



June 12, 2020

The Honourable Jonathan Wilkinson, P.C., M.P.
 Minister of Environment and Climate Change
 House of Commons
 Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Re: Expediting Creation of the Canada Water Agency

Dear Minister:

We applaud and strongly support your government’s mandate commitment to protect water security for future generations of Canadians through the creation of a Canada Water Agency. A new Canada Water Agency will be an important legacy institution that will help ensure the government’s long-term ability to safeguard our freshwater in the face of a changing climate. To capitalize on this opportunity, we respectfully advise you to expedite creation of the Canada Water Agency so that the Agency is in operation and beginning its important work by late fall 2020, one year after the Prime Minister’s mandate letter.

Canada is facing urgent and complex water challenges that will only become more pressing as the effects of climate change intensify. The COVID-19 pandemic has put many of these challenges into sharp relief and highlighted the urgent need for the Canada Water Agency to be established. For instance, responding to spring 2020 floods in western Canada has been greatly complicated by measures put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19. Once established, the new Agency will play an important role coordinating and, where appropriate, integrating water-related programming across the federal government, as well as establishing key partnerships with other levels of government and important actors across the water community.

We are aware that current internal timelines aim to include the Agency in Budget 2022 and establish it after that time. We strongly believe that this lengthy timeline creates a very real risk that establishment of the Agency will be pushed beyond your government’s current mandate. Public momentum – as shown in the numerous supportive and detailed comments on your PlaceSpeak platform – is strongly behind the creation of the Agency. Feedback from webinars and our discussions with individuals and organizations across the water community indicate that

there is broad and increasing support for a much more expedited timeline. Additional webinars on regional water issues are planned across the country, including a major policy webinar on agriculture and water, featuring Ralph Goodale, on June 25, 2020. There is genuine excitement in the water community about a Canada Water Agency and great expectations that it will soon come to fruition.

We advise the federal government to capitalize on this support by establishing the Canada Water Agency immediately (the attached one-page note details a cost-effective, expedited process for doing so) and by including funding for the Agency in Budget 2021. Once established, the new Canada Water Agency can then lead co-creation of its own mandate through in-depth collaboration with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments, local authorities, and the general public. This plan offers a practical, achievable, and broadly supported pathway to fulfilling a key mandate commitment of this government.

It is imperative to comprehensively modernize federal freshwater leadership through institutional, legislative, and policy reform. Establishing a Canada Water Agency is just one piece of this puzzle, but it is an important mandate commitment that can and must be achieved.

There is currently a small window of opportunity to create the Agency – we urge you to move quickly before this window closes. We welcome and request the opportunity to discuss this important priority with you in more detail.

Sincerely,

Tom Axworthy

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University of Toronto

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Coordinator, Forum for Leadership on Water

John Pomeroy

Director, Global Water Futures Programme,
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cc. The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
The Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau, P.C., M.P.
Mr. Terry Duguid, M.P.

Establishing the Canada Water Agency: A Six-Month Plan

The Canada Water Agency can be established in six months following the timeline below. Not all questions can be answered in six months, but the Agency that emerges from this process will have the institutional foundation to build a robust and collaborative mandate. Without this foundation as a starting point, it will be challenging to build an effective Canada Water Agency at all. We recommend a three-step process to establish the Agency:

1. Undertake Internal Reorganization

July 2020

The Canada Water Agency can be created expeditiously by building from existing strengths within the federal system. Initially, the Agency should be anchored by two major units from Environment and Climate Change Canada: the National Hydrological Service and Water Science and Technology Directorate. Drawing from these two units will provide the Agency with the capacity and expertise needed to begin establishing itself. The Canada Water Agency would initially report through the Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

2. Commission External Report

August 2020

A reputable management consulting company should be enlisted by the Privy Council Office to complete a focused and expedited report that defines additional skills and capacity which should be added to the Agency from other federal agencies or through external recruitment. Examples include groundwater and flood risk mapping skills from Natural Resources Canada and soil and water conservation expertise from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

3. Amalgamation and Interdepartmental Coordination

September-December 2020

The Machinery of Government Secretariat in the Privy Council Office should use the external report identified above to amalgamate additional skills and capacity within the Canada Water Agency. The Secretariat should also establish an organizational structure and reporting relationship for the Agency, as well as mechanisms and processes for broader interdepartmental coordination of water priorities and programs across the federal bureaucracy.

This timeline will allow a robust, comprehensive Canada Water Agency to be established before the end of 2020. Once it is established, the Agency will be well-situated to elaborate on its mandate and priorities through in-depth collaboration with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments, local authorities, water organizations, and the general public. Budget 2021 should provide resources to support this collaborative process and the Agency's first year of operation.