

# A Water Policy for Canada

**June 28, 2000**

*Following the tragic outbreak of E. coli poisoning in Walkerton, Ontario, and a second failed attempt by federal Environment Minister David Anderson to persuade provinces to sign a voluntary water accord, the Council called on Ottawa this spring to implement a comprehensive national water policy. The following is an outline for a national water policy released by the Council on June 7, 2000.*

The time has long passed when Canada's precious water can be left to an inadequate patchwork of municipal and provincial regimes. People are dying. Our water supply, which is limited, is being polluted, depleted and diverted at an alarming rate. The Council of Canadians is calling on the federal government to implement a comprehensive, national water protection policy with the following components.

## 1. **Water Preservation**

We are all responsible for the destruction of our water systems and must collectively, through our democratic institutions, reclaim, conserve and preserve water. Our federal government, in concert with the provinces, must undertake immediate measures in the following areas:

- **Testing** of drinking water and federal legislation to establish national safe drinking water standards.
- **Conservation**, including targets for industry, agriculture and cities. Groundwater extractions should not exceed recharge.
- **Preservation**, including setting aside large tracts of aquatic systems for protection. This includes the need to create watershed management and regulatory frameworks to protect watersheds.
- **Reclamation**, including the cleanup of polluted river systems and wetlands. The whole issue of clear-cutting must be addressed, as must the disposal of raw sewage into waterways.
- **Restoration** of the cuts made in the 1995 budget to many water-related programs, including the freshwater and acid rain research programs.
- Climate change commitments must be met with stricteforcement.
- Alternative sources of power like solar energy must be explored and alternatives found to mega-power projects, like dams, diversions and hydro-electric facilities.
- Standards for industry and agribusiness. Every level of government must commit itself to creating and enforcing strict laws against industrial dumping, the use of pesticides and the discharge of toxins into waterways or landfills.
- Federal water policy must consider the other "water stakeholders," including aquatic species and future generations, in any laws that affect water. No decisions about water use should ever be made without a full consideration of the impacts to the ecosystem.

## 2. **Public Trust**

Water is a public trust and a human right to be guarded by all levels of government,

and should not be privatized, commodified or traded on the open market for profit.

Therefore:

- The federal government must enact a federal ban on the commercial export or diversion of bulk water. It must give up on the flawed and unworkable provincial accord and pass the legislation that it has the exclusive jurisdictional authority to undertake. This does not mean that Canada is opposed to "water sharing" (as opposed to "water trading") for countries in water crisis.
- NAFTA and WTO must be renegotiated to exempt water altogether. Water should be exempted from all existing and future bilateral and international trade and investment agreements. The negotiations on the FTAA currently underway provide an excellent opportunity for this negotiation.
- Municipal water and wastewater privatization must be banned. Funding must be initiated or restored to provide full protection to all municipal and rural water users. Adequate reporting of water testing to trained water experts must be established or restored.
- The federal government must work with the provinces and municipalities to undertake a full infrastructure repair program with tight timeframe commitments.
- Legislation must guarantee access for every Canadian to clean water; the legislation must spell out the ways in which governments commit to ensure this right. This could include a "local sources first" policy.
- Industry water-access preference and subsidized water rates must end. Corporations and the wealthy must pay a more equitable share of taxes in order to help pay for infrastructure repair and water reclamation.
- Legislation must be initiated to regulate bottled water. This should include requiring these companies to pay fees and rate structures for water-taking and for the use of roads. Additional legislation could give preferential access to local bottling companies that will guarantee local job creation.

### 3. **Shared Stewardship**

The best advocates for water are local communities and citizens. The public must participate as an equal partner with government to protect water. We need federal commitments on the following:

- public consultation, local water governance councils and provisions for governments to report back to communities
- local watershed governance systems
- the guarantee of First Nations' water rights and self-governance on issues of water management
- "local people and farmers first" legislation, whereby local communities have first rights to local water
- provisions for independent, publicly funded research into all aspects of policy governing water.