



Federal budget 2008 and Water

What's in the budget?

- \$330 million over two years to extend the Plan of Action for Drinking Water in First Nations communities to improve access to safe drinking water.

What does it mean for Canadians?

The 2008 budget provides no new specific funding to improve water quality beyond extending the plan of action for drinking water for First Nations.

The Budget claims that “the Government’s comprehensive ecoACTION plan is making progress on preserving and enhancing the environment, improving air and water quality, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and addressing the health effects of environmental contaminants.” However, no actual “ecoAction plan” seems to exist: either it is a closely guarded state secret or wishful thinking and political rhetoric. Furthermore, the government’s ecoAction website has little to say about water quality.

No additional policy, program or money was announced for ‘preserving or enhancing’ water quality. An articulated and comprehensive National Water Strategy is conspicuous in its absence. In the 2007 budget it received but honourable mention yet we have lost ground here. There is no increased funding for municipal water and wastewater infrastructure upgrades or maintenance. Our public water assets

are now more vulnerable than ever to privatization and corporate profiteering with an open invitation from the newly established P3 Crown Corporation. Water quality is clearly not a priority in this budget.

Although \$330 million is allocated to First Nations water improvements, the government is playing a numbers game in the “Strengthening Partnerships with Aboriginal Canadians” budget allocations. Much of this money is re-profiled and re-announced from previous budgets. Extra money for First Nations programs in health, social services, education, infrastructure including water, amounts to a dismal \$270 million. These funds could be contingent upon negotiated agreements between First Nations, the provinces and territories and the private sector.. Water in many First Nations communities remains under pressure and at high risk. For some communities these abysmal conditions have been a reality for the better part of a decade.

What choices did this government not make?

The Harper government chose to exclude from this budget a serious and comprehensive National Water Strategy. Access to safe and clean water must be enshrined as a fundamental right, and standards legislated to enforce this right. Canada’s water needs be protected from trade deals in international agreements that promote the privatization of water services and that define water as a tradable commodity.

It is imperative that bulk water exports and water diversions are prohibited. A true strategy would implement a public, national investment strategy for all communities across the country.

Stephen Harper refused to sign the UN declaration on Water as a Human Right, and decided on inaction in ensuring the health and well being of Aboriginal peoples and lands. The Plan for Action for Drinking Water for First Nations has shown slow progress. Two years later 59% of First Nations water operators remain untrained; of the high-risk communities, over half remain so; and,

as of this budget, 91 aboriginal communities are under boil-water advisory. The federal government could choose to develop a water strategy to ensure the health and wellbeing of aboriginal people. They could have met Kelowna accord commitments in this budget and allocated serious dollars to aboriginal water infrastructure. They opted instead for national disgrace.

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