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Daphne Bramham: Metro Vancouver needs more than conservation to solve future water needs

Opinion: Despite continued population growth and climate change, Metro Vancouver Water District has taken only baby steps toward expanding its storage and supply capacity.

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Daphne Bramham

Published Apr 27, 2023 • Last updated Apr 28, 2023 • 5 minute read

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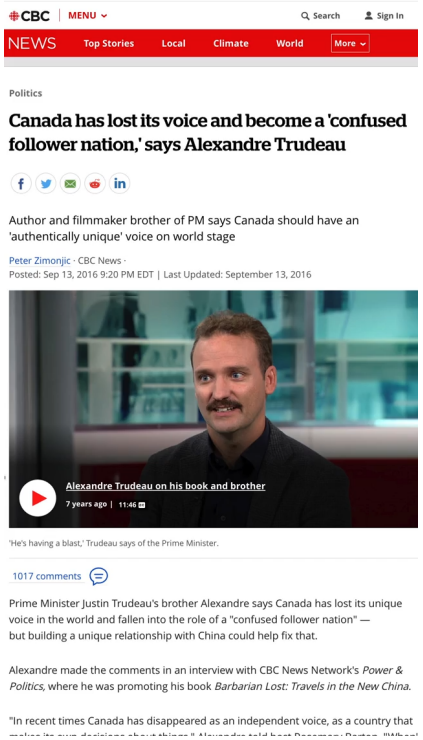
The restriction is a precaution to keep water stored in county reservoirs at acceptable levels for critical activities like cooking, drinking and firefighting, according to the county. SunMedia

As the sun finally makes an appearance following months of snow, sleet and rain, Metro Vancouver's watering restrictions are set to kick in only six months after they were lifted.



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Canada has lost its voice and become a 'confused follower nation,' says Alexandre Trudeau

Author and filmmaker brother of PM says Canada should have an 'authentically unique' voice on world stage

Peter Zimonjic · CBC News ·
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Alexandre Trudeau on his book and brother
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'He's having a blast,' Trudeau says of the Prime Minister.

1017 comments

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's brother Alexandre says Canada has lost its unique voice in the world and fallen into the role of a "confused follower nation" — but building a unique relationship with China could help fix that.

Alexandre made the comments in an interview with CBC News Network's *Power & Politics*, where he was promoting his book *Barbarian Lost: Travels in the New China*.

"In recent times Canada has disappeared as an independent voice, as a country that

Starting Monday, people with lawns can only water them once a week between 5 a.m. and 9 a.m. and only on weekends with the day dependent on whether you have an odd- or even-numbered address. We've had annual restrictions since 1993 when a 10-week lawn sprinkling ban was put in place. Over the years, they've lengthened and toughened. Since 2021, watering lawns is restricted to a two-hour period one day a week from May 1 until Oct. 15.

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But last year, that ban had to be extended to Nov. 1 when the region's reservoirs were at or near their lowest levels.

The region had never looked so brown, been so susceptible to wildfires or closer to having a drinking water shortage. And, yet, we live in a rainforest or, at least, what used to be a rainforest.

Fortunately, the reservoirs have recovered to normal seasonal levels. Because the only Plan B available is further restrictions.

Despite continued population growth, new mandates aimed at speeding up housing development and climate change, Metro Vancouver Water District has taken only baby steps toward expanding its storage and supply capacity.

For the past two decades, its directors — councillors and mayors appointed by their various councils — have had conservation as the primary strategy. There are the watering restrictions and there's advertising aimed at convincing, cajoling and encouraging residents to take shorter showers and turn off the tap while brushing teeth. This year, Metro has budgeted nearly half a million dollars for its "enhanced behaviour change campaign."

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Up until now, cutting per-capita usage has worked well enough to forestall what would seem to be the inevitable — building more infrastructure and installing water meters as a monetary stick to encourage conservation and a fairer way for infrastructure costs to be apportioned.

Even though per-capita usage continued to drop even in 2022, that rate has slowed to two per cent from 20 per cent less than a decade earlier when people were only starting to install low-flow toilets and water-saving shower heads.

Crunch time may finally have arrived.

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A handout photo of Coquitlam Glacier shot in 2006. Note the bedrock is not as exposed in the left-middle of the glacier. At right, the glacier as it appeared in 2022. PHOTO BY METRO VANCOUVER

Climate change is now the most significant risk to the water supply, according to the 2022 annual system update provided to directors at April's committee meeting — a meeting that lasted little more than half an hour.

The risk description is alarming. There's a general reduction in snowpack accumulation, which is expected to reduce late-season water storage levels. The region's last glacier was 20 per cent smaller last fall than it was in 2014 and could be gone entirely by 2043.

More frequent and intense precipitation during the winter and spring followed by hotter, drier summers and falls increases the likelihood of landslides and wildfires.

Those fires and slides, in turn, could result in "turbidity events" that are "capable of overwhelming current treatment systems." That means new and different infrastructure may soon be needed — things like filtration pre-treatment, intake locations changed and treatment plants designed differently.

A million-dollar request for better tools has just been approved so that staff can more accurately forecast the short-term supply and demand and "reduce errors" — errors like last fall when the board was assured that the reservoir levels weren't dangerously low only a few weeks before they were forced to

extend watering restrictions to protect the drinking water supply.

Staff have relied on “historic, worst-case conditions.” Except as everyone is well aware, historic worst-case conditions are continually being exceeded.

Drought condition in Vancouver, BC, October 10, 2022. PHOTO BY ARLEN REDEKOP /PNG

There was the unprecedented heat dome in June 2021 — described in the water district’s March Climate Impacts Report as “the most anomalous regional extreme heat events to occur anywhere in the world.”

There were two atmospheric rivers, prolonged periods of rain, a heavy snowfall and freezing rain at the end of 2022. Those were preceded by drought, two of the hottest months on record and a spring with record high precipitation and temperatures averaging two degrees cooler than the old normal.

Four years ago when Metro did its Water Supply Outlook 2120, it said there were no immediate risks to the water supply due to climate change, although it confirmed that there may be “future supply storage vulnerabilities” that would be addressed “over time.”

The biggest risk in 2019 was increased demand. The region would “likely need additional source storage by the mid-2030s (emphasis added) based on forecasted demand growth.”

The solution was a second intake valve in the Coquitlam reservoir to “access increased storage volumes to deeper depths” that should be sufficient to meet demand until 2070. The project was described as “currently underway.”

But it’s barely moved forward. A cryptic note in April’s update on the $2.5-billion capital plan for 2022-2026 says: “Protracted engagement for the regulatory and permitting phase. Project construction is deferred to 2038 completion (approximately five-year delay).”

The permitting phase is now expected to take until the end of 2025 with design work only starting after that.

There’s a lot that’s good about conservation being a major part of the region’s water supply management strategy. No one needs to wash driveways with treated drinking water, have lush lawns in a drought or even leave taps running.

For years, we did. We even now we remain among the world’s highest per-capita water users. So there’s still room for improvement.

But we’re going to need more than magical thinking to deal with regional water supplies. We won’t be able to conserve our way out of continued population growth and significant risks posed by climate change any more than we can pretend that there’s nothing we can do about the weather.

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