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Funding isn't flowing: ending dry spell for freshwater action

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The climate emergency is a water emergency.

In Canada, we experience climactic change directly through changes to our water – its quality, its quantity, and its seasonality.

In short, to mitigate and adapt to a changing climate in Canada, we have to start with water.

The Liberal Party recognized this in 2021 with a [campaign promise](#) of a 10-year, \$1-billion Freshwater Action Plan. That plan would “protect and restore large lakes and river systems” across the country, from the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence system to the Fraser and Mackenzie River basins.

Yet when Budget 2022 was released, we (a collaborative of regional water-monitoring leaders) were stunned. The budget delivered a meager two per cent of the promised Freshwater Action Plan – [just \\$19.6-million](#). Not only is the funding shockingly lower than the government’s election commitment, it comes with the worrisome warning that “the future of this initiative will be communicated at a later date.” The result? Vital programs across Canada are left treading water.

The federal government must honour its promised \$1-billion investment in freshwater protection, in full recognition that water action underpins effective climate action.

Now, as Parliament rises for the summer, federal MPs will leave Ottawa, heading home to their constituencies. Throughout July and August, they – like many Canadians – will visit a local waterbody to enjoy a sunny day at the beach, a friendly fishing trip, or a calm evening paddle.

These local waterways make every MP’s constituency unique. They are refuges, homes, and habitats, cared for deeply by the people who live, work, and play within them: the very people who have been noticing and reporting changes – for decades now – in the quality, quantity, and seasonality of our water.

But will our MPs truly take note of these regional water changes? Or will they simply continue saying – rather than doing – the right thing?

Far from the “historic investment” [mandated by the prime minister](#), the drastically reduced Freshwater Action Plan in Budget 2022 undermines decades of watershed-level efforts to protect freshwater through the Great Lakes Protection Initiative and the Lake Winnipeg Basin Program. It raises questions about the future of other regional water programs, like the Atlantic Ecosystems Initiative. And it prevents this regional approach from being expanded to other watersheds in need across the country, such as the Peace-Athabasca Delta.

Most concerningly, it leaves us lacking the resources and knowledge we need to effectively confront Canada’s climate-water emergency, in all its regional variations.

For example, in the Great Lakes and Lake Winnipeg basins, warming water temperatures and flooding intensify eutrophication and increase the frequency and severity of algal blooms.

In the northern Peel River region, permafrost thaw is causing slumping and consequent changes to water quality.

In Quebec, historic floods in 2017 and 2019 significantly impacted waterways and ecosystems, but also the social, cultural and economic life of

communities.

In northeastern Alberta's Peace-Athabasca Delta, upstream water use by the fossil fuel industry and hydroelectric development – and climate change – cumulatively reduce flow, limiting safe travel and access to traditional rights.

In Atlantic Canada, the Wolastoq experienced historic once-in-100-year floods in both 2018 and 2019.

Communities across Canada know these challenges are urgent. And because of their concerns, these diverse watersheds share at least one commonality – local water-monitoring initiatives. Even throughout COVID, these communities continued collecting data when centralized government programs had difficulty monitoring.

Community monitoring is carefully designed to generate the data needed to address specific regional concerns that are shared by local citizens, community organizations, provincial-territorial governments, and Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC).

ECCC's past watershed-level programs were continuously and collaboratively refined, adjusted, and improved over decades, effectively linking community concerns and federal policy priorities. Now, as we face Canada's climate-water emergency, there is a severe risk of disrupting these important regional connections, undermining past investments, and compromising local and regional knowledge about our changing waterways.

Together, as community monitoring leaders across Canada, we are optimistic that MPs will carry their summer experiences back to Ottawa this fall, where together they can take action to protect their local waterways.

Budget 2023 is an opportunity for the federal government to follow through on its \$1-billion freshwater promise. From watersheds across this amazing land, we will be watching.

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