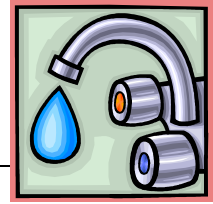


# Selling Canada's Water

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Canada lucked out in the global water sweeps. We are near the top of water-rich nations, trailing only Brazil, Russia and China.

Thanks to the replenishing cycle of rain and evaporation, the amount of water on Earth has remained the same over the past four billion years. Only in this generation has there been concern that we may be ruining our water supply. Of all the water on our planet, 97.5 per cent is sea water and three-quarters of the remaining 2.5 per cent is locked in polar ice caps. The tiny bit left over is drinkable.

Estimates of Canada's supply of fresh water vary from 5.6 per cent to nine per cent to 20 per cent of the world's supply, depending on how one defines "fresh water" – whether it means "available," "usable," or merely "existing." One study says Canada has 20 per cent of the world's fresh water – ranking it at the top – but only nine per cent of "renewable" fresh water.

Whatever the case, Canadians consume 350 litres of water a day per capita, second only to the Americans as the most profligate wasters of water in the world. The average global citizen needs only between 20 and 40 litres of water a day for drinking and sanitation.

It has been said that water will be "the oil of the 21st century," or "liquid gold," and that it will cause wars between nations. Whatever happens with regard to global water, and the environmental, economic and political fallout, Canada will be a major player. Talks have intensified during the past few years on whether Canada should take advantage of its bountiful supply of water by selling it for profit – like gas, oil and timber.

The House of Commons intends to hold televised hearings starting in September 2001 on "freshwater security" to examine the pros and cons of selling Canada's water to other countries. Canada sells bottled water to other countries, but shipments of bulk water are not allowed.

There is also the issue of whether, under the terms of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), water is a "vital resource" like the air we breathe, or a "commodity" to be sold and traded.

## **Water as a Commodity**

Gerry White is an entrepreneur who wants to sell Canada's water to the world and sees no reason why he should be prevented from doing so.

Specifically, he wants to sell water from Gisborne Lake in Newfoundland. The lake is 16 kilometres long and 10 kilometres wide, near the south coast of Newfoundland. White flew over Lake Gisborne one summer day in 1996 and nearly didn't notice it because the water is so clear.

White quickly developed a plan to skim 500,000 cubic metres from Gisborne Lake each week and ship it in bulk to overseas customers. He argued that draining 500,000 cubic metres of water would lower the lake an inch, but this would be replenished naturally within 10 hours.

He also argued it would be a godsend to jobs-poor Newfoundland, especially the small community of Grand Le Pierre, 30 kilometres down the hill on the Atlantic shore. Grand Le Pierre used to be a thriving cod-fishing town, then the cod disappeared and now the unemployment rate is more than 40 per cent.

White convinced the town's mayor, Edward Fizzard, to back the plan. Fizzard imagined a water pipeline from Gisborne Lake, a bottling plant in Grand Le Pierre, work for locals loading tankers to take the water to distant ports.

When environmentalists got wind of this, White's grand plan was scrapped. The environmentalists successfully argued that allowing Gisborne Lake water to be sold in bulk would make Canadian water a "commodity" and thus subject to the terms and conditions of GATT and NAFTA.

The same thing happened two years earlier when the province of Ontario issued a permit to a private company to collect Great Lakes water and ship it in bulk to Asia. The permit was issued to Nova Group, a company in Sault Ste. Marie, allowing it to ship up to 600 million litres of Lake Superior water to Asia by 2002. There was such a public outcry – on both sides of the border – that the permit was withdrawn.

Early in 2001, Roger Grimes, the new premier of Newfoundland, revived the plan to sell water from Gisborne Lake. He has called for a review of Gerry White's Gisborne Lake plan and thinks there is a good chance Newfoundland may go it alone and damn the federal torpedoes. Mayor Fizzard of Grand Le Pierre couldn't be happier. "The water is just running into the Atlantic Ocean, no one is getting one nickel out of it," he told a visiting Toronto Star reporter in May 2001. "Why shouldn't it help us? It just seems like other parts of Canada want to keep Newfoundland down."

## **"Belongs to everyone and to no one"**

Maude Barlow is chair of the Council of Canadians, a citizens' group with 100,000 members. She is the Joan of Arc of those opposed to the sale of Canadian water.

"There is a common assumption that the world's water supply is huge and infinite," Barlow has said. "This assumption is false. At some time in the near future, water bankruptcy will result."

She cites a United Nations study that says by the year 2025 – less than 25 years – two-thirds of the world will be "water-poor."

"The wars of the future are going to be fought over water," Barlow has declared.

She endorses a 1999 paper from the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA) that says: "Water is an essential need, a public trust, not a commodity. It belongs to everyone and to no one." The CELA paper continues:

"Even large-scale water exports cannot possibly satisfy the social and economic needs of distant societies. Water shipped halfway around the world will only be affordable to the privileged and will deepen inequities between rich and poor. International trade in bulk water will allow elites to assure the quality of their own drinking water supplies, while permitting them to ignore the pollution of their local waters and the waste of their water management systems."

Commenting specifically on the Great Lakes Basin, CELA says:

"Changing water levels and flows will have unpredictable and harmful consequences to basin habitat, biodiversity, shorelines, jobs and culture, particularly to First Nations. Lower water levels will mean greater disturbance of highly contaminated sediments in shallow harbours and connecting channels and less dilution of polluted waters."

Barlow maintains that if Newfoundland is allowed to export bulk water, it becomes, ipso facto, a "good" under NAFTA, which would allow any other company in Canada to do the same. "The prime minister can't blame it on the provinces or the Constitution," Barlow says. "The federal government has jurisdiction over trade and could ban (water) exports tomorrow. Sadly, Jean Chrétien doesn't seem prepared to do that."