

Water

Introduction

Decades of neoconservative government policy decisions have undermined the critical water infrastructures that support our communities, leaving them especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Reversing this trend and rebuilding the lost systems and expertise will require many years of continuous attention and resources. The impacts of climate change are happening much faster than predicted by most scientific bodies. Weather conditions and events once considered extreme or exceptional are occurring with such startling frequency that even the most ambitious mitigation and adaptation plans may be inadequate to ensure that communities remain viable. We must reverse this trend immediately and reinvest in our natural and built water infrastructure.

We have built infrastructure to provide clean drinking water, sewage and stormwater management, electricity production and promote countless economic activities. Many Canadian cities still rely on water pipes laid over a century ago. All infrastructure requires ongoing investment to continue to function as designed. Unfortunately, governments at all levels in Canada have tended to ignore these requirements, resulting in massive backlogs and deficits for maintenance.¹

There is also the so-called “natural infrastructure” that most of Canada’s built infrastructure relies upon. A water treatment plant is useless without a dependable supply of water. We build hydro dams and sewage treatment plants based upon probabilities of how much water flow will be available to power our homes and dilute our treated wastewater to “acceptable levels” of pollution for those downstream. This natural infrastructure has always been under pressure from short-sighted

development, but many of the wise decisions to protect our natural infrastructure in the past have recently been undermined and reversed in the name of short-term profit. This is resulting in the proverbial death by a thousand cuts of various kinds of natural and built infrastructure that are critical for the long-term health of our communities. Canada must invest in the resiliency of our built water infrastructure, in the protection of our remaining natural water infrastructure, and in acquiring and preserving the knowledge we need to make better decisions regarding water. While the federal government has recently taken some positive action, the urgency of responding to climate change requires a much greater commitment than we have seen to date.

The AFB will provide the Canada Water Agency with the funding and independence required to achieve the stated goals of creating the agency. The AFB has perennially allocated federal funding to establish a Ministry of Water, finally giving water the attention and focus it requires. In the 2022 federal budget, \$45 million was allocated to the task of “standing up” the Canada Water Agency this year and funding operations until 2026.² This level of funding is insufficient and will not allow the CWA to fulfill its stated goals and role over this period. For the CWA to be effective, it must have a degree of independence that approaches a stand-alone ministry. If it merely exists as a department within the ECCC, the CWA will be an “agency” in name only, without the autonomy required to work directly with First Nations, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments. Therefore, **the AFB will ensure that the new CWA is a true agency, reporting directly to the Minister of the Environment.** One of the greatest barriers preventing the CWA from achieving its goals is potential resistance to federal initiatives from provincial governments, which view most water issues as a provincial jurisdiction. These concerns have already shaped the proposed role of the CWA as an agency that will seek provincial cooperation rather than demand it. To ensure this cooperation, the CWA must be able to offer substantially beneficial programs and facilitate the sharing of information and resources with and among governments. It will require a significant ongoing operating budget in addition to program support. **The AFB will fund the operations of the CWA for \$25 million a year.**

The AFB will create a comprehensive freshwater monitoring network and database. The AFB will fund the CWA to create and share a comprehensive freshwater database that maps all watersheds, aquifers, and groundwater recharge areas across Canada. The CWA will partner with willing First Nations to develop appropriate protocols for gathering and including any traditional knowledge that First Nations wish to share

regarding their territories. This program will establish an extensive waterbody monitoring network capable of tracking changes in the quality and quantity of freshwater resources and provide sufficient funding and training for Indigenous and settler communities to participate in the monitoring activities. **The AFB will provide \$100 million a year over three years and \$20 million a year thereafter.** (See the Environment and Climate Change chapter.)

The AFB will provide funding for the Great Lakes clean-up. The United States government is providing approximately \$350 million in annual funding projects to clean up industrial sites impacting the Great Lakes. Meanwhile, in Canada, the federal government has been spending less than \$10 million a year to clean up Canadian industrial sites on the Great Lakes. Canada has previously identified the need to spend upwards of \$1 billion to clean up and protect the Great Lakes Basin. Given that the Biden administration is showing a novel willingness and commitment to Great Lakes clean-up and protection, now is an opportune time to expand and entrench bilateral funding. Beyond cleaning up industrial sites, there are endless opportunities to increase the resiliency of the natural infrastructure features protecting the Great Lakes. This includes restoring coastal wetlands, reducing agricultural runoff, protecting undeveloped land from urban sprawl, and reducing the discharge of microplastics from all sources. **The AFB will spend \$500 million in 2023-24 and \$950 million a year until 2027 to implement a comprehensive action plan to protect the Great Lakes Basin.**

