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Notes: Panel Presentation on Water- National Council of Women of Canada
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There is no question that we are facing a global water crisis. Around the world, 1.1 billion people do not have access to clean drinking water, and more than 2.5 billion people do not have access to basic water and sanitation services. The twin realities of deeply inequitable access to water and degradation together pose the greatest environmental and human rights crisis of our time.

Canada is not prepared. Canada does not have a national strategy to address urgent water issues. Current water policies, already inadequate, predate our knowledge of climate change, as well as the tragedies of Walkerton, Ontario, North Battleford, Saskatchewan and the Kashechewan Cree reserve in Northern Ontario.

Canada's freshwater is facing a variety of threats including contamination, shortages and pressure to export water to the United States. Meanwhile, municipalities and First Nations communities are struggling with crumbling infrastructure and private companies are eager to cash in on the problem. In Canada, there is no national strategy to address urgent water issues and to conserve and protect our water.

3. First Nations suffer the most. In Canada, contamination and inadequate water and sanitation services in First Nations communities pose a huge danger to human health and the environment. There are currently 80 First Nations communities under a boil-water advisory and 21 communities are deemed at severe risk.

4. Canada needs a National Water Policy. A Canadian plan must include national clean drinking water standards, committed federal funding for municipalities and First Nations communities to upgrade public water utilities, and a full ban on bulk water exports.

5. The global right to water. Canada was the only country to vote against the right to water at the United Nations in 2002 and has gone on record as being opposed to the right to water. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights developed General Comment 15, which confirms that the right to water is implicitly contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

6. The right to water in Canada. Recognizing the right to water in Canada will ensure equal and adequate access to water for all people, irrespective of their province or territory, or the community to which they belong.

7. Ban bulk water exports. There have been growing calls for Canada to allow bulk water exports. Paul Wihbey, president of a Washington think tank called the Global Water and Energy Strategy Team, told a 2006 business conference in Banff, Alberta that it is "nearly inevitable" that bulk water exports from Canada "will take place, given the political circumstances, within the next two to five years." Wihbey's group is suggesting that a freshwater pipeline could be built between Manitoba and Texas.

8. A threat to the ecosystem. Bulk water exports would permanently remove water from the ecosystem. With glaciers melting at alarming rates worldwide, and the Great Lakes levels at historic lows due to climate change, Canada's water security is threatened.

10. Water and Alberta's oil sands. Development of Alberta's massive oil sands will have dangerous and lasting impacts on the quantity and quality of fresh water in the Prairies. It takes between three and five barrels of water to extract just one barrel of oil, and 90 per cent of that water is permanently removed from the hydrological cycle.

Water Issues in Canada: Talking Points for Community Activists

INFRASTRUCTURE- PRIVATIZATION THREAT

Contamination and inadequate water and sanitation services in First Nations communities pose a huge danger to human health and the environment.

Kasheshewan made searing headlines in 2005 when the northern Ontario Cree community was forced to evacuate because of dangerous levels of water contamination. This one community awoke the rest of the country to a much larger issue- across the country first nation communities have been chronically underfunded and water services are in some cases not existent and in others boiled water advisories have been in place for years. First Nations communities are the sole responsibility of the federal government and we have simply failed them. There are currently 80 First Nations communities under a boil-water advisory and 21 communities are deemed at severe risk- 78% of the 18 First Nations water systems are on this list.

Across the country, we have aging infrastructure that is crumbling. Private companies see this as an opportunity to make a profit and are angling to cash in on the problem.

Water is a patchwork quilt of jurisdictions with the feds and the provinces playing a role, but the rubber really hits the road at the municipal level where increased responsibility and decreased federal dollars have meant that towns and cities are not able to maintain their water services.

Increasingly, these local governments, under the enormous pressure to treat and deliver clean water, are looking to the private sector for help and privatization is sneaking in through the back door as a "private-public partnership". Around the world, privatization has been a dismal failure and has meant high water rates, lower environmental and conservation standards, lost accountability but more horrifically, has meant that we allow water, something essential for all life, to be left to a system that sees those that can pay for it will have all they need and those who cannot pay for it will have to go without.

