

ecojustice



## WATERPROOF 3

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### CANADA'S DRINKING WATER REPORT CARD

## THE ESSENTIALS

No matter where you live in Canada, we all depend on clean drinking water to survive. Water is provided to our homes in a number of ways—from large-scale public treatment and distribution systems if you live in a major city to private wells dug deep into the land if you live in the vast rural areas that span between urban centres. No matter where you get your water, all levels of government share the responsibility of ensuring it is safe and accessible for all Canadians.

*Waterproof 3* is the third drinking water report card from Ecojustice. It evaluates water policies, programs and legislation across the country and gives each province and territory, as well as the federal government, a grade based on how well they're protecting drinking water. Released every five years, *Waterproof* also shows how each jurisdiction has performed over time when it comes to things like treatment and testing requirements, drinking water quality standards, source water protection, and transparency and accountability.

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## KEY FINDINGS

### • WATER IS BEING CONTAMINATED AT THE SOURCE

Full-fledged source water protection—a critical first step in achieving safe drinking water systems—has been implemented to some degree in only 7 of 13 provinces and territories, and is notably lacking in industry-heavy areas where the risk of contamination is high.

### • NOT ALL CANADIANS ARE TREATED EQUALLY

There is a huge disparity when it comes to how much of a province's population receives drinking water from systems covered by legally-binding source water protection plans—from 92 per cent in PEI to zero in Alberta. Some provinces are on track to protect 100 per cent of their water systems in coming years.

### • LITTLE HAS CHANGED IN FIVE YEARS

While some jurisdictions have stepped up water protection efforts since our last report in 2006, most have remained stagnant and made only marginal improvements to water treatment, drinking water quality standards and testing requirements.

### • WARNINGS AREN'T REACHING THOSE WHO NEED THEM

Despite huge advances in information technology, there is an alarming deficiency in the consistency of water advisories, particularly in remote, rural areas. No central resource or archive exists, there are no standard criteria or procedures and information and terminology varies considerably between provinces, regions and even local health units.

### • ANOTHER FAIL FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Federal management of water—for places like First Nations reserves, military bases and federal parks—still fails to meet basic benchmarks for safe consumption. In this report card, we find that the federal government is failing in almost every aspect of water protection, even though it should be setting rigorous standards for allowable contaminant levels in our drinking water.

### • OUR BIGGEST THREATS HAVE SHIFTED

In *Waterproof 1* and *2*, the greatest identified risks to our water were deficiencies in the frontlines of water protection—the laws, programs, policies and personnel directly responsible for safe drinking water. Due to much hard work and dedication, this is no longer the case. Today, the biggest threats relate to unprotected source water, climate change and government cutbacks. Left unaddressed, these factors could erode a decade's worth of progress.

## EMERGING ISSUE: SOURCE WATER PROTECTION (SWP)

For the first time, *Waterproof* examines Canada's efforts to protect source water—the streams, lakes and aquifers that feed our drinking water systems. In the face of evolving threats such as climate change and unmitigated contaminants, protecting the quality and quantity of source water is a critical first step in a multi-barrier approach to ensuring safe drinking water for all.



Watch our video on how source water protection works at [ecojustice.ca/waterproof-3](http://ecojustice.ca/waterproof-3)

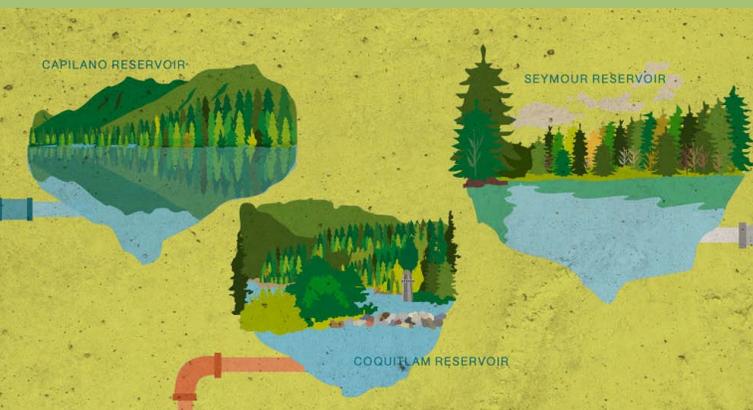
Protecting source water is essential because some contaminants are not effectively removed through standard treatment methods. For example, atrazine—a commonly used herbicide frequently found in water sources—is not removed by conventional treatment and requires expensive, active-carbon filtration.

