A summary of the research report
“Cross-Canada Checkup: A Canadian Perspective on Our Water Future”
published by
Shifting Currents: Canada’s Freshwater Resources

Water resources have traditionally been overused and their true value has been underappreciated in Canada. In light of this, there is growing awareness that the way fresh water is currently managed poses significant challenges to ensuring the environmental well-being and economic prosperity of our country. Confronting current and forthcoming challenges—such as increased water scarcity due to a changing climate—will require new and innovative water policy and management approaches.

Each province and territory faces its own unique set of water-related concerns. Yet, there are critical challenges that cut across jurisdictional borders, illustrating the interrelatedness of many water issues common to all Canadians, regardless of geographical location.

Canadians are acutely aware of the need for a more fundamental analysis of how we use our water supplies, and why we make certain choices to use water in the ways we do. This awareness signals a readiness across the country for a fundamental shift in how we view water and our connections to it, how we manage it and plan for the future, and, importantly, how we govern it.

We must shift the narrative and action on Canada’s most precious resource to one that ensures prioritization of water allocations for environmental flows, conservation of water for future generations, and collaborative decision-making processes. We must create a new national vision for understanding the value of water and for using it in the wisest and most sustainable way possible, now and in the future.

Lessons from the North

The Northwest Territories’ innovative water stewardship strategy, Northern Voices, Northern Waters, released in May 2010, could serve as a model for water policy reform in the rest of Canada. It promotes a vision for common water management across the territory, based on a solid foundation of extensive consultation between federal, territorial, and First Nations governments, and collaboration with stakeholders. The strategy is premised on sustaining river flows, aquatic ecosystem health, and the ecosystem services that make life on earth habitable for all living organisms, while simultaneously protecting Northern cultures and traditional ways of life. Importantly, the strategy recognizes the value of bridging traditional First Nations knowledge and scientific knowledge with public policy to sustainably address water governance and management challenges in the NWT. Other jurisdictions are also approaching water management in more innovative ways, demonstrating a need for water managers to look both within Canada and abroad for examples of better ways to protect water.
"The report **Cross-Canada Checkup** provides a sweeping picture of Canadian water priorities and allows us to draw out those themes that stretch across jurisdictions. The goal is to give politicians the means to start engaging on water issues and making better decisions."

—**Jesse Baltutis**, co-author of **Cross-Canada Checkup: A Canadian Perspective on Our Water Future**

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### Key Observations

- The absence of a comprehensive national water strategy, coupled with present and emerging threats of a changing climate and its inevitable impacts on the hydrological cycle, will have severe consequences for Canada’s environment and economy.

- It is essential to foster credible science to inform decisions on best approaches to address water challenges now and in the future.

- Traditional First Nations knowledge can strengthen our collective understanding of ecological processes for improved management of natural resources and policy development.

- Effective water policy reform can be informed by cross-jurisdictional learning, looking to best practices from within Canada and abroad.

- Political leadership at all levels, citizen engagement, and collaboration with diverse stakeholders are essential for improving water governance.

- A national water strategy should be considered a vital element of, and priority for, current water policy reform.

- The Northwest Territories offers one learning opportunity and compelling case for the rest of Canada to move forward on water policy reform.

- Facing water challenges requires re-engineering our built systems and production processes to emphasize conservation and efficiency.
Taking the National Pulse on Water

The full research report *Cross-Canada Checkup: A Canadian Perspective on Our Water Future* synthesizes the themes, perspectives, and information heard during the Forum for Leadership on Water (FLOW)’s 2011 national discussion series tour, “Northern Voices, Southern Choices: Water Policy Lessons from Canada.” Spanning two months and 16 Canadian cities, Bob Sandford, a leading Canadian water expert, spoke with water researchers and community leaders from across the country. He discussed the need for water policy reform in Canada, and the merits of the approach taken by the Government of the Northwest Territories in developing its water stewardship strategy. The tour was designed to get a sense of how the Northwest Territories’ water stewardship strategy could serve as a model for water policy reform in the rest of Canada, and to hear from southern Canadians on the critical water challenges they are facing.

The report was co-written and published by researchers at the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance at the University of Victoria, the Adaptation to Climate Change Team (ACT) at Simon Fraser University, and FLOW. The implications of the discussion points identified in the report are useful for decision-makers, researchers, and policy analysts who are faced with the monumental challenge of addressing the impacts of a changing water cycle on local communities while ensuring watershed health and function, and long-term water security.

The full *Cross-Canada Checkup: A Canadian Perspective on Our Water Future* is available at [www.poliswaterproject.org/publication/452](http://www.poliswaterproject.org/publication/452) and [www.act-adapt.org/water-security](http://www.act-adapt.org/water-security)