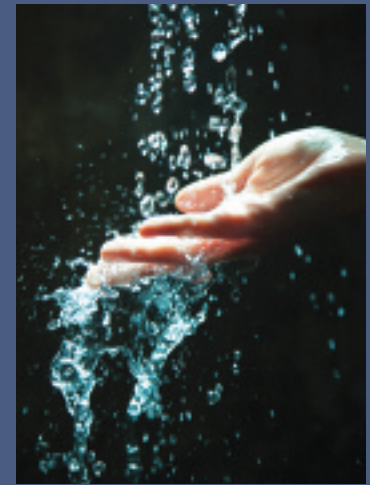


A CANADIAN VISION AND STRATEGY FOR WATER IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Rob de Loë

The importance of water for Canada's environment, economy and society is increasingly recognized by citizens, governments and corporations, observes Rob de Loë. Over the past decade, water has gained prominence on the political agenda, and new actors have emerged. However, he cautions, there is a lack of national coordination, which jeopardizes our ability to respond to the complex water-related challenges and opportunities. There is now a consensus that there needs to be an action-oriented, pan-Canadian vision and strategy. After reviewing the positive developments of the last few years, de Loë outlines the main features of such a strategy, which would include "acknowledgement of shared responsibility for water in Canada; a flexible and adaptive approach; and a strategic stance that focuses on areas where a national perspective is needed, and where the benefits of collaboration are evident."

L'importance de l'eau pour l'environnement, l'économie et la société est de plus en plus reconnue par la population, les gouvernements et les entreprises du pays, observe Rob de Loë. Depuis 10 ans, la question s'est graduellement imposée à l'ordre du jour et de nouveaux acteurs sont apparus. Mais la coordination nationale est encore lacunaire, prévient l'auteur, et notre capacité de réagir à la complexité des défis et de profiter des possibilités qui s'annoncent reste à démontrer. Au moins un consensus sur la nécessité d'élaborer une vision et une stratégie nationales axées sur l'action s'est maintenant dégagé. L'auteur recense les avancées des dernières années, puis souligne les grands éléments d'une telle stratégie : « Ses principales caractéristiques comprennent la reconnaissance d'une responsabilité partagée sur la question de l'eau, une approche souple et adaptative, et une démarche centrée sur les domaines qui nécessitent une perspective nationale et qui profiteraient clairement d'une collaboration. »



Water is crucial for the economy. Virtually every industry from agriculture, electric power and industrial manufacturing to beverage, apparel, and tourism relies on it to grow and ultimately sustain their business.
Pacific Institute, *Water Scarcity & Climate Change: Growing Risks for Businesses & Investors*

Despite the fact that water is crucial to Canada's economic and social well-being, we have often failed to treat it with sufficient care. Overuse, degraded ecosystems and contaminated water bodies were long seen as the cost of doing business in Canada. Reasons are numerous, and include a long-standing myth of water abundance combined with a tendency to prioritize economic development over environmental protection.

Considerable progress has been made during the past few decades in reducing pollution and overuse, and the

importance of water for Canada's environment, economy and society is now widely recognized by citizens, governments and, increasingly, corporations. For example, the poll conducted by Nanos Research and just released in this issue of *Policy Options* reveals that 61,6 percent of Canadians ranked fresh water as the country's most important natural resource — ahead of forests, agriculture, oil and fisheries. Unfortunately, awareness of the importance of clean, safe water has not always translated into sustained action. To illustrate, contamination of the water supply of the town of Walkerton, Ontario, in May 2000 was the outcome of a long period of underinvestment in infrastructure and human resources, combined with neglect of basic water management functions. Importantly, the factors that contributed to the contamination of Walkerton's water supply existed across Canada during the 1990s. Thus, a similar outbreak could have happened in many parts of the country.

Still, the last decade has seen positive shifts in the priority assigned to water by governments in Canada. Selected examples from across the country include the following:

- Largely in response to the tragedy in Walkerton, the government of Ontario created a new legal foundation for drinking water safety, invested in activities that protect water resources and began the process of rebuilding water capacity in the civil service.
- Motivated primarily by concerns about water shortages and degraded ecosystem quality, the government of Alberta overhauled its system for allocating water resources in 2000, and created a new framework for water governance in 2002 called Water for Life. Under this framework, broadly based partnerships at the local, regional and provincial levels play important roles in water-related planning.
- In 2002, the government of Quebec introduced its Water Policy. This policy aims to protect water quality and quantity in the province, and to promote a participatory approach by providing incentives for citizens to become more involved in water management.
- Water reform is also ongoing in northern Canada. In partnership with Aboriginal governments and the federal government, the government of the Northwest Territories is currently developing a comprehensive water strategy. The goal is to ensure that existing and new challenges relating to resource development, climate change and other concerns can be addressed more effectively.
- At the national level, the government of Canada clarified its water-related priorities and principles in 1987 through the Federal Water

Policy. Unfortunately, as numerous observers have noted, this innovative policy was never fully implemented. Reflecting the revival of concern for water across the country, the federal government took steps to clarify its water-related priorities through the 2007 Action Plan on Clean Water.

