



# Water for Sustainability

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## Issue

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce is concerned about how best to deal with the significant pressures Alberta is facing on its water resources, both surface and ground water. There are ever-increasing demands for the water resource. The limits of available water have been reached in the southern portion of the province, and concerns are rising about the adequacy of water resources to support continued economic development in the northern part of the province.

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## Background

The past several years have provided us with numerous examples of the need for better water management throughout Canada. The floods, the droughts, the pollution problems in Canada's rivers and lakes, the waterborne infectious diseases, the issue of water exports, the variability of our climate and the impact of man's activities on the climate all speak to the need for federal, provincial and municipal governments to develop appropriate and integrated strategies for managing one of our most precious resources. Towards this end, and to sustain quality of life, healthy water quality and economic well-being, the Canadian Water Resources Association (CWRA) has circulated "sustainability principles" for water resources management. In addition, CWRA has also created a roadmap report titled *Toward a Canadian National Water Strategy*, illustrating a method to develop a Canada-wide water strategy.

Historically and economically Canada has been shaped by our waterways and infrastructure. The benefits we have derived from water are diverse. Canada has more lakes than any other country. We have more water per capita than any other large country. Unfortunately we tend to take water for granted and undervalue it. Canada's per capita water withdrawals are among the highest in the world, and twice as much as the average European.

Despite the fact that Canada possesses nine per cent of the world's fresh water supply, Canada is not necessarily a water-rich country. Viewed globally, Canada's land mass is proportional to its water supply. Approximately 60 per cent of Canada's fresh water drains north, while 90 per cent of our population lives within 300 km of the 49th parallel. Recent droughts and shortages indicate the relative scarcity of water in some regions at some times of the year, and demonstrate the importance of developing strategies to minimize the adverse effects of potential future shortages.

In 1987 the federal fresh water policy was tabled in Parliament. This policy outlined five strategies: water pricing, science leadership, integrated planning, legislation and public awareness. Since 1987, water quality has become an important issue and it should be added as a sixth strategy.

It is time to revisit and update the federal water policies to identify how the federal government can better work with provinces and territories to identify and achieve common water management principles, objectives and/or outcomes, especially for watersheds that cross provincial boundaries, or whether there is a joint federal-provincial interest.

The following is a quote from a report prepared by CWRA and released in the fall of 2010:

*Recognizing the need for an integrated and over-arching national water strategy, Canada's water stewards are initiating the development of a vision-based strategy aimed at harmonizing policy and management objectives across jurisdictional divides, enhancing the effectiveness of management at all levels, selecting the priority actions requiring immediate attention and strengthening local watershed based water management to deal with these issues.*

*Sectors that are encouraging increased co-ordination, collaboration and integrated resource management include:*

- *International and bi-lateral organizations i.e., U.N., International Joint Commission, Council of Great Lakes Mayors.*
- *Federal Agencies – Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Environment Canada, Health Canada, Transport Canada, Natural Resources.*
- *National Governmental Collaborations and Councils – e.g. CCME, Federation of Canadian Municipalities.*
- *Provincial and Territorial governments and agencies.*
- *Canada's Aboriginal leadership.*
- *Watershed organizations (e.g. Watershed Authorities, River Basin Councils, Ontario Conservation Authorities).*
- *National and local non-government organizations*
- *Business, Industry and Labour Organizations and Corporate Champions.*
- *Transboundary Watershed Management – e.g. Prairie Provinces Water Board*

*Each sector is contributing independently to this National Water Agenda. It is timely to put our minds together to develop this essential overarching strategic framework or Vision of a Canada Wide Water Strategy.*

*Significant threats to water resources exist across Canada. Climate change is an emerging challenge in all parts of the country, but numerous long term problems also exist, with serious implications for Canada's environment, economy and society.*

*Canada does not currently have an overarching national water strategy that facilitates more effective responses to current and emerging challenges and threats. The benefits of having such a strategy are numerous. Examples include the following:*

- *More consistent and effective responses to concerns with national dimensions, such as water exports and climate change.*
- *Increased accountability due to broader stakeholder participation in governance.*

- *Enhanced environmental protection and a stronger foundation for economic productivity.*
- *Stronger national capacity to respond to threats and crises.*
- *Better positioning to meet growing international expectations and obligations; and*
- *Greater public acceptance and support for water management decisions.*

*The Canadian Water Resources Association (CWRA) believes that a Canada Wide Water Strategy (CWWS) is an effective way to address the water management challenges we face, and that such a strategy is within reach.*

*CWRA supports a CWWS that has the following broad characteristics:*

*A CWWS for Canada must be developed and implemented through the participation of all stakeholders. The federal government must be a full and active participant, as must all the provinces and territories. However, initial lack of participation by some provinces/territories should not preclude initiation of the process. Indigenous people should have leadership roles.*

*Common goals and principles endorsed by all participants should be at the core of a CWWS. These should be comprehensive in their scope, and should be sufficiently specific that they can guide the policies and actions of participants.”*

Water management in Alberta is guided by the *Water Act* and the Water for Life strategy. In November 2008, the Water for Life Strategy was renewed with three goals:

1. Albertans are assured that their drinking water is safe.
2. Albertans are assured that Alberta’s aquatic ecosystems are maintained and protected.
3. Albertans are assured that water is managed effectively to support sustainable economic development.

Knowledge and research is key to achieving these outcomes and the renewed strategy identifies three key directions:

1. Albertans will have access to the knowledge needed to achieve safe drinking water, healthy aquatic ecosystems, and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy.
2. Water for Life partners are empowered, informed, and fully engaged in water stewardship.
3. All sectors: understand how their behaviours impact water quality, quantity, and the health of aquatic ecosystems; adopt a “water conservation ethic”; and take action.

Water touches all of our lives and is a significant factor in the economy of all sectors, but good information about the water resource base and various uses is lacking. The development of an effective water policy and strategy can only be undertaken with full knowledge of the quantity and quality of total water supply along with comprehensive information on water use. Reporting of water uses and return flows is an essential part of adopting a watershed approach to water resource management.

The Alberta Chambers supports the goals of the renewed Water for Life strategy, especially the commitment to empower stakeholders and other Water for Life partners, in developing action plans that address the unique conditions in each of Alberta’s river basins.

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**The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends that the Government of Alberta:**

1. Continue to support implementation of the renewed Water for Life strategy and strive to be a world leader in water management, thereby setting the standard for other provinces and countries.
2. Participate in any national initiatives that bring the provinces and territories together in addressing water issues of national importance. These initiatives should be undertaken by the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment and modelled after the process used in creating Alberta's Water for Life strategy.
3. Continue work with other provinces to ensure there is consistent and effective management of watersheds that cross provincial borders, including agreement on water sharing and water quality.
4. Continue to provide expertise and financial requirements to Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils for developing and implementing water management plans for each basin and ensuring that these costs are not downloaded as primary responsibilities of municipalities:
  - a. Take a proactive role with respect to feasibility studies, infrastructure development, water supply, and conservation projects.
  - b. Support research and data collection for proper forecasting of stream flows and possible long-term flow changes, which may impact development activities in the areas of water management.
5. Encourage all federal government departments with an interest in water to participate in any activities related to the development of a Canada-wide water management strategy and to use a cross-ministry team approach to develop such a strategy.
6. Continue to communicate and promote conservation measures and watershed protection, and to increase public awareness of the water management roles and responsibilities of municipalities, irrigation districts, basin councils and watershed groups throughout the province.
7. Continue to use partnerships and provide funding that will support and promote regional, place based, stakeholder-driven solutions.