



The Value and State of Fresh Water and Appropriate Responses to Freshwater Issues Survey

Executive Summary

Prepared for Environment and Climate Change Canada

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**The Value and State of Fresh Water and Appropriate Responses to Freshwater Issues Survey
Final report**

Prepared for Environment and Climate Change Canada by Environics Research

July 2021

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Executive summary

A. Background and objectives

The 2019 Mandate Letter to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change called on the Minister to:

With the support of the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, create a new Canada Water Agency (CWA) to work together with the provinces, territories, Indigenous communities, local authorities, scientists and others to find the best ways to keep our water safe, clean and well managed.

Develop further protections and take active steps to clean up the Great Lakes, Lake Winnipeg, Lake Simcoe and other large lakes.

A supplementary mandate letter, issued on January 15, 2021, reaffirmed the CWA commitment. It directed the Minister of ECCC to “With the support of the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, the Minister of Natural Resources and the Special Representative for the Prairies, continue work to create a new Canada Water Agency....”.

To deliver on these dual commitments, ECCC has sought external input through national and regional policy forums, online tools, and other forms of engagement. Most participants have had a solid knowledge base and a strong personal or professional interest in fresh water. Thus, they represent a relatively small segment of the Canadian public.

The purpose of this public opinion research study is to complement ECCC’s previous engagement on the freshwater commitments by assessing the *general population’s* views on:

- The value and state of fresh water
- The appropriate responses to freshwater issues.

The findings of this study provide ECCC with an up-to-date understanding of public sentiment. ECCC intends to use the information to:

- Inform the implementation of the mandate letter commitments (and potentially other Government of Canada policies and programs)
- Inform external outreach and communications strategies for the CWA and large lakes initiative.

B. Methodology

EnviroNics Research conducted an online survey with 2,001 Canadians (aged 16 and older), from June 11 to June 19, 2021. The sample was stratified to ensure robust sample sizes across regions. Data was weighted approximately by region, age and gender to reflect the Canadian population according to the 2016 Census.

Survey respondents were recruited from registered members of an opt-in online panel. Since a sample drawn from an online panel is not a random probability sample, no formal estimates of sampling error can be calculated.

More information about the methodology for research is included in Appendix A of the full report.

C. Contract value

The contract value was \$39,922.09 (HST included).

D. Key findings

The survey results reveal that most Canadians consider fresh water to be among the most important natural resources in the country because of its value to the health of Canadians and to the environment.

Canadians believe the current quality of fresh water nationwide is in good shape, but are uncertain there is enough to meet long-term needs. They also hold mixed views about whether fresh water is being adequately protected, and anticipate that issues like water pollution and loss of wetlands will worsen over the next decade.

Most Canadians do not feel knowledgeable about fresh water, which is evident in their relatively elementary understanding of the threats facing fresh water in Canada – they tend to focus on “pollution” writ large and on industry, with limited mention of household (over)use. Similarly, many place responsibility on governments to regulate industry and prevent water pollution. The results suggest the need for greater awareness of individual Canadians’ role in and responsibility for fresh water protection in Canada.

Value of fresh water

- There is a broad consensus that fresh water is one of Canada's most important natural resources; nearly half (46%) rate it as the most important natural resource in Canada (well ahead of forests and oil & gas, each at 17%), and seven in ten (72%) rank it among their top three choices. The importance of fresh water is linked most closely to the health of Canadians (87%), wildlife, and ecosystems (85%); as well as to food production (85%), quality of life (83%) and Canada's beauty (80%), all of which rank ahead of its perceived value to economic prosperity, industry, recreation, culture and Indigenous reconciliation.

State of and threats to fresh water

- There is broad but modest concern about the **quality** of fresh water in Canada, with three in four (75%) saying they are at least somewhat concerned, but only three in ten who are very concerned. This reflects general optimism that water quality in Canada is currently excellent or good (86%, vs. 11% who say it is only fair or poor). Despite general positivity about the current state of fresh water quality in Canada, there are mixed views about its trajectory over the past ten years. Roughly three in ten believe fresh water quality has declined in the past decade, while roughly equal proportions think it has stayed the same (32%) or improved (28%).
- Canadians express uncertainty that the **supply** of fresh water is adequate for our long-term needs. Only one in five (22%) are very confident, 55% are only somewhat confident, and 18% are not confident.
- When asked to name the biggest threat to Canada's fresh water, half (50%) of the population points to pollution, followed by industry (21%) and climate change (10%). By comparison, relatively few mention household waste of water (6%) as a problem. Looking ahead ten years, a majority believes that the major issues affecting fresh water, like pollution and loss of wetlands, are bound to worsen over time.

Appropriate response to issues

- After considering the state of and potential threats to fresh water, there are mixed views about whether fresh water in Canada is adequately protected. Over half of Canadians (55%) rate current efforts as excellent or good, compared to almost four in ten (38%) who rate them only fair or poor (8% are unsure).
- Suggestions for how to better protect fresh water in Canada focus on the role of governments in monitoring and regulating, as well as creating disincentives, such as fines for polluters and fees for overuse.
- When presented with the possibility, four of five (80%) agree that protection of Canada's fresh water could be improved if there was more collaboration between different levels of government and different jurisdictions.

Communicating about fresh water

- When asked to rank arguments in favour of protecting Canada's fresh water, leaving clean fresh water for future generations was ranked most compelling, with 64 percent selected this among their top three choices. Other strong arguments include safeguarding the health of Canadians (57% top three) and ensuring that wildlife and ecosystems have the fresh water they need (57% top three).
- Canadians do not feel particularly well informed about the state of fresh water in Canada: only two in ten (19%) say they are extremely or very informed. Overall, Canadians most often rely on television (40%) or the internet (35%) for information about fresh water. However, generational differences are evident, with younger Canadians more likely to turn to social media or the internet, and older Canadians more likely to find information through TV or government communications.

Differences by population segment

- The study results uncover differences in perceptions between generations of Canadians. Those 55 or older are more likely to say fresh water quality has declined in the past ten years (24%), and to predict that freshwater issues will further worsen over time (with the exception of water pollution, which all age groups equally anticipate will become more serious). Older Canadians 55 and up are also more likely than those under 35 to have concerns about freshwater protection in Canada.
- Among Canadians who live near fresh water, and those working in jobs that rely on fresh water; there is higher confidence that the current state of fresh water in Canada is good. However, there are also higher levels of concern about it worsening in the future.

E. Political neutrality statement and contact information

I hereby certify as a senior officer of Environics that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

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