

“Putting a price tag on water is politically unappealing, but the reason we waste so much is because it is free.”



It is a liquid as precious as life itself, making up 65 per cent of the human body, covering about two-thirds of the earth's surface and essential for the survival of every living organism. Yet there is nothing we take more for granted than the water that comes rushing from the faucet every time we turn on the tap.

Over a lifetime, the average Canadian will flush enough down the drain to fill eight Olympic-sized swimming pools. We use twice as much water per person as the average European for bathing, brushing our teeth and washing our clothes, dishes and vehicles.

Fortunately, we have lots of it. With 20 per cent of the world's supply of fresh water, Canada has more water than any other country of comparable size and population. We are also using it at a rapidly escalating rate. In the last 30 years, our water use has almost doubled, while our population grew by just a little over 30 per cent.

To their credit, the provincial Conservatives appear to get that point. The problem is they are reluctant to do much about it. Faced with the politically unappealing prospect of putting a price tag on water, Environment Minister Lorne Taylor opted for a passive strategy, seeking a 30 per cent voluntary reduction in our household use by 2015. That means taking shorter showers, installing low-flow toilets and letting our lawns get a little brown before turning on the sprinklers.

While cutting our water use by almost a third may seem an ambitious goal, in reality it is setting the bar low. Environment Canada estimates we could reduce personal consumption by 40 per cent without any

noticeable change in our lifestyles. Leaky water mains alone are blamed for a 13 per cent loss of municipal water. Calgaryans consume about 50 per cent more water than Edmontonians, largely because half the homes in Calgary don't have water meters.

The reason we waste so much is because it is free. Our water bills cover only the cost of treatment and distribution. Although many of us may feel we have just as much right to water as we have to sunshine and the air we breathe, there is a grow-



ing sense that the only real incentive for us to conserve is to have to pay for it. “I think people have a basic right to enough water for their personal use at a low cost,” says professor David Schindler, a world-renowned water ecologist from the University of Alberta and recent recipient of the Order of Canada. “But the rate you pay should get higher the more you use.”

That would have greatest impacts on the big users in the province, specifically agriculture and industry. Municipal use accounts for only 11 per cent of all water used in Alberta. But irrigation consumes 44.8 per cent, power plants use 26.2 per cent and the oil industry uses 4.6 per cent. The latter may sound small, but it is the equivalent of a five-hour flow of the Peace River being pumped down oil wells every year, removing it from the water cycle.

For political reasons, the provincial Conservatives are reluctant to risk their close relationship with industry and agriculture by making them pay for water. But they may not have much choice if their conservation measures are to gain acceptance. “The general public is going to be very cynical about water conservation if they don't see industrial and agricultural users being put under any pressure to also cut their use,” says Schindler.

At the same time, the Tories' commitment to conservation rings hollow considering their resistance to the Kyoto Accord on global warming, another major threat to our water supply. Due to rising temperatures, glaciers that feed our river systems could disappear as soon as 25 years from now, reducing mountain-fed rivers to a trickle. With higher temperatures also come higher rates of evaporation.

To deal with our dwindling water supply, Environment Minister Taylor is contemplating more dams to catch mountain runoff and redirect it to our cities and farms. But not only are water diversion projects out of sync with modern environmental practices, they could pose an irresistible temptation to our parched neighbours, further threatening this precious resource. “There are sure to be demands that we share our abundant waters with water-poor regions,” Schindler says. “Pressures to export water will come from both inside and outside Canada.”

Against this backdrop, putting a price tag on water as a conservation measure may not be so unappealing after all. There are worse things than having to pay for water—such as not having any left to buy at any price.

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