International Joint Commission
Canada and United States

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Canada et États-Unis

October 22, 2026

The Honourable Julie Dabrusin, P.C., M.P.
Minister of the Environment, Climate Change and Nature
Minister responsible for the Canada Water Agency

The Honourable Anita Anand, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Foreign Affairs

House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Cc: Mark Fisher, President, Canada Water Agency
Mollie Johnson, Deputy Minister, Environment and Climate Change Canada
Arun Thangaraj, Deputy Minister, Foreign Affairs

Re: Public Engagement Toward a National Water Security Strategy

Dear Ministers,

The International Joint Commission (IJC) welcomes the Government of Canada's initiative to develop Canada's first National Water Security Strategy. We write to you jointly because, while the engagement document associated with the Strategy is domestic in scope, the Strategy will shape how Canada meets its commitments on waters shared with the United States, a matter that spans both of your portfolios.

Why the Commission is commenting on a national strategy

The Commission does not ordinarily comment on domestic policy, and it offers no views here on matters that are solely domestic. It writes for two reasons. First, this is a water security strategy for Canada, not only for the Canada Water Agency or the federal government. The engagement document itself describes it as a national roadmap that could set shared priorities and opportunities for action across all levels of government and partners. Canada's water security includes the waters it shares with the United States and the commitments it has made on them, and those commitments bind Canada as a whole. Second, in shared basins, there is no clean line between domestic water management and Canada's international obligations.

The *Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909* is implemented largely through domestic action. Article IV of the Treaty includes a commitment that "boundary waters and waters flowing across the

boundary shall not be polluted on either side to the injury of health or property on the other". This commitment is met, or missed, through domestic decisions in areas such as wastewater, nutrients and land use. Uses, obstructions and diversions that affect levels and flows across the boundary require the Commission's approval, and the Orders of Approval issued under the Treaty set conditions regarding the operation of domestic dams and control works today.[1] Under the *Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement*, the two governments have asked the Commission to assess the effectiveness of their programs, many of them domestic, in achieving shared objectives.[2] Canada's own implementing legislation, the *International Boundary Waters Treaty Act*, already places the licensing of certain works and the prohibition on bulk water removal from boundary waters with the Minister of Foreign Affairs.[3]

In short, domestic water policy in shared basins affects how Canada implements, and whether it meets, its obligations under treaty, including the *Boundary Waters Treaty.* The Canada Water Agency's own list of freshwater systems of national significance makes the point: most extend to or across the boundary (**Annex 1**).[4] A Strategy developed without reference to these commitments risks gaps or inconsistencies that neither federal government would intend.

The Commission is equally clear about what it is not recommending. It does not suggest that the Strategy create new channels for international water relations or alter existing roles. Canada's relations with the United States on water rest with Global Affairs Canada and the binational institutions the two governments have established. The Commission's recommendations are directed at ensuring that domestic science, programs and investment in shared basins take into consideration, align with, and reinforce, those arrangements.

Shared basins are where water security pressures will be felt first

Depending on the basin, Canada is upstream or downstream of the United States. The Red River flows north into Manitoba and Lake Winnipeg, carrying upstream flood and nutrient conditions into Canada. The St. Mary and Milk rivers sustain irrigated agriculture on both sides of the Alberta-Montana boundary under an apportionment Order dating to 1921. In 2026, exceptionally dry conditions brought the Milk River's natural flow to zero or near zero for periods, requiring temporary cessation of Canadian irrigation withdrawals under established binational procedures.[5] *Canada's Changing Climate Report 2026* projects longer and more intense summer droughts and more frequent flash flooding in central and southern Canada, which is where most shared basins lie.[6] These pressures will test binational arrangements as much as domestic ones.

[1] Treaty between the United States and Great Britain relating to Boundary Waters, and Questions arising between the United States and Canada (1909), Articles III and IV.
[2] Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (2012), Article 7.
[3] International Boundary Waters Treaty Act, R.S.C. 1985, c. I-17; and Report to Parliament pursuant to section 42 of the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act (2026).
[4] Canada Water Agency, 2026-2030 Strategic Plan (2026).
[5] International Joint Commission, Notification of 2026 Milk River Conditions (2026).
[6] Environment and Climate Change Canada, Canada's Changing Climate Report 2026: Headline Statements (2026).

