

Leading Change in B.C. Water Policy: Watershed Security Strategy and the Water Sustainability Act

Presentation to UBCM Convention 2023, Electoral Area Directors Forum

September 19, 2023

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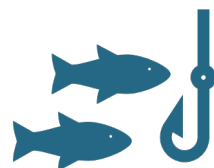
Kathryn Forge, Assistant Deputy Minister – BC Emergency Management and Climate Readiness

Purpose

- Asked to cover topics including:
 - Water Sustainability Act
 - Ground water licensing
 - Housing authorizations
 - Drought and water availability
- Provide time for Q+A and follow up

New WLRS Ministry Mandate - water

Created April 2023 to lead B.C.'s work on water policy and watershed planning



Co-develop **Watershed Security Strategy and Fund** with First Nations.



Transform management and **stewardship of our waters, lands and resources**, together with First Nations.



Develop **modern land use plans and permitting processes** that consider new and cumulative impacts

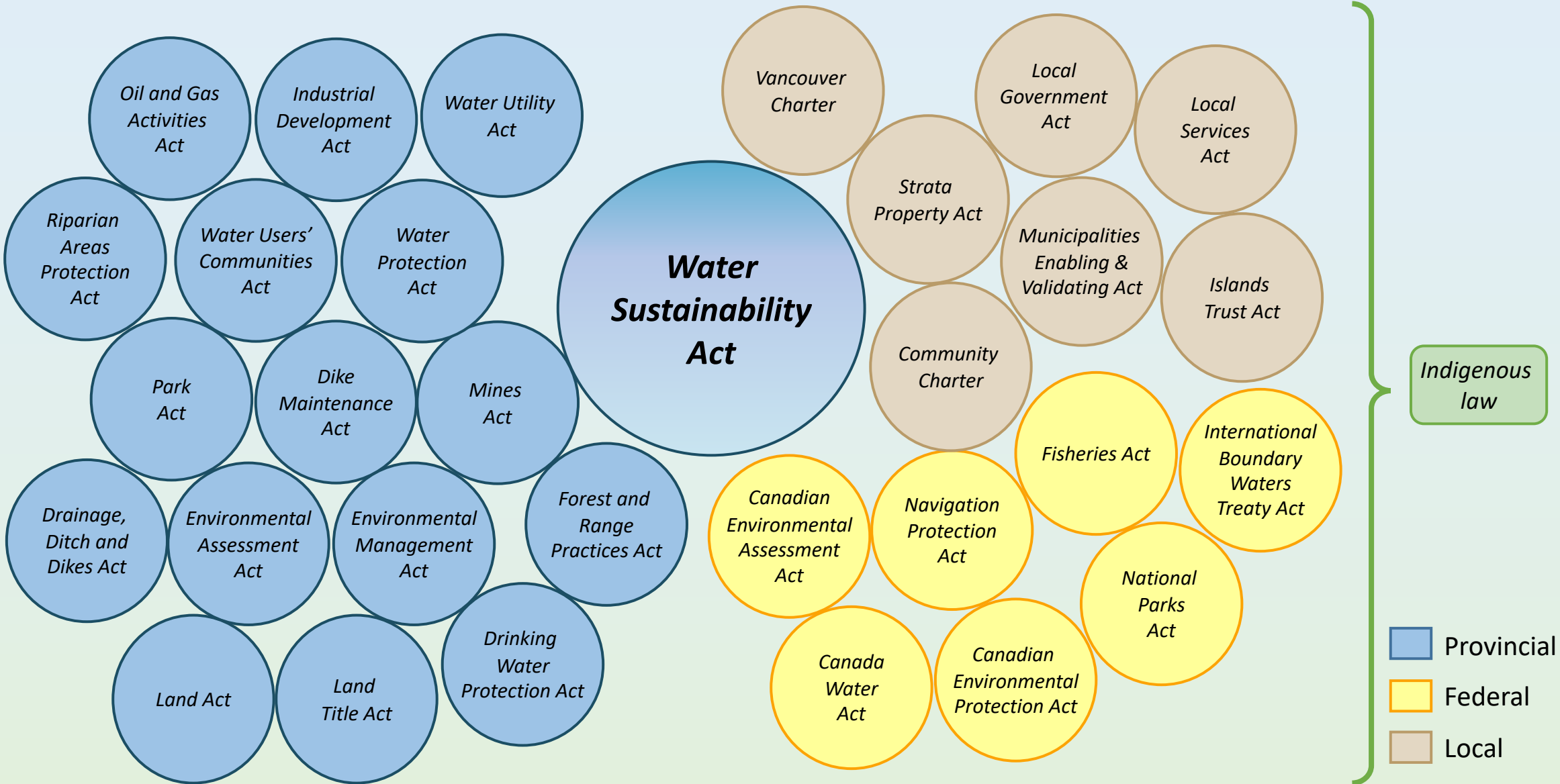


Lead cross-government work to support sustainable **economic development, housing and infrastructure** while maintaining high levels of environmental protection.

Background - Water Sustainability Act

- The *Water Sustainability Act* (WSA) was brought into force in 2016.
- WSA is B.C.'s principal law for managing the diversion and use of water resources.
- Responsibility for WSA implementation is shared between Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship (WLRS) and Ministry of Forests (FOR).
