

OPINION TORONTO STAR

Canada has a moral and societal obligation to invest in fresh water

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With another federal budget and U.S. President Joe Biden's first official visit to Canada fast approaching, it's time to talk about our nation's relationship with — and investment in — our fresh water resources.

Canada's interior waters are facing multiple threats — toxic blue green algae blooms, “forever chemicals” and microplastics are increasingly polluting our drinking water sources. Coupled with wetland and biodiversity loss, along with the impacts of climate change, the situation in our waters will only get worse. As a country, we need to tackle this crisis through significant new investments in water and related infrastructure supported by effective collaboration between the different orders of government, Indigenous communities and civil society.

Investing in Canada's waters is not only good for our environment, it will also support the sustainable development of our economy. Funding water stewardship projects will create jobs, strengthen industries that depend on access to clean water, help maintain affordable water rates, facilitate innovation and support the country's habitat restoration and conservation goals. It will also bolster the post-pandemic recovery of Canada's recreation and tourism economy by connecting more Canadians and tourists to our waters.

We were pleased to see the government put forward an ambitious \$1-billion commitment towards protecting and restoring our waters during the last federal election. Last year's budget, however, allocated a mere \$19.6 million to Canada's Freshwater Action Plan.

By comparison, the United States has recognized that clean water is the foundational element of a strong economy and its federal government is taking the water crisis very seriously. By some estimates, America is currently outspending Canada at a rate of 80-to-one in Great Lakes restoration. Additionally, Biden's administration, with the support of Congress, is making key investments to protect their drinking water sources and services, including improving the resilience of water infrastructure (\$12

billion (U.S.)) and supporting farmers and other landowners in wetland protection, water conservation and pollution reduction efforts (\$14 billion (U.S.)). With this year's budget, Canada can and must do better.

As a nation, we are blessed to have 20 per cent of the world's freshwater reserves. Yet, less than half of these reserves are considered renewable. We therefore have both a moral imperative to protect a resource that globally is becoming increasingly scarce and a societal obligation to properly steward our waters so that future generations may enjoy the same benefits.

Further, we need to make sure that we are keeping pace with American investments to protect and restore waterways that we ultimately share. This isn't an expectation that we'll match the United States one-to-one, but that Canada will come to the table with an ambitious investment that reflects the vital importance water holds for our long-term prosperity. Biden's visit would be an opportune moment to announce such a historic investment as was committed during the federal election.

We therefore ask the federal government to keep its promise by investing \$1 billion over five years in the Freshwater Action Plan to help safeguard Canada's most important asset — our waters.

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Also endorsed by: AquaAction, Coalition for responsible and sustainable navigation, Environmental Defence, Fonds d'investissement BleuImpact, Georgian Bay Forever, Lac La Biche Region Watershed Stewards Society, Nos eaux vitales, Ottawa Riverkeeper, Pigeon Lake Watershed Association, Réseau québécois sur les eaux souterraines, Rivershed Society of BC, Shapiro and Company, The Ontario Headwaters Institute, Toronto Metropolitan University, Université du Québec à Montréal, Watersheds Canada, Water Rangers