Another key shift during the past decade has been an explosion of concern for water among citizens, non-government organizations, universities and corporations. One of the most exciting developments is the emergence of new players, beyond those with a long history of interest in water in Canada. Three examples (from among many) are the following:

- The Conference Board of Canada recently drew attention to the importance of innovations in water technology and management. As part of its Leaders' Panel on Innovation-Based Commerce, the Conference Board identified three priority areas, one of which relates to water. The panel recommended that Canadian firms could become global players through implementation of a national program to retrofit municipal water

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infrastructure with leading-edge "smart" technologies.

- In 2007, the Royal Bank Foundation launched the Blue Water Project. This \$50-million investment supports the conservation and protection of freshwater resources in Canada and around the world.
- The Canadian Water Network/Réseau canadien de l'eau

(CWN/RCE), one of the federally funded Networks of Centres of Excellence, was formed in 2001. CWN/RCE involves hundreds of researchers at over 30 Canadian universities who are working in partnership with private firms, government agencies and non-government organizations to address pressing water-related challenges.

Heightened public concern for water, government reforms and a host of initiatives launched by corporations, non-government organizations and universities signal a positive shift in the priority of water in Canada. However, can we be sure that Canada is well positioned to meet the water-related challenges of the 21st century through activities such as these? Unfortunately, the answer is no.

Despite the positive developments just described, our ability to tackle long-standing problems such as drinking water safety, habitat degradation and overuse of water in a coordinated fashion is in question, and our strategic knowledge of the significance of water for Canada's economy is currently poor.

Our ability to address emerging threats and opportunities that demand a coordinated, national approach is also uncertain. Because of its potential for economic disruption, conflict, degraded environmental quality, disruption to communities and risks to human health and well-being-climate change is a major challenge for Canada. Effective adaptation to climate

change requires coordinated action at local, regional, provincial/territorial and national scales.

National coordination is also needed if Canada is to take advantage of emerging opportunities. For instance, the Leaders' Panel on Innovation-Based Commerce identified significant water-related business opportunities that should be pursued by Canadian firms. A coordinated, national vision and strategy for water science and technology may greatly enhance their ability to do so.

Why has development of a coordinated, national vision for water not been a priority in Canada? The persistence of the myth of water abundance in Canada accounts for some of the apathy that is evident. Perhaps related to this concern, when water competes for attention with other pressing concerns, it typically does not receive adequate attention from governments at all levels. To illustrate, in April 2009, Canada's commissioner of the environment and sustainable development indicated that the federal government had made very little progress on its Action Plan on Clean Water in the two years since it was announced in 2007. The Commissioner's assessment echoes the concerns of the Gordon Water Group (now known as the Forum for Leadership on Water). In its recent report, *Changing the Flow: A Blueprint for Federal Action on Freshwater*, this group of Canadian water experts identified numerous critical concerns that demand leadership from the federal government.

The Gordon Water Group argued that a revitalized *federal* water policy should be a priority. Others have suggested that in addition to the need for Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments to create their own overarching water policies or strategies, a *pan-Canadian national* water strategy is needed to achieve a coordinated vision and approach to water in Canada.

The difference is significant. For instance, where a federal water policy

BOX 1. BASIS FOR A PAN-CANADIAN STRATEGY FOR WATER

- A pan-Canadian vision and strategy for water should address only those areas where Canada is better off and stronger because provinces, territories, the federal government, Aboriginal people and others are working together on water-related concerns rather than acting individually or at cross-purposes. A cumbersome, all inclusive national water policy is neither needed nor appropriate. The strategy proposed here is lean, focused and action-oriented. Furthermore, it is meant to add to or reinforce existing and future provincial, territorial or Aboriginal water strategies rather than to replace them.
- Common goals and principles endorsed by all participants provide the core of a national vision and strategy for water. Broad principles should include a commitment to shared governance and stewardship, endorsement of the watershed as the basis for integrating relevant concerns, and a commitment to clean, safe drinking water for all Canadians. Specific principles pertaining to areas of common interest — e.g., transboundary water governance, water science and technology, and water export — also are required. The goals and principles included in a national vision and strategy should be specific and tangible; they must guide policies and actions, and permit measurement of progress.
- Development of a pan-Canadian water strategy requires a participatory and inclusive process that respects and recognizes the shared interests that exist. Governments (federal, provincial and territorial) must be leaders in this process. However, it is essential that Canada's Aboriginal people play leadership roles that recognize their current and evolving rights and responsibilities. Public and private sector agencies and organizations — from municipalities and watershed management bodies to diverse organizations with an interest in water — will be critical to both the development and implementation of a national vision and strategy for water. Finally, opportunities for broad citizen engagement are needed to create legitimacy.
- A national vision and strategy for water should be action-oriented. Numerous areas exist where urgent national action is required, and where a coordinated approach can be beneficial; examples were identified earlier in this article. Specific commitments by participants to take actions toward these priorities should be included in the strategy. Additionally, targets, timelines and mechanisms for reviewing the progress of implementation should be included alongside commitments to take action.
- Flexibility and adaptability are essential. Thus, mechanisms will be needed that permit identification of emerging challenges and opportunities that require coordinated national action, and that facilitate adjustments in light of new priorities and strategic opportunities.
- Finally, in light of the fact that responsibility for water is shared widely in Canada, a large, centralized bureaucracy created to implement a pan-Canadian water strategy is not appropriate. Instead, while coordination mechanisms are needed, the focus should be on integrating key functions relating to implementation of the strategy into existing structures. For example, in implementing their own overarching water strategies or policies, governments would be responsible for ensuring consistency with agreed principles and actions in the national strategy. Reporting on progress toward commitments would thus fall to agencies that already undertake this function, e.g., the offices of the auditors general.