Proactively protecting water at the source is less costly and more effective than treating contaminated water after the fact. It is also the only level of protection for Canadians who get their drinking water from non-public systems, such as wells.

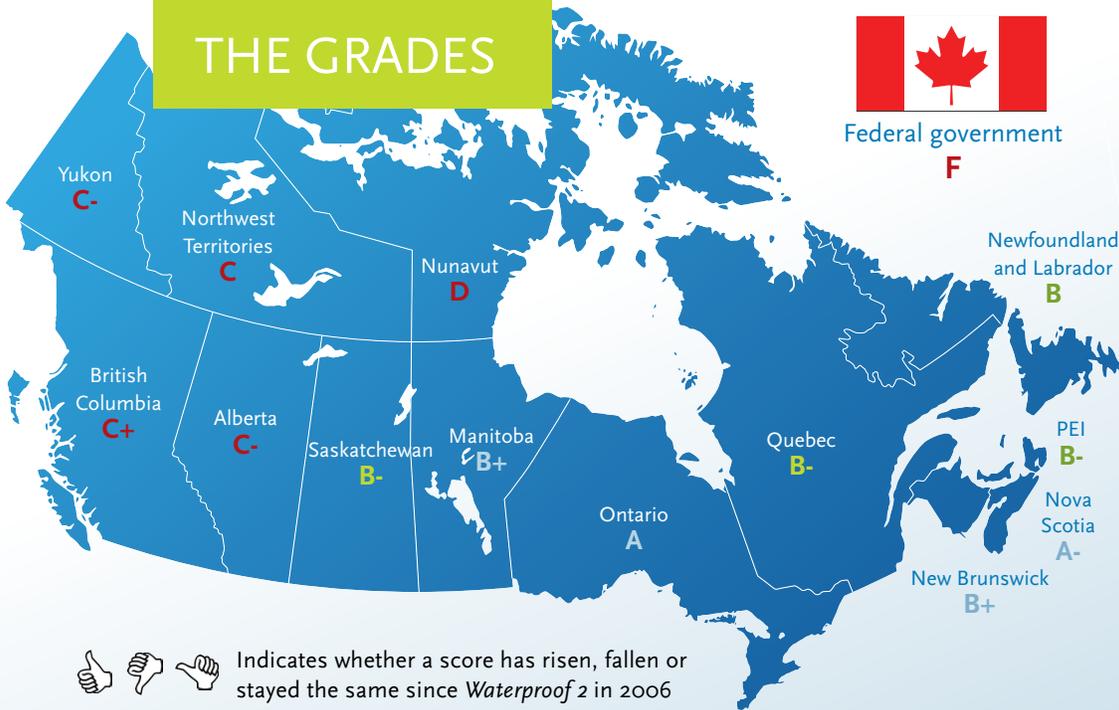
When it comes to source water protection, *Waterproof 3* found:

- B.C., New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec and PEI have dedicated SWP programs that include planning and consultation requirements.
- Only Manitoba, New Brunswick and Ontario mandate consultation in SWP planning and programs, and all three as well as Saskatchewan have dedicated funding for SWP.
- Alberta, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have yet to fully engage in source water protection planning.

Learn more about source water protection in [the full report](#).



# THE GRADES



Federal government  
**F**

## FEDERAL FAILURE

**F** Canada's federal government gets another 'F' for its poor drinking water protection record, which continues to worsen.

- No progress has been made on the legislative front and there has been little improvement in the quality of water for First Nations communities.
- Drastic budget cuts virtually guarantee that Environment Canada will continue its inability to properly monitor water quality, as described in a [recent Auditor General's report](#).
- Some drinking water improvement funds are available only to municipalities that engage in public-private partnerships.

Indicates whether a score has risen, fallen or stayed the same since *Waterproof 2* in 2006

### ONTARIO

**A** Is implementing the most ambitious source water protection program in Canada and has some of the country's strongest treatment, testing, operator training and public reporting standards.

