

# H<sub>2</sub>O: The province of provinces

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Unsafe drinking water is a topic usually connected to the developing world. But the regular recurrence of boil-water advisories, and widely publicised outbreaks in towns like Walkerton and Kashechewan have shown that, even in Canada, clean water cannot be taken for granted.

The increased scrutiny that arose from such issues has resulted in widespread criticism of the uneven drinking water regulation among

Canada's provinces and territories.. However, centralizing water regulation is not necessarily the best solution, according to new research from Concordia University.

In a paper recently published in the *International Journal of Water*, civil engineering graduate Ryan Calder evaluates claims that more centralized US-style regulation of drinking water would improve outcomes for Canadians. The paper finds limited support for these claims but suggests they reflect deeply held Canadian political and cultural values.

"Environmental advocacy groups in Canada routinely decry the inconsistencies between provinces and push for US-style centralized regulation as a way to improve water quality," says Calder, who is now a doctoral candidate at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "This paper is the first rigorously examine these claims, and it finds that tighter regulation at the federal level would not likely improve outcomes."

Using risk management theory, Calder and co-author Ketra Schmitt from the Centre for Engineering in Society found that environmental advocates are more influenced by the distinctly Canadian values of equality and solidarity than by actual evidence for improved outcomes.

The study shows that the Canadian public are only likely to support decentralization if provinces and territories are actively allocating public funds to [public health](#) initiatives in proportion with the magnitude of risks.

"Decentralization presents a theoretical benefit that is largely borne out by the evidence," says Calder. "Local decision-making allows different populations to tailor spending to their particular circumstances, without undermining 'equity.' We actually found that the Canadian and American experiences with centralization have led to more permissive standards

than might otherwise exist if the risks were addressed locally."

Calder suggests that, rather than repeating the work of provincial and territorial regulators, federal resources should be put towards insuring access to safe water. He also notes that the federal government should embrace its role as a facilitator of decision-making on a local level if it is to respond to legitimate criticisms and promote good governance of [drinking water](#) well into the 21st century.

**More information:** Study:

[www.rycalder.com/files/CalderSchmitt15.pdf](http://www.rycalder.com/files/CalderSchmitt15.pdf)

Provided by Concordia University

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