

LEGISLATION

Feds must keep promises on water

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According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Canada is spending \$1.9-billion annually on damages caused by climate-exacerbated floods, storms, droughts, and wildfires that also cause displacement, trauma and personal tragedy. From coast to coast, climate impacts are devastating lives.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, pictured recently on the Hill. The federal government should create an effective Canada Water Agency and adequately resourcing the Freshwater Action Plan are necessary first steps. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Whether it's marking World Environment Day by kayaking on the Niagara River or canoeing on Lake Laurentian before making an election promise, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has shown himself to be very interested in water health. In their 2021 platform, the Liberals demonstrated their commitment to healthy waters by promising an independent, robust Canada Water Agency, a renewal of the five-decade old Canada Water Act, and an overdue but necessary investment of \$1-billion in the Freshwater Action Plan focused on revitalizing the treasured network of rivers and lakes that span the country.

Yet, more than a year after the election, Canadians are still awaiting action, even as we continue to be impacted by a climate crisis that is most acutely felt through water events. According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Canada is spending \$1.9-billion annually on damages caused by climate-exacerbated floods, storms, droughts, and wildfires that also cause displacement, trauma and personal tragedy. From coast to coast, climate impacts are devastating lives. Eastern Canadians are still reeling from Hurricane Fiona while unprecedented mass die-offs of salmon are choking British Columbia streams, affecting economies, cultures, and ecosystems.

According to a recent Canadian Climate Institute report, every dollar spent on adaptation measures saves taxpayers \$13 to \$15 — this is a huge return on investment. For example, during British Columbia's catastrophic flooding last year, investments to restore Peach Creek and the Hooge Wetland in the Fraser Valley had two clear benefits. It allowed salmon to escape flood waters and continue to spawn in off-channel habitats, while the restored wetlands soaked up excess storm water, minimizing flood damage in the nearby areas. Investing in the health of our waters builds climate resilience, supports job creation, advances reconciliation, and helps us deliver clean drinking water for all. But we are still waiting on meaningful government investment to ensure adequate protection of our most precious natural resource.

This year's federal budget was a time for action. Instead, the government allocated a mere \$19.6-million to the Freshwater Action Plan. Rather than taking bold and well-supported action, Budget 2022 signaled that healthy waters across Canada are simply not a priority.

South of the border, water investments have been far higher. The United States has earmarked billions of dollars into Great Lakes restoration over the past decade, with annual funding rising from US\$375-million this year to US\$475-million by 2026. U.S. President Joe Biden and Congress also added another \$1-billion to this funding in the

recently passed Infrastructure Bill. Canadian investment is consistently failing to match the U.S. even on a per-capita basis.

But Canada can act now and demonstrate a commitment to promises made. Creating an effective Canada Water Agency and adequately resourcing the Freshwater Action Plan are necessary first steps.

The most effective way to structure the future Canada Water Agency is as a separate Government of Canada Agency, with an agency head reporting to a minister, like the Parks Canada Agency or the Public Health Agency of Canada. There are now more than 20 federal departments and agencies with freshwater responsibilities, creating the need for a strong central coordinating body with the legitimate ability to foster collaboration and provide a whole-of-government approach needed to face our modern water challenges.

In addition to adequately funding a separate Canada Water Agency while maintaining and improving existing programs, an investment of \$1-billion over five years in the Freshwater Action Plan is needed to address the climate crisis that is showing itself to be a water crisis. The 2023 federal budget needs to include this historic investment, and the 2022 fall economic statement is the first place to signal the government's intention of finally making water health a priority.

Canadians care deeply about the health of our waters. Organizations from across Canada have openly championed the same Canada Water Agency and investment in the Freshwater Action Plan that the government has promised. Yet, as the years go by without meaningful action, we are left wondering, with so much support, why hasn't the federal government taken the steps needed to break the logjam?

Andrew Stegemann is chair of the Canadian Coalition for Healthy Waters and the members of the steering committee include: Dominique Monchamp, executive director of the de Gaspé Beaubien Foundation; Nicole Trigg, communications director of Living Lakes Canada; Coree

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