Proof of concept: the Elk-Kootenai/y watershed

The Elk-Kootenai/y watershed shows what this looks like in practice. In March 2024, the Governments of Canada and the United States, in partnership with the Ktunaxa Nation, asked the Commission under the *Boundary Waters Treaty* to investigate and make recommendations regarding transboundary water pollution in the watershed.[7] Six governments (Canada, the United States, the Ktunaxa Nation, British Columbia, Montana and Idaho) now sit together on a Governance Body, with the Commission as secretariat and a Commission-led binational Study Board supporting shared data and knowledge.[8]

Three features are directly relevant to the Strategy. First, an Indigenous Nation whose territory spans the boundary participates as a government, not a stakeholder. Second, the jurisdictions of all six governments, including the Ktunaxa Nation, are respected, and the arrangement was built through an existing treaty mechanism: a reference granted by both Parties in partnership with the Ktunaxa Nation, rather than any new international channel. Third, it pairs governance with shared science, bringing agencies, data and Indigenous knowledge from both sides into a common picture of a shared problem. It is a working example of the recommendations that follow.

Recommendations

With respect to waters shared by Canada and the United States, the Commission recommends that the National Water Security Strategy:

1. **Recognize the binational framework as part of Canada's water security infrastructure.** The engagement document identifies water as a critical infrastructure sector. The *Boundary Waters Treaty*, the *Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement* and the boards and mechanisms established under them have allowed the two countries to prevent and resolve water differences for more than a century. Like physical infrastructure, they require maintenance and investment to remain fit for purpose. The Commission recommends that the Strategy's definition of water security reflect cooperation on shared waters, consistent with the UN-Water definition's reference to peace and political stability, which the Canada Water Agency's 2026-2030 Strategic Plan already adopts.[9] The United Nations University's 2026 report on global water bankruptcy, produced by its Canadian-hosted Institute for Water, Environment and Health, warns that water depletion is becoming a driver of fragility and conflict, and frames water cooperation as a strategic opportunity in a fragmented world.[10] Canada-United States cooperation under the Treaty is exactly that kind of strategic asset. For example, the proposed definition could

[7] Governments of Canada and the United States, Reference to the International Joint Commission regarding Transboundary Water Pollution in the Elk-Kootenai/y Watershed (8 March 2024), incorporating a proposal developed in partnership with the Ktunaxa Nation.
[8] International Joint Commission, Elk-Kootenai/y Governance Body Terms of Reference (2024) and International Elk-Kootenai/y Watershed Study Board.
[9] UN-Water, Water Security and the Global Water Agenda: A UN-Water Analytical Brief (2013); Canada Water Agency, 2026–2030 Strategic Plan (2026); and Canada Water Agency, Public Engagement Toward a National Water Security Strategy (2026).
[10] Madani, K., Global Water Bankruptcy: Living Beyond Our Hydrological Means in the Post-Crisis Era (United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health, 2026), DOI: 10.53328/INR26KAM001.

conclude: "and to manage water-related risks, including through cooperation on waters shared across borders, today and for future generations."

