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Water research funding dries up

BY ROBERT SANDFORD, FREELANCE MAY 26, 2010

At no time in Canada's history has it been more important to build a bridge between science and public understanding; between research outcomes and decision-making; and between emerging knowledge and public policy.

Water rationing and fire restrictions are becoming a fact of life in Western Canada. British Columbia and Alberta are already looking with trepidation at lower than average spring snowpack levels. At the same time, the wildfire season lasts longer each year as the intensity and frequency of fires continues to grow.

Meanwhile, one of Canada's leading research funding institutions -- the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences -- will close next year for want of ongoing federal funding. "So what," you ask? This important research foundation funded the IP3 Research Network, which has been exploring improvements in our understanding of the effects of climate change on water resources in the cold regions of Canada.

Canada doesn't seem to recognize the global water crisis and is beginning to impact North America, where our hydrology is already on the move because of climate change. Instead of increasing support for water research as the U.S. government has done, Canada is dropping support for the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences.

The foundation's mandate has been to supply funding for university based research in climate change and its impact on our health, safety, economy and the environment. Funding no longer exists for such research. Research funding for networks of organized research is now available only through the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, with the caveat that only programs targeted by Canada's science and technology strategy are eligible.

Under that mandate, only three areas of research are currently eligible for funding: advanced communications and management of information, healthy environments and ecosystems, and sustainable energy systems. Eligible research under the advanced communications and management of information targeted area includes "research conducted in new media, animation and games;" under healthy environment and ecosystems, "targeted natural resources include groundwater, estuarine and coastal waters, rivers, lakes, soil, air and forests ... climate research is not included in this target area; however, research designed to better prepare the environment and ecosystems to adapt to common scenarios for future climate change is encouraged".

In other words the government is responding to a pressing need for more animation and game research, but the fundamental water research necessary for adaptation is not on their radar. Research of this importance should not be subject to the funding vagaries of the political flavour of the year. Without network funding, we have a piecemeal system of individual scientists and researchers applying for small amounts of funding on a random basis for often disconnected water research projects.

The good news that water is still front and centre during the last days of the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences. It is sponsoring a water symposium in Ottawa at the end of May entitled "Canadian Water Security -- The Critical Role of Science." Speakers will report on the outcomes of the \$14 million worth of water-related research that the foundation has funded in the last 10 years and discuss what they have learned and what

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we still need to know. Encourage your MP to attend the symposium Thursday so they can bring back to Parliament an understanding of what is needed to continue funding research into this most basic requirement for life.

Encourage your MP as well to attend a breakfast Thursday on Parliament Hill when Dr. John Pomeroy, Canada research chair in water resources and climate change at the University of Saskatchewan, speaks on "Water prescriptions for a dry land – how the West needs to prepare for drought."

Both sessions are designed to coincide with the sitting of the House so MPs can attend.

Robert Sandford is the chair of the Canadian Partnership Initiative, United Nations Water for Life Decade and director of the Western Watersheds Climate Research Collaborative.

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