

REDUCE COSTS & DELAYS IN B.C.'S ENVIRONMENTAL WATER QUALITY REGULATORY SYSTEM

Issue

British Columbia's industries face fragmented governance related to environmental water quality. These inefficiencies delay projects, raise costs, and weaken competitiveness. Businesses must wrestle with overlapping jurisdictional oversight that results in complex permitting, unclear accountability, and inefficiencies across multiple authorities and rights holders.

Recent environmental water quality regulatory changes have expanded permitting requirements and made amendments more cumbersome. Cost-feasibility in setting water quality objectives is often overlooked, imposing heavy compliance burdens without proportionate environmental benefit.

Also, Canadian innovation exists that can support water quality regulatory and environmental objectives. A systemic process is needed to seek and support local Canadian companies with solutions that would benefit from domestic country demonstration projects.

With better alignment of permitting and regulatory processes within and across jurisdictions, clarity of accountability, and a return to a risk-based regulatory model, we can move investment projects forward faster, reduce project costs, and strengthen business competitiveness and innovation. All this can be done while maintaining environmental protection.

Background

Jurisdictional & Regulatory Uncertainty - harmonizing policies

The maritime sector is essential to B.C.'s economy, supporting national trade corridors through major coastal and interior ports. Yet, when new investment projects are put forward, project proponents regularly encounter jurisdictional challenges that result in duplicated efforts and conflicting requirements that result in project delays that hinder coastal infrastructure development and economic growth.

British Columbia's environmental water-quality governance is overseen by a mix of federal, provincial, and local/sector-specific rules rather than one single regulator. At the provincial level, BC sets water-quality guidelines, objectives, monitoring programs, and discharge authorizations through the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy and related legislation.¹

BC's core provincial tools are approved water quality guidelines, working water quality guidelines, and water quality objectives, which are used to protect aquatic life, wildlife, agriculture, drinking water sources, and recreation. BC also uses discharge permitting and related authorizations, including waste discharge authorizations, for activities that may affect water quality. For drinking water, BC's Drinking Water Protection Act and Drinking Water Protection Regulation set treatment, construction, operating, monitoring, and reporting requirements.²

¹ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/air-land-water/water/water-quality/water-quality-guidelines/approved-water-quality-guidelines>

² https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/air-land-water/water/waterquality/water-quality-guidelines/bc_working_water_quality_guidelines.pdf

Federal rules matter where industries affect fisheries, shipping, navigation, marine pollution, or federally regulated works. In BC, the main federal framework includes the Fisheries Act, the Canada Shipping Act, and the Canada Marine Act, all of which can apply to marine and coastal projects.³

In practice, this creates overlapping review pathways for industrial projects that may need, provincial authorizations, federal approvals and municipal permits at the same time. This maze of overlapping authorities is both expensive and time consuming for businesses to navigate.

To address this, BC has an opportunity to better harmonize policies controlled directly by BC (e.g., water quality objectives, discharge permitting, amendments under provincial environmental statutes), while working collaboratively with federal and other government partners to coordinate national and local requirements.

Permitting, Innovation & Environmental Technologies

Marine permit applicants (ie: for discharge permits, stormwater management, shoreline restoration) face excessive administrative complexity across disconnected agencies, each with unique forms, timelines, and evidence requirements. For example, minor marine infrastructure changes can take 9–12 months for review across multiple jurisdictions. This ambiguity delays approvals, creates inconsistent enforcement, and weakens coastal restoration efforts.

A Single standardized, digital “one-window” portal could create greater certainty, encourage investment, and support innovation. For example, this program could be led by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy and begin by setting published service timelines and coordinating engagement across all levels of government. It could be phased and piloted on coastal permit integration to assess feasibility before wider rollout.

Canadian environmental technology innovation can be leveraged to support this regulatory framework, while supporting economic development. For example, creating a transparent, coordinated pathway to validate and integrate Canadian-developed environmental protection technologies into the regulatory framework. Technologies, in areas such as spill response systems or green infrastructure material could be supported through demonstration projects. These projects could in turn be proving grounds for international clients who often first seek strong domestic references.

Establishing an intergovernmental process to review and recognize such innovations would promote cleaner operations and faster adoption of proven environmental technologies across Canadian ports and waterways.

Risk-Based Model Re-Adoption

Since moving away from a risk-based regulatory approach, low and medium-risk activities have been overburdened by intensive reviews intended for higher-risk operations. The absence of streamlined processes for predictable, low-impact activities results in resource misallocation, processing backlogs, and diminished regulatory focus on actual high-risk threats.

³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/environmental-workplace-health/water-quality/drinking-water/canadian-drinking-water-guidelines.html>

Re-establishing a proportional, risk-based system—supported by regulations and Codes of Practice for low and medium risk activities and streamlined approvals/permits for high-risk activities would allocate expertise where it matters most, improving overall environmental oversight efficiency.

Simplified Permit Amendments

Currently, even minor permit amendments require full re-review processes, imposing significant time and costs on proponents. Introducing a tiered amendment system—expediting or allowing notifications for low-risk design changes while reserving full review for high-risk alterations would improve project agility, encourage adaptive management, and maintain rigorous environmental protection standards.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government:

1. Clarify lines of environmental water quality regulatory accountability
 - a. Explicitly state and describe which agency or level of government leads in Permitting, Compliance Monitoring, and Environmental Restoration oversight
2. Re-adopt a “risk-based” environmental regulatory model
 - a. For low and medium-risk activities/industries: use a streamlined Codes of Practice and/or regulations
 - b. For higher-risk activities/industries: maintain robust oversight through environmental permits
 - c. Adopt a proportional permit amendment system - allow efficient approval of low-risk changes through notification or simplified reviews.
3. Better align permitting and environmental regulatory processes
 - a. Ensure cost/benefit feasibility analysis is conducted prior to finalising environmental guidelines and objectives, to ensure they are achievable.
 - b. Share best practices on environmental protection and enhancement
 - c. Evaluate and promote adoption of Canadian-developed environmental technologies
4. Develop a unified digital “one-window” environmental permitting portal to standardize application requirements

Submitted by the North Vancouver Chamber of Commerce