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Speech

Notes for an Address by the Honourable Jim Prentice, P.C., Q.C., M.P., Minister of the Environment on Managing Municipal Wastewater.

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Introduction

Thank you for your introduction and for this opportunity to speak to you today about Canada's precious water resources.

What better place to talk about water than here in Saint John, a city surrounded, intersected and identified by water: Grand Bay, Kennebecasis Bay, and the Bay of Fundy.

This is a city that takes its name from the majestic river that has been described as “the Rhine of North America.” The Saint John River extends over 670 kilometers into the interior. It has served as the artery of New Brunswick's history and industry, culture and commerce. Today, its popularity for recreational boating underscores how much Canadians love their rivers and their water resources.

Myths and Realities

We Canadians regard ourselves as a country blessed by an abundance of water.

But when you look more closely at how water is used in Canada, two startling realities come into sharp focus. The first is that we do not actually have that much *renewable* water. The second is that we can definitely be better stewards of our water.

What do I mean by “renewable” water? It is the water that is replenished by precipitation and inflow from rivers and groundwater — not water that is locked in polar ice caps and glaciers, not the water in our underground aquifers, not the water that remains for many years in our lakes.

In fact, when you look at the Great Lakes, we get a good idea why it is important to think about “renewable” water. These five lakes represent the largest system of fresh surface water on Earth and contain about 18 percent of the world supply — about 84 percent of the North American supply.

But out of that huge volume of water, only one percent is replenished each year. That one percent represents the renewable water. It also represents the amount of water that we can use without depleting the resource — living off our water interest, and not dipping into our water capital, as it were. And each year, we withdraw a significant part of that one percent for use — for human consumption, agriculture, and industrial purposes.

That means that each year, the people who live and work beside the Great Lakes withdraw for use nearly as much water as flows into the lakes.

We Canadians are stewards of the third-largest supply of fresh water in the world. But the reality is that there is not an over-abundance of renewable water in Canada. We have enough to use – if we use it wisely. And that brings me to the second myth: that Canadians are good stewards of our water resources.

Water is a precious resource, but often we take it for granted. The consequences of not managing fresh water wisely are especially severe in places like Saint John, where water-borne pollution can damage the coastal environment. We need to protect the aquatic ecosystems that sustain our coastal fisheries and aquaculture, which in turn support healthy communities and sustainable livelihoods.

Action Plan

The Government of Canada has a strong, comprehensive approach to ensure clean water for all Canadians.

Our Action Plan for Clean Water includes investments in regulating and enforcing laws and in monitoring our water resources. It includes research into the science that gives us a better understanding of the factors that threaten our water *quality* – everything from pathogens, chemicals and nutrients, to invasive species and acid rain. We also invest in the science that provides information on the *quantity* of our water – including the impact of climate change, and the impact of our own use of the resource.

Our Action Plan for Clean Water also includes remediation of contaminated sediments. The Government of Canada has announced federal investments of up to \$48 million to clean up contaminated sediment in the Great Lakes, another \$30 million on remediation projects in Lake Simcoe in Ontario, and another \$18 million for Lake Winnipeg.

The Action Plan complements a number of other initiatives, such as the St. Lawrence River Plan, which has allowed us to invest \$323 million on such priorities as water conservation and protection.

Part of our Action Plan for Clean Water addresses drinking water in First Nations communities. The last Budget, Canada's Economic Action Plan, announced \$515 million to accelerate First Nations infrastructure projects, including schools, community services and water.

We also protect Canadian lakes and rivers by requiring specific industries such as metal mines and pulp and paper to reduce the toxicity of their effluents. We are taking action to amend regulations to restrict the level of phosphates in laundry and dishwasher detergent as well as household cleaning products. This will help cut down the growth of blue-green algae in our rivers and lakes.

Beyond the Action Plan, earlier this year I announced that we will invest \$2.5 million over five years to support the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Global Environment Monitoring System GEMS/Water so that we can learn more about our own water by understanding inland quality issues around the world. An additional investment of up to \$2 million through Western Economic Diversification Canada is also in the works, potentially bringing the Government of Canada's total investment to \$4.5 million.

Municipal Wastewater

But perhaps the most important way in which we can help improve the water quality of Canada's rivers and lakes is to work with the provinces and municipalities to address wastewater – the water we drain from our sinks, bathtubs and dishwashers; the water we flush from our toilets.

There are more than 4,000 wastewater systems in Canada that vary in their capacity to treat sewage. Here at the mouth of a great river, you are very aware how much we depend on wastewater management.

We want to ensure that Canadians can depend on safe and reliable wastewater systems that return the water to a state where it can be reused again and again.

Anything short of this is unacceptable, as environmental and health problems - even tragedies - may be the consequences of wastewater systems that do not work as they should. Each time we close a beach or issue a boil-water advisory, we are reminded that we must do more to protect our water resources.

Until this year, policies, regulations and legislation governing the effluents discharged from wastewater systems have been confusing for wastewater management facility operators. Such policies and regulations are administered at the federal, provincial and territorial levels, but the key responsibility for implementation falls on municipalities.

