

MEDIA RELEASE

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Survey shows politicians failing public by ignoring BC water crisis

Water experts urge leaders to tackle shortages and privatization of freshwater

Vancouver, BC – Water experts in BC are urging politicians to address the public's well-founded concerns about water safety and shortages. A 2009 Canadian Water Attitudes Study administered by Ipsos Reid showed that the long-term supply of freshwater is a top concern for Canadians, second only to health care availability and financial market stability. Yet, when polled, BC's two main political parties are willing to address only some of the concerns presented in a recent survey sponsored by eight leading organizations.

"We have real questions about whether BC's leading political parties are ready to manage our most valuable resource. By their own words, they have shown us that in many ways they don't understand the urgency of the problems we face," said Ecojustice lawyer Randy Christensen. The poll was issued by Ecojustice (formerly Sierra Legal Defence Fund), Watershed Watch, POLIS Water Project, Raincoast Conservation Foundation, T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation, Sierra Club of BC, West Coast Environmental Law, and the Wilderness Committee.

Some highlights of the poll:

- Over 600 waterways in BC have been staked for the development of privately owned Independent Power Projects with licensing that does not involve public input and has major loopholes around environmental assessments. The Liberal Party does not plan to slow private power development to allow these issues to be addressed. The NDP does plan to stop the current "gold rush approach" and evaluate cumulative environmental impacts of run-of-river projects.
- BC has the worst rate of water-borne diseases in Canada, yet the Liberals do not plan to make drinking water quality standards legally binding as recommended by the World Health Organization. The NDP have made this policy change a possibility.
- Neither of the two major parties committed to ensuring adequate water flows for fish and the environment through legally binding water allocations. The Green Party committed to this step.
- Though BC is the only province in Canada that does not require a government licence for groundwater extraction, the NDP did not commit to regulating groundwater withdrawals, while the BC Liberals did.
- Most current water demands can be met with far less water than is currently being used. Both the Liberals and NDP are considering the creation of water efficiency standards for agriculture, industry, commercial and residential use.
- No party committed to establishing an independent office that would provide regular reporting on the state of BC's water, but the Greens and the NDP respectively propose an Environment Commissioner and an expanded mandate for the Auditor General's office to report on environmental considerations.

The results have disappointed several water experts.

"The public's ownership of our rivers and streams cannot be a partisan issue, and the public deserves a say in the use of its water. IPP projects have serious social and ecological impacts, and the Green Party and NDP deserve credit for calling for a moratorium until a public process is in place," said Craig Orr of Watershed Watch

“It is truly disconcerting that neither leading party is willing to legally guarantee water for fish and the environment. Many streams in BC have periods where they are critically low putting fish bearing water ways at risk of drying up,” said Linda Nowlan of Watershed Watch.

However, both party’s commitment to water efficiency was applauded.

“It’s exciting to see that both parties recognize we’ve got to set water efficiency targets. Our hope is that firm standards and incentives make water efficiency and conservation non-negotiable in BC,” said Oliver M. Brandes of the Polis Water Sustainability Project.

To see the survey, party responses and get more information, please visit www.ecojustice.ca or contact:

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