

WATER SUSTAINABILITY PLANS

POTENTIAL, OPTIONS, AND ESSENTIAL CONTENT

SUMMARY

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The purpose of this Innovation Brief is to explore the potential of Water Sustainability Plans (WSPs) enabled by British Columbia's *Water Sustainability Act*. They can assist watershed communities to begin addressing many of the challenges of the land and water governance regime in B.C., to improve watershed health, and to support collaborative governance between Indigenous communities, the provincial government, and other local actors. Key insights and observations from this brief include:

- As an element in the modernized provincial water regime, WSPs are a promising tool that can enable and enhance adaptive water management and new governance relationships that express core elements of government-to-government relationships for water and watersheds, as well as address the challenges of environmental flows, sustainable groundwater management, drought planning and protecting and enhancing watershed health.
- WSPs can express government-to-government agreements and parallel governance structures between Indigenous nations and the provincial government. WSPs offer many possibilities that can complement and support the framework for Indigenous legal orders and aboriginal rights, and can assist in moving towards reconciliation and the larger goal of Indigenous self-determination.
- WSPs are intended to be long-term and create both a vision and governance processes for a watershed that rely on Indigenous and local governments, as well as other sectors and community interests to oversee and implement over time.
- A thorough understanding of the local context and "state of the watershed" is needed to support any watershed vision or WSP. This requires ongoing data collection and monitoring to ensure understanding as the local context changes, and must consider the future impacts of climate change.
- Watershed-specific performance-based objectives and environmental flow standards will establish the socio-ecological framework within which decision-making processes can operate.
- Taking a whole-of-watershed approach, WSPs can link land- and water-use decision-making. By regulation, impacts on water establish the parameters within which decisions about forestry, agriculture, and urban development are made.
- WSPs can be adaptive. They have the potential to amend or change the existing allocation of water under licence, and can change water management priorities over time.
- WSPs can set out detailed and watershed-specific drought response strategies, such as protecting environmental and critical flows, promoting localized voluntary water sharing, and establishing water reserves for essential uses.
- WSPs can establish dispute resolution processes that are unique to a specific watershed, issue, or ecological concern, such as protecting (or restoring) drinking water sources, environmental flows, riparian areas, and watershed function.
- WSPs can contemplate their own adaptation by embedding regular review and amendment processes on, for example, a five-year cycle.



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