



## News

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# BC Government Commits to Water Sustainability



Fresh water is one of British Columbia's most valuable natural resources. It provides us with clean energy, supports our iconic salmon runs and quenches our thirst. It is the lifeblood of our province and, as a limited resource, must be cared for wisely to ensure its continued health and security for future generations.

Modernizing B.C.'s Water Act was a key commitment in the government's election platform.

Mary Polak, Minister of Environment has been directed to complete consultation with British Columbians on a proposed new Water Sustainability Act with the intention of passing new legislation in 2014. The new act will update and replace the existing Water Act, respond to current and future pressures on water and position B.C. as a leader in water stewardship.

Minister Polak "We started working on the proposed new act in 2009 and have engaged widely with British Columbians. In the more than 2,200 written submissions, individual citizens, First Nations organizations and stakeholder groups shared their ideas and pride for their rivers, lakes, streams and watersheds. Government has reviewed this input carefully and continues to refine the legislative proposals, seeks to better understand sector concerns and works out the details of how the new act will be implemented.

"We recognize one of the greatest weaknesses of the existing Water Act is that groundwater - with a few exceptions - is not currently regulated in B.C. As such, the Province does not license or charge for withdrawing groundwater. This is why regulating groundwater use will be a key component of the new Water Sustainability Act.

"I would also like to acknowledge that First Nations in B.C. bring a unique perspective due to strong cultural, ecological and economic interests in water. The B.C. government will continue to engage First Nations as we refine and implement the proposed Water Sustainability Act. My predecessors and I have met with members of the First Nations Leadership Council and I plan to meet with them again later this fall.

"I continue to be impressed by the strong interest British Columbians have taken in their water resources. What government does is only part of the solution. All British Columbians are challenged to play their part to protect, preserve and conserve our water. I look forward to introducing the new Water Sustainability Act in the legislature in 2014."

Anna Warwick Sears, Executive Director for the Okanagan Basin Water Board, had this to say in response to the Minister's statements:

" I agree that getting groundwater regulations will be one of the most important new components of the Water Sustainability Act. As it stands now, there are very few restrictions on who can pump, where and how much they can pump. As the population of BC increases, and if there are major droughts that reduce the availability of surface water, unregulated groundwater increases potential for real conflicts. It's my understanding that with all the consultation for Water Act Modernization, groundwater regulations had the greatest support.

"The province will be focusing most of their groundwater regulations on large water users: utilities, developments, industry, and agriculture that pump large volumes of water from aquifers. It's not likely that individual residential well owners will be expected to get a license.

"I don't believe that the groundwater licensing/permitting system will work properly unless it is integrated with the surface water licensing system, with a similar fee or "water rent" structure. Surface and groundwater are often closely connected: groundwater in-flows allow creeks to run in the winter, and groundwater keeps stream water cool enough for fish to survive in the summer, surface water in turn feeds aquifers. New surface water licenses have to consider downstream surface water licensees, and new groundwater licenses will have to consider the needs of the surrounding well-dependent homes and businesses, as well as the connection to surface water. If the surface and groundwater aren't connected in law and through the licensing system, it is hard to imagine a way to establish a proper water balance.

Also, as was raised in the [recent articles](#) about Nestle operations in Hope, it will be very important for BC to have a strong and transparent system for water use reporting – for both groundwater and surface water. Transparent water use reporting builds trust and allows more careful regulation in times of water scarcity."

Water is a very important all around the world and BC happens to be one of the richest areas in the world when it comes to fresh water. With any resource proper management will ensure that it is maintained safely and enjoyed by all.