

Water for Sustainability

Issue

Canada has been facing significant pressure 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 central and northern parts of the province.

Background

Alberta's agri-food industries are an important part of the Alberta economy, contributing \$10.3 billion in gross domestic product and employing approximately 69,000 Albertans in 2022.¹

In recent years, industry is becoming subject to high water costs and water shortages, challenging them to do more with less water. This restriction on water uses and resources has direct implications to business and the Canadian economy. Water scarcity has a direct impact on rain-fed irrigated agriculture as well as livestock, and an indirect impact on food processing industries.

In 2021², 2022³, and 2023⁴ Southern Alberta experienced drought conditions, leading to lower crop yields and livestock feed shortages in both 2022⁵ and 2023⁶.

Without water, businesses ranging from family farms to major corporations will face problems, including higher costs and long-term viability.

With water supply experiencing below average runoff and precipitation for several years, and higher demand for water, this has led to worries about having enough water to support ecosystems, particularly in Southern Alberta. Together, this underscores the need to develop an effective water policy and strategy along with comprehensive information on water use.

In addition to knowing the value of water and its contribution to the Canadian economy, reporting on water impacts, uses and return flows is an essential part of adopting a watershed approach to water resource management.

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.

¹ Agri-food Investment and Growth Strategy – Government of Alberta (<https://www.alberta.ca/agri-food-investment-and-growth-strategy>)

² Southern Alberta Experiencing Drought as Bad as 2002 – Alberta Seed Guide (<https://www.seed.ab.ca/southern-alberta-experiencing-drought-as-bad-as-2002/>)

³ Canadian Drought Monitor – Government of Canada (https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2022/aac-aafc/A27-39-2022-9-eng.pdf)

⁴ Current drought conditions – Government of Canada (<https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/agricultural-production/weather/canadian-drought-monitor/current-drought-conditions>)

⁵ Feed shortages reaching crisis levels for Canadian cattle producers – Global News (<https://globalnews.ca/news/8529897/canadian-cattle-feed-shortages-crisis/>)

⁶ Hot, dry summer leaves ranchers, farmers in southern Alberta with tough decisions – CBC (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-drought-hay-producers-1.6927341>)

We have more water per capita than any other large country. Unfortunately, we take water for granted and undervalue it. Canada's per capita water withdrawals are the second highest per capita of any OECD country¹.

Even though 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 certain times of the year and demonstrate the importance of developing strategies to minimize the adverse effects of potential future shortages.

In 1987 the federal freshwater 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.

It is timely to put our minds together to develop this essential overarching strategic framework or Vision of a Canada Wide Water Strategy.

Research has indicated that 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
- 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.

¹ Canada second among OECD countries with most significant water resources per capita – Ground Water Canada (<https://www.groundwatercanada.com/canada-second-among-oecd-countries-with-most-significant-water-resources-per-capita>)

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.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Canada:

1. Instigate a national initiative that brings the provinces, territories, and First Nations together in addressing water issues of national importance. This initiative should be led by the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment;
2. Work with other levels of government to create and mobilize the knowledge needed to predict and respond to water problems and opportunities by providing centralized and harmonized collection and dissemination of water information;
3. Improve collaborative river basin planning by building durable partnerships for water management and decision-making with the federal government, municipal government, and Indigenous governments, with clear outcomes that include building resilience to extreme events, identifying priority areas for watershed restoration, and ensuring effective environmental flow regimes are in place across all levels of jurisdiction and authority;
4. Encourage federal government departments responsible for water management to collaborate on the development of a Canada-wide water management strategy and work towards alignment in regulations; and
5. Collaborate with the governments of British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Montana on regional strategies to plan and manage watersheds where jurisdiction allows.