

# Toward a water strategy

## Canadians understand the importance of the resource, but leaders might not

By Thomas S. Axworthy, Citizen Special March 11, 2010 [Comments \(1\)](#)

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## Sunrise on the Rideau River: Water management, Thomas S. Axworthy argues, touches so much of our lives that it should be a national priority.

**Photograph by: Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen, Citizen Special**

Last week's speech from the throne emphasized economic innovation, productivity and a balanced budget. Less noticed, was the pledge to "bolster" the Action Plan for Clean Water, but a sensible national water strategy would not only contribute to a better environment, it could be a driver of the government's overall economic agenda.

Canadians are ahead of governments in recognizing the importance of water: a recent Nanos poll revealed that 61.6 per cent of Canadians see fresh water as the most important natural resource for the country's future (three times more than oil and gas which registered at 22 per cent).

As the poll shows, Canadians are intuitively aware of the critical impact water has on the health of communities and that good health depends on reliable sewers and pipes. This infrastructure is aging and energy intensive: more than 30 per cent of a municipality's electricity bill comes from pumping and treating water.

Beyond the needs of health, water is essential to the viability of businesses, especially in energy production, manufacturing, tourism and the entire agricultural sector. The costs of drought in 2001-2002 amounted to \$3 billion, making it one of the largest natural disasters in Canadian history. In a changing climate, prolonged droughts and intense floods will likely increase in frequency. Water is also central to risk management.

It is clear that water touches nearly every part of our daily lives and so protecting and conserving this priceless resource should be a national priority, as the 2010 speech from the throne recognized.

What are components of such a national strategy? Adèle Hurley, director of the Munk Centre Program on Water, writes that "the way to protect Canada's freshwater resource rests on a simple, yet powerful, three-pillared foundation of water policy:

- Keep water in its national river basins;
- Treat it with respect;
- Use it efficiently."

To start implementing Hurley's framework, the actual state of Canada's water resources needs assessment. The Council of Canadian Academies reported in May 2009 Canada has little information on the extent and condition of our groundwater resources. The United States, in contrast, has completed extensive aquifer mapping along the U.S.-Canada border. At the current rate, Canada will not complete its mapping until 2030. The U.S. recognizes, as Canada has not, that security and water are inextricably linked.

Second, there must be a prohibition on inter-basin transfers and bulk-water exports. In the 2008 speech from the throne, the Harper government pledged "to ensure protection of our water resources, our government will bring in legislation to ban all bulk water transfers or exports from Canada's fresh water basins," yet, to date, no such bill has been introduced. The Munk Centre at the University of Toronto has produced "a Model Act for Preserving Canada's Water" which should form the basis for a Harper government legislative initiative.

Third, while preventing water from leaving the five natural basins in Canada, the Harper government should also stress water management co-operation with our U.S. neighbour. The International Joint Commission is one of the world's most successful inter-governmental advisory boards. The commission relies on joint fact-finding and has suggested innovative ideas such as international watershed boards from coast to coast to prevent and resolve trans-boundary issues. The United States and Canada have recently recommitted to improving the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and the Obama administration has committed serious funding to this priority. But other trans-boundary water situations are fragile, such as the ongoing dispute over North Dakota's Devil Lake project and other problem areas.

Canadians believe themselves to be environmentally superior but per capita use of water in Canada is the highest in the world, (while it has been declining in the U.S. since the 1980s). A comprehensive water conservation strategy therefore makes environmental, energy and economic sense. The Federal government should modernize the Canada Water Act (now 50 years old) and pass a new Water Efficiency and Innovation act. This act would create the regulatory framework to encourage businesses, cities and individuals to use water more efficiently, reducing the need for costly water infrastructure grants and government subsidies. It would also generate policy incentives for investment in the Canadian water sector, making the country a hub for the growing international industry in water technologies and innovation – predicted to be worth \$1 trillion by 2020.

Lastly, the speech from the throne mentioned the responsibility of the federal government to ensure safe drinking water and effective waste-water treatment on native reserves. With 105 boil advisories currently in place, this is an obvious health, social and economic imperative. The money allocated in the 2010 budget for addressing First Nations water problems must be spent, not only on expensive treatment plants, but just as much on the capacity for First Nations to operate them. Such training and education programs should be implemented and overseen by an independent First Nations water commission.

Safe, secure clean water is a legacy we must pass on to future generations. The federal government has a critical role to play and it is a real plus that the Harper government appears ready to move. In bolstering the Action Plan for Clean Water as the Speech From the Throne promised, it only need apply the values of efficiency, conservation, science and technology that it rightly advocates as the key to Canada's economic future.

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