- Introduced new tools to support watershed planning, management and governance.
- Under the WSA a person must obtain authorization (e.g., water licence) for the diversion, storage, and use of surface water and non-domestic diversion/use of groundwater.

Water-Related Legislation in B.C.



Changing Environmental Conditions



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Emergency Management and Climate Readiness 

Province assisting communities; people, businesses urged to conserve water

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As drought conditions worsen, with unprecedented... observed in British Columbia this year... urged to prioritize water...

Information Bulletin

Vancouver
Thursday, July 13, 2023 12:31 PM



British Columbia

Drought conditions at highest level in parts of B.C. as province warns of tightening water restrictions

Two-thirds of the province's water basins are now at Level 4 or 5 drought

CBC News · Posted: Jul 13, 2023 10:25 AM PDT | Last Updated: July 13



ENVIRONMENT

'Not normal': B.C. farmers, crops, livestock feeling the impacts of drought

By **Elizabeth McSheffrey** · Global News
Posted July 15, 2023 5:26 pm · Updated July 16, 2023 9:02 am



ENVIRONMENT

Impact of B.C. drought on province's fish could be severe, experts say

By **Victoria Femia** · Global News
Posted August 6, 2023 5:37 pm



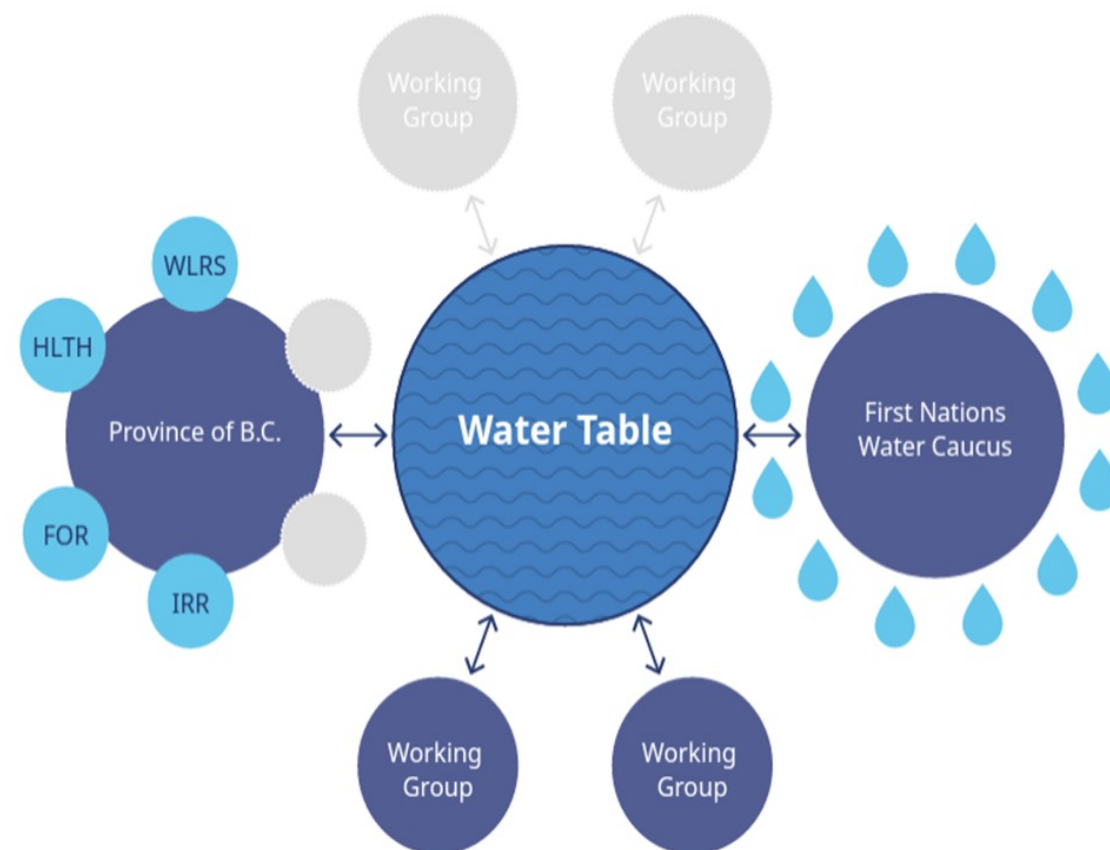
Developing a Watershed Security Strategy