### NOVA SCOTIA

**A-** Has strong measures in place for water treatment and testing, and is home to one of Canada's most extensive SWP programs.

### MANITOBA

**B+** Has strong treatment standards and is developing what appears to be a robust source water protection program.

### NEW BRUNSWICK

**B+** Established strong SWP measures that protect a high percentage of its population, and boasts improved standards for water treatment and testing.

### NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

**B** Implemented SWP measures that cover the majority of groundwater sources and improved water standards, but lacks an operator certification program.

### PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

**B-** Has 92% of water systems protected by legally-binding plans, but water treatment is not mandatory.

### QUEBEC

**B-** Stands alone in affirming that water is a collective good and has strong treatment regulations, but SWP is not as advanced as in other provinces.

### SASKATCHEWAN

**B-** Has solid treatment and testing standards, and is at the forefront of protecting public interest, but SWP is not legally-binding.

### BRITISH COLUMBIA

**C+** Has some of Canada's lowest standards for water treatment and SWP efforts and is undertaking an ambitious water law overhaul, but it does not touch directly on drinking water.

### NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

**C** Seems poised for significant improvement. Though no SWP measures are in place, it has taken steps to recognize the right to water and is undergoing an ambitious review of its water laws.

### ALBERTA

**C-** Has not fully engaged in SWP efforts despite being a hub of industrial activity. Standards for water treatment and testing have remained static during the last five years.

### YUKON

**C-** Has improved standards related to treatment and contaminants and has rules requiring separation of drinking water sources and potential contamination threats, but no SWP is in place.

### NUNAVUT

**D** Has no source water protection in place and its standards for water treatment are among the lowest in Canada.

These grades were determined by evaluating treatment and testing requirements, drinking water quality standards, source water protection, and measures for transparency and accountability. See the detailed report card on page 37 of [the full report](#).



# RECOMMENDATIONS

For the complete list of recommendations, refer to Part III of the full report.

## STEP 1: PROTECT SOURCE WATER



Create and/or implement source water protection plans or programs that are science-based, widely inclusive and legally-binding (and therefore enforceable) in each province and territory.



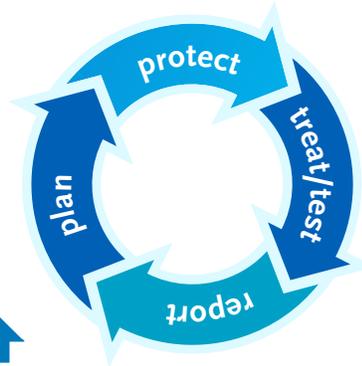
## STEP 2: TREAT AND TEST WATER



Require filtration of surface water and groundwater subject to the influence of surface water.



Test for all contaminants listed in the *Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality* on a regular and ongoing basis.



## STEP 4: PLAN FOR THE FUTURE



Review legislation and policies to ensure consistency with the newly acknowledged human right to water.



Make specific, high-priority plans to address situations where Canadians to do not have reliable access to safe drinking water.



Acknowledge that water is a public trust (or community good) and explicitly acknowledge that the government is a trustee of water and bound to protect it for present and future generations.



## STEP 3: REPORT TO THE PUBLIC



Require that water suppliers make system approvals and test results publicly available online.



Release right-to-know reports on a regular basis.

## CONCLUSION

In previous editions of this series, our findings led us to conclude that the biggest risks to drinking water came from gaps or deficiencies in the frontlines of drinking water protection—the laws, programs, policies and personnel directly responsible for delivering safe and clean drinking water.

But now the gravest threat, according to our research and analysis, is that improvements to these frontlines may be undermined by other forces, including pollution from constantly-evolving contaminants, government cutbacks and climate change. Each of these factors alone makes a compelling case for why governments must introduce comprehensive and legally-binding plans to protect water at the source—before it reaches our treatment centres and distribution systems.

We possess the capacity to improve our health and our children's health, and we believe Canada can rise to the challenge.

Visit [ecojustice.ca/waterproof-3](http://ecojustice.ca/waterproof-3) to learn more and to take action to protect Canada's drinking water.

