BC WATERSHED
SECURITY COALITION

WHY BC NEEDS WATERSHED BOARDS

With world-class rivers, lakes and streams, BC's freshwater supplies have always seemed abundant. But an unprecedented multi-year drought has shown that we can no longer afford to take water for granted.

Right now, B.C. is one of the few provinces that does not have a system of local watershed boards that can reduce conflict over scarce water resources and solve watershed challenges.

This needs to change.







THE PROBLEM

Over the past four years, the impacts of water scarcity have affected the entire B.C. economy and way of life:

- States of water emergencies declared by the Sunshine Coast in the south, and the Village of McBride in the north
- First Nations communities running out of water
- BC farmers losing crops and cattle at enormous cost
- Businesses struggling with water shut-offs
- Thousands of dead salmon from dry and overheated rivers
- Devastating wildfires arising from tinder-dry conditions

With rising water demands and drier weather, the future for B.C.'s water supplies looks very different to the past.

Other regions of the world show us what lies ahead unless we act now. Social unrest has erupted in countries such as Spain and France due to water conflicts between towns and farmers, residents and tourists, and industry and natural ecosystems.









The loss of economic productivity from a long term water shortage is estimated to easily exceed one billion dollars.

BC Government 2019
Climate Risk Assessment

OUTDATED APPROACH

Lack Of Action On Watershed Management

Social unrest and fierce competition over water is not our inevitable future. B.C. still has enough water but we must manage it much better.

Unfortunately, the province's current approach to watershed management is severely outdated and under-resourced. One glaring gap in B.C.'s watershed management approach is the lack of an organized system of local watershed boards to provide a dedicated focus on resolving water issues and preventing future conflict.

Surprisingly, the B.C. government has established only one formal watershed board in its history, when it created the Okanagan Basin Water Board *over 50 years ago*. B.C.'s other best known watershed board, the Cowichan Watershed Board, was created by Cowichan Tribes and Cowichan Valley Regional District in 2010 and is now internationally recognized for its leadership on water issues.

Despite the success of both the OBWB and CWB (see page 5), there has been no provincial move to enable additional watershed boards in other regions.

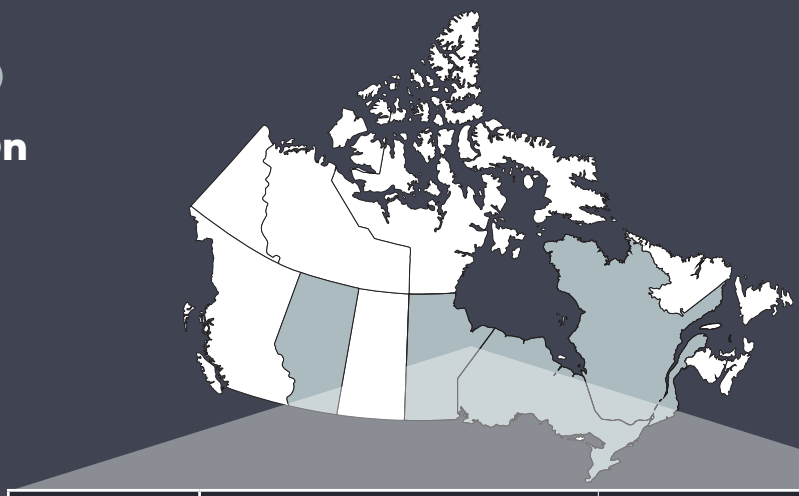
This lack of action makes B.C. an outlier in Canada when it comes to watershed management.

FALLING BEHIND

Other Provinces Ahead On Watershed Governance

Ontario, Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec all have provincial frameworks that establish local watershed-based organizations.

These entities undertake watershed planning, set collaborative priorities, lead drought and flood prevention, protect drinking water sources, conduct monitoring, and strengthen community water stewardship. In each province, they have become essential social infrastructure.



PROVINCE	NAME/NUMBER OF WATERSHED ENTITIES	POLICY/ LEGISLATION
ONTARIO	36 Conservation Authorities	Conservation Authorities Act
QUEBEC	40 les organismes de bassins versants - OBV (Watershed Agencies)	Loi sur la gestation de l'eau (Water Management Act)
MANITOBA	14 Watershed Districts	Watershed Districts Act
ALBERTA	11 Watershed Planning & Advisory Councils	Water for Life Strategy

THE OPPORTUNITY

The B.C. government needs to make a decisive move forward to establish a system of Local Watershed Boards. By investing in these boards, the province can leverage local expertise and equip communities with the tools and resources to solve water challenges in their watersheds.

WHAT IS A WATERSHED BOARD?

A Watershed Board differs from community watershed groups or roundtables, which are common in B.C. and play a vital role in water stewardship.

Unlike these groups, ***a Watershed Board operates with a mandate from authority holders—such as the provincial government, First Nations, and local governments—to either make decisions or directly advise decision-makers.*** In other provinces, this mandate is set by a legal or policy framework established by the provincial government.

