

YUKON WATER AT RISK

By Genesee Keevil, Sr. Reporter

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The Yukon's abundance of water gives residents a false sense of security, says the UN chair of water for life.

"You should not count on the idea the amount of water you have will always be the same," Bob Sandford said Tuesday.

He's worried about the Yukon.

"Climate change impacts and rising temperatures are beginning to have a significant effect on your hydrology," said Sandford, who will talk about the global water crisis in Whitehorse later this week.

But that's not the only threat.

With water scarcity growing in North America, including many parts of Canada, people are beginning to look north.

"You should expect others to take a great interest in how much water you have and what they might do with it," said Sandford.

He's not worried about Americans — the bigger threat comes from other Canadians, he said.

"I'm less concerned about the Americans than what certain Canadians might do with our own water resources," he said, citing Quebec and Manitoba.

The two provinces have recently shown a renewed interest in selling Canada's water to the US on a wholesale basis.

"I'm quite familiar with American foreign policy with respect to water resources on a continental basis, and I would be as concerned by what I see Canadians doing and planning as I am by anything else," said Sandford.

If Canadians don't pay attention to what they're doing with the country's water, an accidental precedent could be set — which would commodify water under certain trade agreements, like the North American Free Trade Agreement.

"I think sometimes we're so clumsy, because we think we have so much water," said Sandford.

"We make decisions based on miscalculations about how much water we have and how valuable it is, and in making those miscalculations, as we often do, we set ourselves up to be vulnerable to making environmental, social and political mistakes that could have longstanding impacts on our country."

Much of Sandford's UN work involves putting Canadian water issues in a global context.

And one of his predictions, looking at the world water crisis, is that it's going to get crowded in the territory.

"Water availability and security is becoming a major global issue and people are gravitating for business, and to live, in areas that have relative water abundance — and the Yukon is one of those places," he said.

“And the other thing is with warming temperatures, you can expect the Yukon to be a lot more attractive a place to live generally. And you ought to be very seriously aware of how much of an impact that could have in terms of settlement patterns.”

The Yukon is also one of the few places left in Canada with “the great luxury of an integrated watershed,” he added.

What that means is the territory manages its river basins as singular units.

In most of Canada, rivers are broken into jurisdictions and fragmented situations where it’s impossible to manage a basin, said Sandford.

The North Saskatchewan River, for example, first passes through federal jurisdictions, the national park system, then it goes down to the province of Alberta, then through a number of municipalities, then through the province of Saskatchewan, then through the province of Manitoba. And in each of those jurisdictions the laws, regulations and land-use patterns are different.

“But a lot of your (Yukon) rivers originate and also pour into the ocean in the same jurisdiction,” said Sandford.

“So you’re lucky to have a relatively small population and relatively small aquatic eco-systems associated with your river systems, and also to have First Nation and local cultures that live in great appreciation of that.

“So it’s very important as your population grows and there’s greater and greater pressure for resource development — and as climate change

impacts you — to see the value in the way you can presently manage your resources.”

And that advantage will be lost, “unless you carefully protect that particular, precious, luxurious advantage that you presently have.”

In many parts of the world cities are become so large and numerous they’re competing with agriculture for land and water.

“So you can see that’s a problem, because you’re competing with the land and water resources you need to feed your urban populations,” he said.

“And that’s not the end of this. Now, we’re seeing agriculture is competing with nature for land and water.”

And depriving nature of water threatens global life-support.

“That should be troubling to anybody,” said Sandford.

“So what happens in a situation like that is many regions are now stuck with a very, very difficult choice — either you take back water from agriculture to make sure natural ecosystem function continues, and if you do that it means you have to reduce food production which means that people will starve, or you give it all to agriculture to meet growing food production needs and ecosystems decline.”

These are the terrible, awful public policy choices forced because of limits to the water supply in so many parts of the world, he said.

In 40 per cent of the world, a third of all humanity is now competing directly with nature for water resources.

refuses to accept that these problems can't be solved."

Sandford's talk, *The Global Water Crisis: Implications for Canada and its North*, is on Friday, September 12th at 7:30 p.m. at the Beringia Centre. Admission is \$10 at the door.

[End print version. Online coverage continues as follows]

It's geared to the 20- to 35-year-old generation, said Sandford.

"I want the generation I'm addressing to be well apprised how we got to this situation, what the public policy choices may be to avoid making this particular problem worse, and have access to the very best science so we can understand what the options are, but also to be able to build networks of people who care. So that, throughout one's life, if they choose to work in an area that relates to this, then they would have people outside their immediate social domain to share continued idealism and optimism about solutions to these problems."

Through his international work (he just returned from Iran), Sandford has seen some horrible situations.

"It can be easy to be pessimistic," he said. "And the one thing that gives me hope is to see the (20- to 35-year-old) generation come to terms with these problems so enthusiastically, with such a positive sense of what must be done.

"And the quality I admire most of that generation, and one of the reasons I hope to pass as much knowledge as I possible can to that generation, is that it simply