

FIVE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CANADA'S POSITION ON THE RIGHT TO WATER



Around the world, there is a growing citizens' movement working to establish a global "right to water," affirming that water is an essential and irreplaceable resource for people's health and for our planet as a whole.

Surprisingly, the international community has not yet recognized this basic right. On two occasions, the Canadian government has formally opposed moves by the United Nations (UN) to enshrine the right to water in international law.

Here are five things you should know about Canada's actions on the world stage:

1. Canada voted against the right to water at the UN.

At the UN Commission on Human Rights in 2002, Canada was the only country to vote against the Right to Drinking Water and Sanitation. The Canadian government has declared that water is an important issue, and that countries are responsible for ensuring that their own populations have access to water. But Canada has clearly stated that it does not believe that international law should recognize the existence of a right to water.

2. Canada does not support General Comment 15.

Since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, the UN has stressed the need to secure global access to safe water. In November 2002, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights developed General Comment 15, which confirms that the right to water is implicitly contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Canada has stated that General Comment 15 would force it to provide other countries access to Canadian water, and has refused to support the initiative.

3. Guaranteeing the right to water does not mean that the U.S. can take Canadian water.

The federal government defends its position against recognizing the right to water by saying it does not want to lose control over Canadian water. The Canadian government is concerned that the United States could demand Canadian water by claiming it

under international obligations. This is an unlikely scenario because a claim on human rights grounds must meet very strict criteria.

The U.S. is the largest user of freshwater in the world, and Canada is ranked second. It is impossible to argue the U.S. will need Canadian water on a humanitarian basis when it leads the world in water consumption per capita. The reality is the U.S. is thirsty because of unsustainable urban sprawl and mismanagement, not because it lacks sufficient water resources.

4. Commodification is the real threat to Canadian water.

The notion that water should be bought and sold like any other product is what threatens Canada's control over its water – not the recognition of water as a human right.

Trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) ensure that once water is treated as a commodity, Canada will have little power to stop or even to slow down the export of the resource.

NAFTA is designed to protect trade above all else, and water could be traded and exported even if the consequences to Canada were negative.

5. Canada should be open to water sharing not water selling.

Canada should oppose the privatization of water as it allows for some of the worst human rights violations. Recognizing the right to water would allow international law to address issues of unequal distribution and access to safe water for drinking and sanitation in other countries.

Endorsing the right to water does not affect Canada's control over its water resources. Canada should be willing to consider sharing its water and expertise with countries that are truly in need. But there is a difference between water sharing and water selling. Selling water to the U.S. – or any other country – sets a dangerous social, economic and environmental precedent that could not be easily reversed.

For more information about the Council of Canadians' right to water campaign, check out www.canadians.org, www.blueplanetproject.net or call 1-800-387-7177.