However, Watershed Boards are not just venues for government officials. They actively involve local residents and knowledge holders in decisions and activities affecting the watershed. This fosters community trust and local buy-in.

Watershed Boards are designed to be permanent entities with long-term funding. This stability enables them to build lasting relationships within the community and lead sustained efforts to improve watershed outcomes continuously.



WHAT DO THEY DO?

No two watersheds are identical and each Watershed Board has its own unique characteristics. Nevertheless, when examining examples from other provinces as well as those in B.C., several common roles and functions emerge.

Roles:

- Establish a collaborative vision for the watershed
- Develop & implement watershed plans (inc. drought, flood, & water sustainability plans)
- Breakdown silos between different levels of governments
- Provide formal input into land-use decisions
- Conduct water monitoring and track watershed health indicators
- Lead and coordinate watershed restoration efforts
- Promote compliance and support conflict resolution
- Build community awareness and engage the public

WATERSHED BOARDS: B.C. EXAMPLES

Okanagan Basin Water Board

Founded in 1970 to tackle severe pollution and algae problems in the Okanagan lakes, the OBWB successfully led efforts to restore lake health.

Today, it continues its work on water quality, addressing challenges like watermilfoil and invasive mussels, as well as coordinating watershed planning, research, monitoring, and providing grants for restoration, flood mitigation, water conservation, and drinking water protection.

The OBWB is made up of nine directors from the three regional districts, alongside representatives from the Okanagan Nation Alliance, the Water Supply Association of BC, and the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council. Through the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council, the OBWB receives advice from a wide range of stakeholders in the watershed.

Through the OBWB's basin-wide efforts, phosphorus input into the lakes decreased from 59,000kg in 1970 to less than 1,000kg in 2003, and the health of the lakes in the valley was restored.

Cowichan Watershed Board

Founded in 2010 through a groundbreaking partnership between Cowichan Tribes and the Cowichan Valley Regional District, the CWB is a global leader in collaborative governance.

Sparked by the failure of the Cowichan Lake Weir to sustain the river during summer droughts, the CWB spearheaded efforts to design and fund a new weir. The CWB has driven salmon recovery, strengthened water monitoring, and secured millions for watershed initiatives. In 2022, it helped launch B.C.'s first Water Sustainability Plan under an historic agreement between Cowichan Tribes and the B.C. government.

Co-chaired by the Chief of Cowichan Tribes and the CVRD Chair, it includes 10-12 members from local governments, First Nations, community, and nominees from federal and provincial governments.

The CWB's efforts have supported a remarkable turn-around in Chinook salmon returns in the Cowichan River, with average annual returns increasing from just 500 fish in 2009 to over 23,000 in the last four years.



4 KEY BENEFITS OF LOCAL WATERSHED BOARDS

1



TARGETED ACTION

Watershed boards drive targeted actions that address complex problems in a systematic way.

Using a whole-of-watershed lens, these boards transcend political boundaries and develop solutions to interconnected issues, such as the cumulative pressures of various land-use activities, rising water demand, threats to drinking water sources, and the costly impacts of drought, floods and wildfire.

2



SOCIAL COHESION

Experience shows that watershed boards foster cooperation and enhance social cohesion.

Their collaborative structure facilitates the best decisions for the watershed through difficult but respectful conversations among senior governments, First Nations, regional districts, communities and businesses. Crucially, they give local people a voice in decisions that impact their home.

3



RECONCILIATION

Watershed boards offer a significant opportunity for tangible progress on reconciliation.

They provide a local forum where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can establish shared goals and implement projects in partnership. By building on the strengths of Indigenous knowledge and Western science, these local bodies implement community-led solutions with long-term benefits for everyone.

4



ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Watershed boards drive economic activity.

They use modest core budgets to attract substantial external funds, which support local businesses and create quality jobs. They achieve cost-efficiencies by pooling regional expertise and leveraging existing capacity through partnerships with local organizations. As a result, they deliver positive watershed outcomes at a fraction of what it would cost senior governments.

OUR ASKS TO THE BC GOVERNMENT

1 ESTABLISH A PROVINCIAL SYSTEM OF WATERSHED BOARDS

Work with First Nations and Local Governments to develop a provincial system of Watershed Boards as the cornerstone of a modern watershed governance framework. This system should provide a clear structure for local decision-making that reflects each region's unique geography, history and watershed priorities.

2 PROVIDE STABLE FUNDING AND SUPPORT TO ENSURE BOARDS SUCCEED

Modernize BC's industrial water rates to generate a new source of annual revenue to resource these boards with the financial, technical, and logistical resources required.







BC WATERSHED
SECURITY COALITION

The BC Watershed Security Coalition is a non-partisan, diverse coalition of 57 organizations made up of community water experts and leaders in the field, including farmers, Indigenous champions and local governments, and represents 285,000 British Columbians from all walks of life.

If your organization is interested in joining the Coalition,
please visit our website:

www.watershedsecurity.ca

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