



Northern Voices, Southern Choices

WATER POLICY LESSONS FOR ALBERTA

*A Summary of the Edmonton & Calgary Forum for Leadership on Water (FLOW)
Cross-Country Tour Presentations*

DECEMBER 2011

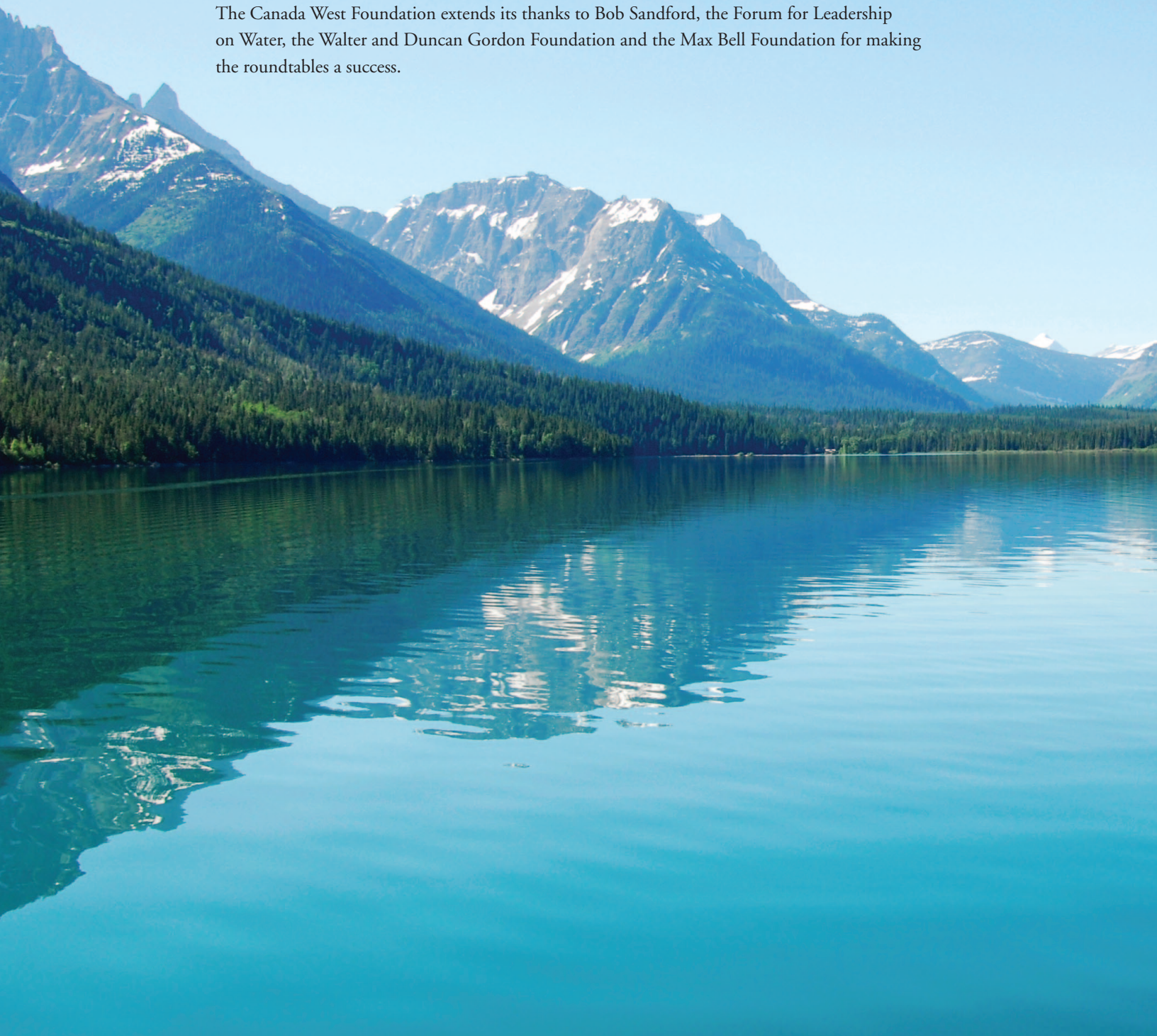
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Overview

In the fall of 2011, Bob Sandford, Co-Chair of the Forum for Leadership on Water (FLOW) embarked on a 15 city cross-Canada tour to give a lecture titled “Northern Voices, Southern Choices: Water Policy Lessons for Canada.” The purpose of the tour was to showcase the Northwest Territories 2010 water strategy, *Northern Voices, Northern Waters*, to discuss the challenges associated with implementing the strategy and to show how it is relevant to the rest of Canada.

On November 21 and 22, 2011, Bob Sandford brought his tour to Edmonton and Calgary. The Canada West Foundation acted as a co-host for two roundtable discussions where a group of nearly 40 individuals from industry, government, academia and non-governmental organizations were in attendance. Participants had the opportunity to hear Bob Sandford’s thoughts on the *Northern Voices, Northern Waters* strategy and discuss challenges and opportunities that arise as a result of the strategy.

Northern Voices, Southern Choices:

Summary of Bob Sanford's Presentation

Bob Sanford opened his presentation by noting the dramatic effects climate change is having across Canada. He cited a rapid loss of permafrost in the Arctic and increased extreme weather events such as droughts and floods. Because of this, many provinces have begun to focus on water management issues with specific attention to how these changes might affect water infrastructure and provincial/territorial economies.

Policymakers must consider the concept of *stationarity* along with climate change. Stationarity is evident when seasonal weather and long-term climate conditions fluctuate predictably within established highs and lows. Stationarity has allowed governments and scientists to plan and prepare for both the worst and best case scenarios. However, there has been a loss of stationarity due to increased global temperatures which are altering the hydrological cycle and, as a result, it is becoming more difficult to plan for future environmental circumstances.

