

## Water and the new business-as-usual in B.C.

Unless we act now, we will have a water crisis of our own making

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Times Colonist

*Sunday, June 15, 2008*

Here in our wet and green corner of the world, it's hard to imagine that water is emerging as a challenge that rivals climate change in significance.

Yet evidence of how the rapidly changing climate affects water abound: Droughts in the Interior, water exploding over the banks of rivers, melting glaciers, shrinking and polluted aquifers and threatened salmon who rely on cold clean water for survival.

Even "wet" coastal communities like Tofino feel the crunch. Water shortages there in 2006 meant turning away millions of tourist dollars.

The looming water crisis will persist, and will continue to be felt in communities across the province.

While the specifics vary from place to place, water problems are universal -- too much or too little, often in the wrong places or at the wrong time, all exacerbated by poor management, top-down planning that ignores local conditions and doesn't give affected people a voice at the decision-making table and not enough resources (including funding) to really make a difference.

But in B.C., with its shiny new water plan -- Living Water Smart -- this all is about to change. Or is it?

Inspired by one of the province's Five Great Goals of the Golden Decade, that B.C. will have the "best water quality bar none," the Living Water Smart Plan makes some valuable promises, like legislating water-flow requirements for ecosystems and species by 2012, beginning the desperately needed regulation of groundwater extraction, and committing to water conservation and efficiency targets.

Yet much remains unanswered, as so often is the case, with such "bold" plans.

First off, not much will change without significantly increased budget commitments for water. Also, an implementation strategy to achieve the targets and goals must be established. These are the minimum requirements for turning rhetoric into reality.

Another concern relates to transparency and public involvement, two key components of basic good governance. The plan sets some dates but does not outline how the changes will be made.

A long-overdue legislative overhaul of the B.C. Water Act is almost a certainty, but the process for arriving at legislative proposals is vague. Virtually all other provinces have established advisory councils and expert groups, published detailed background papers and asked communities for input when changing their water laws. Should we expect anything less?

It is now common wisdom that communities make better decisions about water when a full range of interested parties makes the decisions, implements the actions and is held accountable for performance.

While all four levels of government -- federal, First Nations, provincial and municipal -- have

key roles, shared water governance goes beyond government. It includes multiple actors from professional associations, NGOs, church and community groups, to business and academic institutions.

Provinces such as Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec have all made a clear commitment to shared water governance by supporting local water councils to prepare and implement plans for safe drinking water or watershed protection. Equally important, these governments have provided resources to ensure capacity exists among all the key players. B.C.'s approach is murky.

It is clear, however, that watersheds really matter -- and for more than just water. To maintain reliable future water supplies and healthy resilient ecosystems, including prosperous resources sectors such as fisheries, forestry and farming, all actions must be considered for their cumulative impact on watersheds.

Any water manager knows that what happens on the land shows up on the water. Linking water and land management at all levels from broad-scale resource management and official community land use plans to individual development approvals and licensing decisions is critical.

The real coming challenge will be to not only ensure the resources -- in government and for the communities and stakeholders all sharing the watershed -- are available to see the goals through to fruition, but also that a commitment to good watershed governance is the priority toward a sustainable approach to water.

British Columbia stands at a watershed concerning freshwater management. A new approach to water management may be dawning, recognizing that if we don't act now a water crisis will be of our own making. B.C.'s Living Water Smart Plan has set the guideposts, but it is in reality just the first step. The real work begins now -- is the province up for the challenge?

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