Develop long-term path to a future where clean water and healthy watersheds continue to sustain communities, ecosystems, and the economy.

Co-development with First Nations

Two completed rounds of broad public engagement

Mandate to “co-develop, complete and launch” in early 2024



Watershed Security Strategy - Outcomes

- Transparent and effective watershed governance
- Climate resilient watersheds
- Safe and reliable drinking water
- Dependable water access
- Ecological integrity
- Healthy and abundant fish populations
- Clean and sustainable energy production
- Wild and farmed food security
- Trusted and accessible data and knowledge

Reconciliation

Key Issues - Housing Strategy

January 2023, established
Housing Action Taskforce to
accelerate permitting across
Natural Resource Ministries.



Key Issue - Groundwater Licensing

Why license groundwater?

- Increased demand on water sources
- climate change
- environmental needs

Groundwater licensing (BC Ministry of Forests):

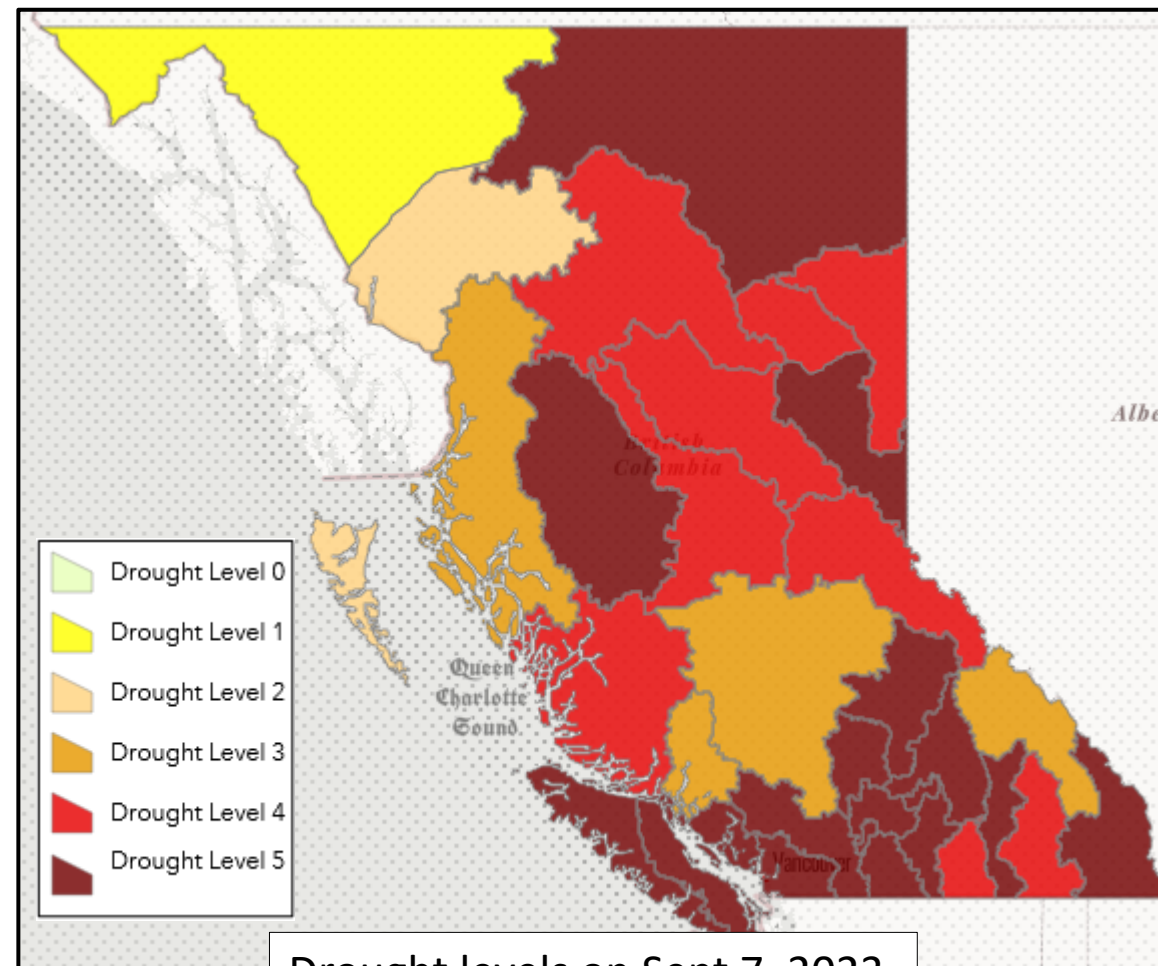
- Creates equity between surface water and groundwater users
- allows for better management
- allocates specific volumes; provides certainty to users
- Existing groundwater users had 6 years to apply for a “transitioning groundwater licence”

