

A water challenge to us all

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Editor's note: The following opinion piece has been submitted by the Winter River- Tracadie Bay Watershed Association.

The City of Charlottetown has been pumping all of the water it uses out of the Winter River watershed, far beyond sustainable levels. More than 80 years of water extraction have dramatically affected water levels, habitat, fish and wildlife and the overall ecological integrity of the watershed. An article on the Green Page in The Guardian earlier this week discussed key issues related to this water extraction.

Recently, the city has become actively involved in the development of water conservation programs.

It's time for the city to take the next needed steps to protect its water supply and safeguard the watershed. The Integrated Sustainability Plan adopted by the city would require the sustainable extraction and use of water. To achieve sustainable extraction, a 26 per cent overall reduction is needed from 2010 levels. In each of the three wellfields, extraction needs to be reduced by 48 per cent at Brackley, by 26 per cent at Union, while no reduction is required at this time at Suffolk. The province of P. E. I. issued a permit for water extraction to the city in 2010, with several conditions to be met by the end of 2015.

On the occasion of World Water Day, which is today, the Winter River- Tracadie Bay Watershed Association presents a challenge to the city, its residents, businesses and institutions with the following 'permit condition':

That city water extraction from the Winter River watershed be reduced to sustainable levels by the end of 2015.

We call for the city to take the following steps to address this challenge:

1. To endorse "sustainable water extraction" (the recognized standard of 50 per cent of recharge from each wellfield) as its new standard for reporting and evaluating its water use, rather than per cent of the provincial permit.
2. To establish yearly "reduction targets" that would enable the city to achieve this standard of sustainable extraction by 2015: this would represent an average overall reduction of six per cent per year from 2010 levels.
3. That the programs and policies for water conservation developed by the city be directly tied to these reduction targets. Savings achieved by each program (e. g. low flow toilet rebates) can then be considered in relation to its contribution in meeting these overall targets. Setting reduction targets without integrating them with programs can be an empty and even discouraging process: witness Canada's Kyoto carbon reduction targets. The city can develop a comprehensive series of programs, as shown, at top, flush with water from spring run- off, and, at bottom, last August when this tributary just above the Union Road ran dry. programs, incentives and measures that, taken together, have the potential to meet these reduction targets. Ongoing monitoring of the reductions achieved by these programs, and using this feedback to modify

programs is required to assure that targets will be met. Access to this information offers a helpful means of collective participation in this process.

4. That sustainable water use be a condition considered in all new development permits.

The development of the proposed wellfield in Miltonvale Park would also make a significant contribution toward meeting these reduction targets.

We recognize that it is the city's role to develop the needed programs and policies, and that they have excellent people and resources committed to water conservation. We offer our assistance to the city in any way possible in the development of these programs and policies. We suggest that the following measures would be most helpful in meeting water reduction targets:

- Universal metering of water for all users is essential. Unless people are able to monitor their use, they are unlikely to become actively involved in the process of conservation.
- A tiered rate structure for water use offers an important incentive to conserve. The level of water use needed to meet a person's basic daily needs (50- 100 litres per day) should be very inexpensive, followed by a series of 'blocks' of water use, each at an increasing rate. The more you use, the more you increasingly pay.
- Programs and policies need to be addressed to all users. Initial programs have been more directed toward residential users, but it is vital that businesses and institutions be targeted as well, particularly the 'big users' who are responsible for a disproportionate amount of water use.

Twenty- eight customers consume 19 per cent of the water used in the city. A program of incentives and penalties could be developed that passes our 'challenge' on to users requiring each to meet 'their fair share' of water reduction (e. g. six per cent per year).

Our focus in this 'challenge' has been directed toward the City of Charlottetown and how its programs and policies can contribute to the reductions needed in water extraction to protect the Winter River watershed and the water resource. The provincial government also has a responsibility and we challenge it to develop policies on water extraction incorporating the same standard of sustainability we propose to the city.

Ultimately, water conservation and living sustainably is a challenge and a responsibility that needs to be taken to heart by each of us. Our water footprint, like our ecological footprint, is large. We use more than three times what we need of this precious and limited resource. While programs and policies are essential, what we require most is a change of mind and heart.

Each and every one of us is responsible for the care of our water, our watersheds and the world that sustains us. We can each begin right now, and realize that every action counts.