Moncton, New Brunswick is a case study of how the failure to invest in water infrastructure resulted in a controversial public-private partnership (P3) with U.S. Filter, now Veolia, for the design, operation and delivery of water services in 1999.

On Monday, February 12, the Sackville, New Brunswick town council announced it was seeking proposals from private companies to take over the water treatment facility.

BULK WATER EXPORTS

Ban bulk water exports. There have been growing calls for Canada to allow bulk water exports. Paul Wihbey, president of a Washington think tank called the Global Water and Energy Strategy Team, told a 2006 business conference in Banff, Alberta that it is “nearly inevitable” that bulk water exports from Canada “will take place, given the political circumstances, within the next two to five years.” Wihbey’s group is suggesting that a freshwater pipeline could be built between Manitoba and Texas.

Leaked documents, secret meetings and denials from governments. It sounds like tabloid fare, or a plot from a Hollywood movie. But sure enough, this story is taking place in Canada. And what’s the source of all the intrigue? Plans that are underway to export water in bulk to the U.S., under the auspices of greater Canada-U.S. integration.

In April 2007, the Council of Canadians obtained a leaked document produced by a Washington think tank, revealing that business and government leaders in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico were actively discussing bulk water exports. We received notice that an initiative called the “North American Future 2025 Project” was being led by the U.S.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Conference Board of Canada and the Mexican Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas. The Project calls for a series of “closed-door meetings” on North American integration dealing with a number of highly contentious issues including bulk water exports, a joint security perimeter and a continental resource pact.

According to the leaked document, a roundtable on the “Future of the North American Environment,” was planned for Friday April 27 in Calgary, and on the agenda was “water consumption, water transfers and artificial diversions of bulk water” with the aim of achieving “joint optimum utilization of the available water.”

The secrecy of the current discussions of bulk water exports is of major concern. There is such a profound disconnect between way that Canadians view water and how water is considered in this document, and my instinct is that this is the very reason this process is unfolding behind closed doors- because Canadians would be outraged.

Polls regularly show that at least 80% of Canadians are strongly opposed to bulk water exports, even if there is an opportunity to earn royalties. The vast majority of Canadians do not believe that water is a commodity that can be bought and sold.

Water shortages are very real- and common thinking is that two-thirds of the US states may run dry very soon. But artificially withdrawing water from one watershed and shipping it to another is not the answer and will not address shortages, but rather ensure that those who can afford it can have all the water they want, where as those who cannot will have to go without.

The Council of Canadians is very concerned about this discussion of bulk water exports and we believe that bulk water exports must be banned and any discussion of water must take place with full public scrutiny.

RIGHT TO WATER

The global right to water. Canada was the only country to vote against the right to water at the United Nations in 2002 and has gone on record as being opposed to the right to water. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights developed General Comment 15, which confirms that the right to water is implicitly contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

In 2002, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stated, “the human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use.”

One hundred and forty-five countries endorsed this statement, but one country stood up and was alone in the vote against the adoption of the right to water. It is a national shame that Canada, my country, was the rogue state on the right to water and it certainly has tarnished our reputation= we earned a rebuke from the United Nations in May, 2006.

Endorsing the right to water would ensure access to clean, safe drinking water for all Canadians, regardless of the town, city, region, or First Nations community they live in. Treating water as a fundamental right will help address the issues of poverty alleviation, gender inequality and promote healthy communities all around the world.

By endorsing the right to water at the United Nations Human Rights Council, Canada can regain our position in the international community as a leader on human rights.

The Council of Canadians has a vision of an integrated National Water Policy that would:

- § **Create national clean drinking water standards.**
- § **Commit federal funding for municipalities and First Nations communities to upgrade public water utilities.**
- § **Ban the bulk export of water.**

Most importantly, a National Water Policy must treat water as a fundamental right and close the door forever to corporate control of fresh water. Canada should take the lead within the international community by recognizing the right to water at the United Nations. Recognizing the right to water in Canada will ensure equal and adequate access to water for all people, irrespective of their province or territory, or the community to which they belong.