Challenges

- Businesses who not yet applied for licences
- Administration of received applications
- In many areas, use of groundwater increasingly strained
- Reforms considered as part of Watershed Security Strategy

Key Issue: Drought Response

- BC experienced severe drought levels and unprecedented conditions across the province
- Early investments:
 - Climate adaptation – local governments
 - Agriculture Water Infrastructure Program
 - Healthy Watersheds and Salmon Restoration
- All people, organizations and businesses were asked to reduce water consumption
- Province worked to balance needs of water users and vulnerable fish populations
 - BC Energy Regulator water restrictions
 - Four Fish Population Protection Orders (Salmon River, Bessette Creek, Tsolum River and Koksilah River)



Next Steps

- “Co-develop, complete and launch” new Watershed Security Strategy
- Updated drought response framework and risk assessment
- Permitting and authorization solutions
- Increased efforts at proactive planning, information systems, and investments

Appendix

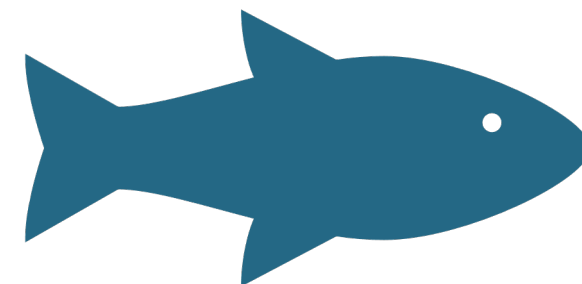
New Tools within the WSA

The WSA also introduced new measures to help British Columbia to respond to existing and new pressures on water resources. This includes:

- Area-based tools
- Water Objectives
- Water Sustainability Plans
- Requirement for decision makers to consider Environmental Flow Needs on new water licence applications
- New tools for managing water during shortages to balance the needs of the environment and fish populations with the needs of water users

Temporary Fish Protection Orders

- WSA s.88 is used in drought to protect threatened fish populations
- Minister must consider the needs of agricultural users
- S.88 Order does not need to follow first-in-time, first-in-right (FITFIR)
- Four orders in 2023 restricted forage users who had largest impact on water streamflow (forage producers, industrial users and mining)
- Smaller and more vulnerable users were not affected (e.g., drinking water for people and livestock, watering for perennial crops)
- Other options require restricting smaller and/or more vulnerable users (e.g., domestic use, livestock drinking water, market vegetables, fruit)



Temporary Protection Order - Salmon River

- Salmon River Chinook migration and spawning requires ~1,270 L/s
- Flows were declining (~530 L/s), despite voluntary efforts
- >95% of water used to irrigate forage (hay, alfalfa, corn)
- Unauthorized use was identified and addressed
- Aug 15: s.88 order issued to restrict forage crop watering
 - Most users had completed their 2nd cut
- Water use maintained for domestic use, livestock watering and market vegetables.

Discharge (unit values) (m³/s)