Environment Canada has been working with provincial and territorial governments to develop a Canada-wide strategy.

We began with broad consultations. Between October 2007 and January 2008, my officials met with municipal, provincial and territorial representatives, as well as the wastewater sector, non-government organizations, interested parties and Aboriginal representatives. It was quite an accomplishment to bring everyone to the table and hammer out a consensus.

We worked on a Proposed Regulatory Framework for Wastewater. We drafted a Canada-wide Strategy for the Management of Municipal Wastewater Effluent. Last February, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment (CCME) approved the Canada-wide Strategy. We proved it could be done. We have an agreement.

Now it's time to live up to it. Our principal instrument to implement the new Canadian Wastewater Strategy will be new regulations under the *Fisheries Act*. Today, I am pleased to announce that these proposed regulations are expected to be published in the Canada Gazette, Part I, in December 2009. After feedback is reviewed, the regulations will be revised and finalized in 2010.

These regulations will give better clarity to the more than 4,000 operators of wastewater treatment facilities and ensure that, across the country, the release of wastewater effluents does not pose unacceptable risks to human and environmental health and fishery resources.

These federal regulations set national performance standards, timelines and monitoring and reporting requirements. They apply to all land-based wastewater systems under municipal, provincial or federal government operation, and those on federal land or on Aboriginal land that discharge effluent to surface water. All jurisdictions will now have to maintain, update, or develop new regulatory tools to implement the Canada-wide Strategy.

We have the Strategy. We intend to enforce it with the powers of the *Fisheries Act* to protect the health of Canadians and the environment.

On this note, we are proud of the concrete measures we have taken to strengthen enforcement on the environment. Through Budgets 2007 and 2008, we provided an additional \$43 million to hire 106 new enforcement officers to ensure that our environmental laws are respected and enforced.

We know that many municipalities will need to invest to bring their wastewater facilities up to the new standards. But the Government of Canada has taken that into consideration as well.

In 2007, the Government of Canada introduced its \$33-billion Building Canada infrastructure plan, which is under the purview of my colleague, the Honourable John Baird. You have to go back half a century to see a similar commitment to infrastructure. That's the scale of the investment.

Today, the priorities for federal infrastructure funding are different. On the transportation side, Minister Baird is investing in trade gateways and corridors, for example. But the infrastructure money is also there for municipalities to invest in wastewater and drinking water systems, public transit, and green energy, among other categories.

In the last Budget, our Conservative government increased the available funding still further. Canada's Economic Action Plan includes almost \$12 billion of new funding for infrastructure over the next two years. Much of this money can also be used by municipalities to improve wastewater management.

We want to help municipalities take advantage of the available infrastructure funding. Federal infrastructure programs are built on a cost-shared principle. The federal government brings money to the table. It's matched by provincial or territorial investment. And the municipality pitches in to make its investment as well.

But what happens if the municipalities do not have funds available for these projects? What if the budget has already been committed? For that, we have introduced a \$2-billion program that will provide low-cost Municipal Infrastructure Loans, administered through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, to provide the funds communities need to come to the table.

Ladies and gentlemen, in coming to New Brunswick with this message, I am preaching to the choir. In fact, municipalities across this province have used the Building Canada Fund to improve their water management:

- In the southeast, in Shediac, Sackville and other municipalities, the Government of Canada is providing more than \$4 million to improve water and wastewater services.
- In the southwest, in Fredericton, the Government of Canada has committed over \$450,000 to a \$1.4-million project involving improved wastewater treatment.
- In the northeast, in the communities of Bathurst and Beresford, the Government of Canada has committed over \$800,000 to improve local water and wastewater services.
- In the northwest, in the communities of Grand Falls and Saint-André, the Government of Canada has committed over \$3.1 million to improve local water and wastewater services.

I could give more examples, but you get the picture: from the Restigouche to the St. Croix, New Brunswickers are taking steps to improve their wastewater systems and become better stewards of our waterways.

We need more municipalities across Canada to follow this example. But there must be the political will to act on these measures. There are many priorities that compete for the attention of elected officials at all levels. But I do not think there are many priorities that can be higher than the need for clean water.

For example, our Government has shown where its priorities lie with the commitment of up to \$26.6 million for the clean up of the Saint John Harbour, work that is taking place even as we speak.

Conclusion/Messages

Ladies and gentlemen, Canadians are proud of our water resources — this great gift of water that our geography has bestowed upon us. It's time to face the many challenges that come along with such bounty. This includes being better stewards of the environment and protectors of the health of our people. We need to protect water legacies such as the Saint John River, the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence.

We have the technology for better management of our water resources. We have the tools. And with the federal moneys now available, we can make wastewater remediation affordable for our municipalities. Now Canadians must make it a priority.

This is a tremendous opportunity to partner and collaborate. I hope that the non-government organizations that helped us shape the Canada-wide Strategy, and community organizations across Canada, will help move wastewater management up the policy agenda in their local municipalities.

Nature is resilient if given half a chance. We must work with nature to restore a balance in our use of our most precious natural resource – Canada's water.

Thank you.

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