Within this context of climate change and a loss of stationarity, provinces and territories will have to adapt their water policies. The Northwest Territories (NWT) is one example where this is happening. In 2010, the NWT released its water stewardship strategy titled *Northern Voices, Northern Waters*.

FLOW applauded the policy for the following reasons:

- 1) Government did what it was supposed to do, that is the agencies responsible for the development of the strategy tackled their task, and completed it from start to finish, despite the difficulties and political sensitivities associated with changing water policy.
- 2) Access to clean water was defined as a human right—the first government in Canada to do so.
- 3) The strategy benefitted from Aboriginal involvement from the beginning.
- 4) The NWT introduced a holistic ecosystem based approach to watershed governance.
- 5) The NWT is working to integrate water stewardship into other initiatives.

While there is no doubt that *Northern Voices, Northern Waters* is a landmark strategy, certain challenges are likely to arise when it comes to successful implementation:

- 1) The NWT government does not have full jurisdiction over all water and ongoing Aboriginal land claims further complicate this.
- 2) Outside influences and events such as political and economic circumstances may lead to challenges in implementing the strategy.
- 3) It will be difficult for the NWT to merge the ideals of the water strategy with resource development within the territory.
- 4) Upstream development in other provinces such as Alberta may make the ecological goals of the strategy difficult to achieve.
- 5) Transboundary agreements will impact the water strategy.
- 6) Accelerating climate change could lead the current strategy to become irrelevant if not implemented quickly.
- 7) Continued and strong leadership is vital to ensuring that the strategy is implemented properly.

FLOW found five lessons that other provinces/territories should take to heart:

- 1) Governments are capable of doing their jobs, and doing them well; through hard work and perseverance, fundamental water policy reform at the provincial/territorial level is possible, even with limited human and financial capacity.
- 2) Better water management can help governments adapt to changing climate because water plays a central role in regulating the global climate.
- 3) Full water policy reform is possible.
- 4) It is necessary to create a national water strategy.
- 5) Strong leadership is vital.

For more details, please refer to the Fall 2011 FLOW Monitor, available at <http://www.flowcanada.org/policy/monitor>.

Key Discussion Themes

Bob Sandford's presentation was followed by a discussion. In both Edmonton and Calgary, the following themes were evident:

National Water Strategy

Participants intently focused on the idea of a *national water strategy*. Some individuals wondered how a national strategy would be defined: How involved would the federal government be? Can a water strategy stand alone or should it be rolled into other proposed national strategies, such as a national energy strategy? What kind of water would a strategy apply to? Surface water? Ground water? And most importantly, what is the key problem that a national strategy should address?

There was broad agreement that, at the very least, there should be common enforceable drinking water standards across the country. Currently, the federal government provides safe drinking water guidelines but leaves enforcement and implementation in the hands of the provinces. This raises a key question: should the federal government seek to enforce standards or rely on moral suasion?

The difficulty with the argument for a national water strategy is that the current government is generally not fond of broad federal frameworks. An added challenge lies in having to make the argument for a water strategy at the same time that other stakeholder groups are calling for national strategies on, for example, energy, Asia-Pacific trade, and pharmaceuticals.

Culture of Water Waste

Canada's *culture of water waste* will, in the end, harm us. We cannot afford to maintain the public infrastructure that is required for increased water provision (e.g., treatment plants, conveyance infrastructure). We are putting our public health at risk if this infrastructure is not repaired and maintained adequately. One of the dilemmas here is that municipalities and water providers tend to promote water conservation, but when less water is used, revenue is reduced. This leads to less money available for infrastructure maintenance. This problem could be addressed by changing the way that water is priced. The more we are required to pay for water, the more likely it will be that water is used in a more conscientious manner because the consequence of not doing so would be a higher water bill.

Making the Case for Water as a Priority

Alberta is a highly urbanized province. The majority of the water issues in the NWT, however, are found in smaller communities. How can politicians get urban buy-in for issues that do not appear to be directly linked to urban water issues? This is likely one of the major difficulties that the Government of Alberta will face, not only if changes in its water policies are made, but also if it decides to work with the NWT so that their strategy can be successfully implemented.

Conclusion

The main conclusion of Bob Sanford's presentation was that it is time for a national water strategy. A national strategy has the potential to help solve Canada's water challenges. Stakeholders, however, hold varying views on what a water strategy should include. Although a national strategy would likely address the jurisdictional fragmentation that currently exists in the area of water policy, it is unclear whether a national strategy can be created and adapted quickly enough so that the NWT water strategy can be implemented successfully.

Although implementing the majority of the *Northern Voices, Northern Waters* strategy may be difficult, the strategy itself is a fine example of how a territorial government tackled a challenging issue, engaged its population through collaboration, and put forth a strategy of which many in the NWT are extremely proud. The rest of Canada should learn from this success story in policy development. If other provinces and territories take a similar approach to developing their water policies, we all might find that working together to ensure the sustainability of our nation's water resources is not so difficult after all.

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In 1971, the Canada West Foundation was established to give the people of the West—British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba—a voice for their dreams, interests and concerns. In doing so, the goal was to put the West on the national agenda and be at the forefront of the most important issues and debates.

Since then, the Canada West Foundation has successfully met that goal, proving itself to be one of Canada's premier research institutes. The Canada West Foundation is the only think tank dedicated to being the objective, nonpartisan voice for issues of vital concern to western Canadians.

This year we celebrate 40 years of representing western viewpoints across Canada. We are proud of our accomplishments and know our research and commentary has improved government policy and decision making.

Today the West is in, but we won't stop there. We continue to promote important issues and debates that provide made-in-the-West solutions to national problems and keep the West thriving.

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