The AFB will conduct a Tar Sands tailings pond study. The exploitation of the Tar Sands has changed the landscape of vast areas of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Little independent research has been conducted on the actual and potential health and environmental impacts of these massive collections of toxic waste. Over the last few years, the oil industry has been lobbying for permission to drain the tailings ponds into the Athabasca River and the federal government is considering how it might regulate this activity despite the paucity of reliable studies on the possible impacts. **The AFB will spend \$40 million to fund an in-depth, independent study of the current health and environmental effects of these tailings ponds and the potential impacts of releasing their contents into the Athabasca River.**

The AFB will fix the funding shortfall for on-reserve water treatment operation and maintenance. The federal government has made progress in eliminating many drinking water advisories on First Nations reserves, but 29 communities are still without potable tap water. The Neskantaga First Nation has had a drinking water advisory in place

for over 26 years. Recent federal budgets have allocated the funding necessary to remove these remaining drinking water advisories, but there is a significant shortfall in funds budgeted for the ongoing operation and maintenance of water infrastructure on reserves. In his report issued in December 2021, the Parliamentary Budget Officer indicated this shortfall was approximately \$130 million a year.³ **The AFB will direct \$130 million a year to staff training, operation, and maintenance of water infrastructure on reserves.**

The AFB will repurpose previous funding allocated to the Canadian Infrastructure Bank. The Canadian Infrastructure Bank was supposed to support \$35 billion worth of projects that encourage the privatization of critical infrastructure in Canada through Public Private Partnerships (P3s) and similar concession services and financing programs. Much of this money is earmarked for water infrastructure but has remained largely unspent due to the overall failure of CIB management. P3s never deliver the benefits their promoters claim they will deliver. They are anti-democratic in nature because the corporate partners invariably insist that key information must remain secret to avoid giving any advantage to competitors. Promoters of P3 schemes claim that the private partners take on risks that were previously borne by the public, but assigning a realistic value to this “benefit” is almost impossible due to the secrecy the corporate partners insist upon. Furthermore, if a corporate partner fails to deliver the critical infrastructure and services as contracted, the public will inevitably pay for them in the end. This is especially true for water infrastructure projects since clean water is a necessity. The CIB has largely failed in its attempts to help private capital leverage its way into the ownership of public infrastructure. The parliamentary committee tasked with performing the five-year review of the CIB has recommended it be abolished. **The AFB will dissolve the CIB and reallocate funds currently under CIB control to provide low-interest loans to municipal and provincial governments so they can reduce the backlog of necessary upgrades and repairs to critical water and other infrastructure across Canada** (see the Infrastructure and Cities chapter).

Conclusion

Climate change threatens almost every aspect of our existence, especially the natural and built water infrastructure critical for our survival. For our communities to remain viable, we must restore natural resiliency, rebuild

Canada's infrastructure, and commit to replacing the pursuit of private wealth with a commons framework that allows water to be managed and protected for the benefit of all. The measures proposed in this chapter are the first step in this long but necessary journey.

Table 25.1 Summary of water measures

All figures in \$M

	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Properly fund the Canada Water Agency	\$25	\$25	\$25
Funds already in the fiscal framework	-\$9	-\$9	-\$9
Create a comprehensive fresh water monitoring network and database	\$100	\$100	\$100
Great Lakes clean-up project	\$500	\$950	\$950
Tar sands tailing pond study	\$40	\$0	\$0

Notes

1 Federation of Canadian Municipalities. *Canadian Infrastructure Report Card 2019: Monitoring the State of Canada's Core Public Infrastructure*. (<http://canadianinfrastructure.ca/en/index.html>).

2 See federal budget 2022, pg. 101.

3 Jill Giswold and Nasreddine Ammar. *December 2021. Clean Water for First Nations: Is the Government Spending Enough?* Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. (<https://www.pbo-dpb.ca/en/publications/RP-2122-021-M--clean-water-first-nations-is-government-spending-enough--eau-potable-premieres-nations-gouvernement-depense-t-il-assez>).