



Quebec moves to protect water
'Collective resource'; Bill would impose royalties on big users

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The provincial government is moving ahead with plans to enshrine in law the policy that water belongs collectively to the people of Quebec but is holding off until 2009 on plans to collect royalties from the big consumers.

Sustainable Development and Environment Minister Line Beauchamp tabled a bill yesterday in the National Assembly that, if adopted, will provide a legal framework for the use of the province's surface and groundwater by declaring it a "collective resource that is part of the common heritage of the Quebec nation."

Beauchamp stressed the move does not amount to the nationalization of water, because that implies the province would own it when, in fact, the government's philosophy is that it belongs to all 7.5 million Quebecers.

She conceded Quebec governments have been talking about such legislation for about 30 years, but with worldwide demand for water on the rise and countries looking beyond their borders for supplies, a law has to be adopted.

"This draft bill confirms that water, so precious to Quebecers, is part of our collective heritage," Beauchamp said.

"The state must be the guardian."

As with other "feel good" news events staged lately by the Liberal government, Beauchamp made sure television cameras had great images with which to work. Her news conference was set against a backdrop of the spectacular Montmorency Falls in Quebec City's borough of Beauport.

At a technical briefing, officials said the draft law - Bill 92 - goes farther than any previous proposal because it would not only entrench for the first time the government's right to require permits for water use by big consumers, but would allow the government to sue firms that compromise the quality of a water source by polluting it or altering the environment. The legislation will be subject to public hearings in the fall.

Specifically, the law would:

- Require anyone using more than 75,000 litres of water a day - the equivalent of two above-ground swimming pools - to apply for a permit that would be valid for a maximum of 10 years.
- Introduce the "user pay" principle, which means all costs related to water use, restoration and management are borne by the user.
- Apply to companies that bottle spring or mineral water, to industry and to the agricultural sector. Individuals would be exempted.

A royalty collection system is not far behind. Beauchamp said she thinks it is "abnormal" that big water users don't pay at least something for their water, but before the province can legally charge royalties it has to adopt a legal framework for water use.

With only about \$5.5 million a year in potential royalties, she said, the government is not doing it for the money but to encourage careful use of what it now considers "an exhaustible resource."

The money raised would go into Quebec's new Green Fund.

"We are going up one step today," Beauchamp said. "We will go up another over the next few months."

With 4,500 rivers, 500,000 lakes, an uncalculated number of underground springs and a 3,790-kilometre share of the St. Lawrence River, Quebec has about three per cent of the world's total fresh water supply.

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