2. **Resource proactive reviews of binational water rules against future conditions.** Many Orders of Approval and apportionment arrangements were designed on the assumption of stationarity, that past hydrology is a reliable guide to the future. Climate change has ended that assumption, and water security cannot be built around yesterday's climate. The same UN report urges governments to shift from repeated crisis management to planning that acts before basins and aquifers lose the ability to recover. Canada's shared basins are not in that condition, and a deliberate review is how to keep it that way. The Commission already has the authority to review its Orders and applies adaptive management to several of them. What is needed is the capacity to do this systematically across shared basins rather than one Order at a time. The Strategy should commit dedicated resources to this work, along with federal climate science, hydrometric monitoring and modelling in shared basins, so that the Commission, in consultation with the two governments, can consider adjustments deliberately rather than under emergency conditions.
3. **Apply a shared-basin lens to federal programs and investment.** Where federal funding, programs, science or regulatory decisions affect a basin that crosses the boundary, their interaction with binational objectives, Orders and commitments should be considered at the outset, with Global Affairs Canada and the relevant binational bodies engaged early. The nutrient objectives and loading targets the two countries adopted for the Red River at the boundary in 2022 illustrate why: domestic investment in the Lake Winnipeg basin is most effective when it is aligned with them. The same applies to significant new water demands, such as large industrial facilities and data centres, in basins shared with the United States, particularly the Great Lakes: they should be assessed against binational commitments as well as domestic capacity. This is a low-cost measure that prevents issues from escalating into disputes.
4. **Build a binational water data commons for shared basins.** The *National Freshwater Science Agenda* recognizes that extending hydroclimate and ecosystem projections across the border is essential to a complete transboundary picture.[11] The Strategy should commit to transparent shared water accounts for priority basins that track inflows, withdrawals and consumptive use on both sides, interoperable standards for hydrometric and water-quality data, shared flood and drought forecasting, and open access to information at the basin scale. It should also protect the continuity of the hydrometric and water-quality monitoring networks on which binational boards depend, including jointly funded stations, since gaps on either side of the boundary weaken the shared picture for both countries. The Commission's boards and its International Watersheds Initiative already bring together data from agencies on both sides and can serve as a neutral forum to collaborate on data harmonization, including for emerging geospatial and artificial intelligence tools that make shared-basin information more useful to decision-makers.
5. **Include transboundary groundwater within the Strategy's shared-waters priorities.** Groundwater and surface water form a single system. Withdrawals from aquifers that

[11] Environment and Climate Change Canada, National Freshwater Science Agenda: A Report on National Freshwater Science Priorities (2026).

cross the boundary, such as the Abbotsford-Sumas aquifer, can affect the levels and flows of boundary and transboundary waters, which can place groundwater quantity within the scope of the *Boundary Waters Treaty* and the Commission's mandate. In the Great Lakes, the *Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement* addresses groundwater expressly.[12] Yet binational monitoring, data and understanding of shared aquifers lag well behind those for surface water. The Strategy should include transboundary aquifers in its groundwater priorities and recognize that existing binational mechanisms, including the Commission, are available to address them.

6. **Recognize Indigenous governments as governments in transboundary basins.** Indigenous Nations predate both the Canada-United States boundary and the *Boundary Waters Treaty*, and many Nations' territories and relationships with water span the boundary. The Elk-Kootenai/y model shows this can be done within existing treaty channels. The Strategy should recognize Indigenous governments as participants in water security in shared basins, alongside federal, provincial, territorial and state governments, and should support the use of this model in other shared basins where Indigenous Nations seek it, building on the Commission's experience bringing Indigenous knowledge into basin-scale work through the International Watersheds Initiative.[13]

Canada and the United States have shown over generations that shared waters can be managed cooperatively as conditions and priorities change. A National Water Security Strategy is an opportunity to ensure that what Canada does at home strengthens that foundation. As countries prepare for the 2026 UN Water Conference in December, it is also an example Canada can point to.

The Commission would welcome the opportunity to discuss these recommendations with officials of Environment and Climate Change Canada, the Canada Water Agency and Global Affairs Canada as development of the Strategy proceeds.

Sincerely,

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Chair, Canadian Section

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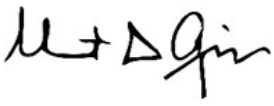

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[12] Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (2012), Annex 8 (Groundwater).
[13] International Joint Commission, Sixth Report to Governments on the International Watersheds Initiative: 2020–2024 (2025); and International Red River Watershed Board, 26th Annual Progress Report (2025).

Annex 1 - Freshwater bodies of national significance identified by the Canada Water Agency

Source: Canada Water Agency, 2026–2030 Strategic Plan. This map illustrates that nearly all freshwater systems identified by the Canada Water Agency as being of national significance extend to or cross the Canada-United States boundary, underscoring the transboundary dimension of Canada's water security.