada lacks a national strategy to address urgent water issues (Council of Canadians, p.1; Sierra Club Canada, p.1). The Federal water policy in place is old and badly outdated (Council of Canadians, p.1). The following factors contribute in some way to this situation.

Canadian geography and the country's political structure give rise to part of the problem. The country is huge, with a tremendous amount of water resources in comparison to most other countries. This gives rise to a myth of overabundance of water (Sierra Club, p. 1; POLIS, p.ii). This belief hinders efforts to develop an effective, meaningful national water strategy. Even more, the water resources are not evenly distributed throughout the country, with each region or locality facing unique challenges in water resource management.

Canada's political structure is fragmented. Jurisdiction is split between the federal and provincial governments. Comprehensive water resource management crosses jurisdictions, involving multiple resources and programs. An effective national water policy must be able to deal with these jurisdictional issues.

II. The Approach (IWRM)

While every nation is unique, there are certain principles of water resources management that can be applied to most every situation. These are embodied in the concept of Integrated Water Resources Management. The four water management principles of IWRM principles are as follows:

- Fresh water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment.
- Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policymakers at all levels.

- Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.
- Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good (IWRM Principles).

These principles should be considered as a framework by Canada in developing a national water strategy. Certain aspects of these principles are more appropriate, depending on the unique aspects of each country. However as a general guide, they can provide a very effective process for developing a national water strategy.

III. Some Strategies for Canada

A. Identify federal responsibilities

A Canadian national water strategy is not solely a federal responsibility. All levels of government, and other members and groups of civil society have a role. However, the federal government has express constitutional powers over many aspects of water resource management and other powers over other issues that can impact water management strategies.

A water policy and action agenda could be framed on two tiers. The first would be the adoption of a common set of principles with the provinces, such as water is a human right, a public trust and a sovereign responsibility to protect. The second tier would be federal action in areas where the federal government has primary jurisdiction (Council of Canadians, p.2).

For instance, the federal government has direct constitutional powers relating to fisheries, shipping, First Nations and matters of national concern. It also has indirect powers to influence national health policies, manage pollution, and oversee environmental assessments (Gordon, p. 23). The federal government can use its powers to assist the provinces and local governments in adopting and implementing a national strategy for water resource management (POLIS, p. iii.). Examples may be a national investment strategy, or funding mechanisms, that enable municipalities or First Nations communities to upgrade infrastructure (Council of Canadians, p.2).

B. Valuing Water

A key component of a national water strategy is promoting a culture of water conservation. (IWRM; Gordon, p.19). Through financial and legal incentives, the federal government can pursue policies towards reducing demand, and educating the public on the finite supplies of water. Understanding the true value of water can lead to better management practices and conservation.

C. Watershed Approach

Sustainable water management should be ecosystem based, with water management to occurring at the watershed level (POLIS, p. iv). Managing water resources at the watershed or basin level develops policies and plans that address basin-wide problems (POLIS, p. iv). Presently, most water resource management occurs at a local level, or is project specific, resulting in a fragmented, piece-meal approach to the resource rather than treating it as a complete system.

D. Water and Health

Protection of public health is a paramount obligation of the government. Clean drinking water is a fundamental aspect of public health. A national water policy should include national standards for drinking water quality (Council of Canadians, p.2).

One of the IWRM principles proposes that women play a central role in managing and safeguarding water. That principle could be applied in Canada to rural areas and First Nations communities. The problem of poor drinking water is most acute in First Nations communities (Sierra Club Canada, p.1). Drinking water standards should be a primary emphasis of a national water strategy.

E. Climate Change and Energy

A viable national water strategy should address the uncertainty of climate change. The timing, flow and availability of water may vary from what communities are experiencing today. Different regions may face different challenges, but education and a stable adaptive management approach should come from a national strategy. Similarly, future energy production and demand, coupled with climate change, will strain Canada's water resources in ways that may be undetermined at this point. A national water strategy must address this concern.

F. Necessary and Effective Legislation

Canada should ensure that appropriate legislation is in place to effectively address current and future water resource challenges.

G. Participatory Transparent Decision-Making

Notwithstanding the existence of a national strategy, many decisions on water resource management will continue to be made at all levels of government. The national water strategy should recognize this, and ensure that the process is inclusive and equitable, and still incorporates important terms and principles of IWRM.

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