would clarify the federal government's policies relating to water, a national water strategy would be a platform for addressing water-related challenges and opportunities that demand a national perspective (Box 1 presents the characteristics and components of such a policy). Thus, it would be the product of a consensus among govern-

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ments (federal, provincial and territorial), Aboriginal peoples and others with an interest in water. Calls for a national water strategy are contained in recent reports such as the Canadian Water Resources Association's *Toward a Canadian National Water Strategy* (2008) and Pollution Probe, *Towards a Vision and Strategy for Water Management in Canada* (2007).

Significantly, Canada's governments have themselves now called for a pan-Canadian vision and strategy for water. Following its meeting in Whitehorse on February 17, 2009, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment (CCME) issued a communiqué stating, "Ministers agreed to develop a strategic national vision that captures existing water priorities." All provinces and territories, including Quebec, signed the Whitehorse communiqué. Quebec did not sign a previous CCME initiative designed to bring a national perspective to environmental policy, the 1998 Canada-wide Accord on Environmental Harmonization. Thus, the fact that it endorsed the Whitehorse communiqué on the need for a national vision and strategy for water is a powerful signal of the consensus that has formed.

Extensive dialogue and negotiation will be needed to determine the form and contents of a pan-Canadian vision and strategy for water. However, this is hardly virgin territo-

ry. For example, the model presented in Box 1 reflects current thinking in the Canadian water community. Its main characteristics include acknowledgement of shared responsibility for water in Canada; a flexible and adaptive approach; and a *strategic* stance that focuses on areas where a national perspective is needed, and where the

benefits of collaboration are evident.

The economic, environmental and social benefits to Canadians of a national vision and strategy for water are numerous and tangible. Examples drawn from the Canadian Water Resources Association's *Toward a Canadian National Water Strategy* include better positioning to meet growing international expectations and obligations; stronger capacity in all parts of the country to respond to threats and opportunities; more efficient and effective water management due to clarified responsibilities and reduced legal and policy fragmentation; greater consistency in responding to concerns with national dimensions, e.g., climate change and water export; and more effective deci-

Nonetheless, creating and implementing a national vision and strategy for water is well within our grasp. The level of interest and concern for water inside and outside of governments in Canada has never been higher or more widespread.

sion-making when problems transcend jurisdictional boundaries.

Experiences with previous attempts to bring a national perspective to environmental challenges are a reminder that development and implementation of a pan-Canadian water strategy will not be straightforward. For instance, the five-year review of the Canada-wide Accord on Environmental Harmonization revealed some progress, but implementation progress in key areas, especially relating to monitoring and enforcement, was considered slow.

Development and implementation of a pan-Canadian water strategy involving an even larger number of partners clearly will be a major challenge. Nonetheless, creating and implementing a national vision and strategy for water is well within our grasp. The level of interest and concern for water inside and outside of governments in Canada has never been higher or more widespread. At the same time, Canada's governments already have demonstrated an ability to collaborate on issues of common concern and acknowledged mutual benefit (e.g., national water quality guidelines have existed since the 1960s).

The time has come for Canadians to properly recognize the economic, environmental and social significance of water by developing a national vision and strategy for water. In doing so, we would be following in the path of jurisdictions such as New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Brazil and the European Union. These places already have recognized the critical need to adopt overarching, coordinated approaches to water. By developing a national vision and strategy for water, Canada can better position

itself to respond to the water-related challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

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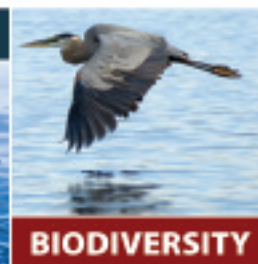
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