



International Joint Commission
Canada and United States

Watching Over our Transboundary Environment from Coast to Coast



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Cooperating on shared waters

Cooperation is vital for the use and management of shared waters along the common boundary of Canada and the United States.

The Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 provides principles for using the waters shared by Canada and the United States. It also created the International Joint Commission (IJC) to help prevent and resolve water-resource and environmental disputes between the two countries through processes that seek the common interests of both.

Under the treaty, the federal governments of the United States and Canada must consent to any project that changes the natural levels or flows of boundary waters. Project proponents may make an application and seek IJC approval for the project, or the two governments may reach a separate agreement. The treaty also allows the governments to refer issues of concern along the boundary to the IJC for investigation and report. IJC reports under these references are advisory and not binding on the governments.

Taking a binational approach

The IJC is an autonomous international organization created by treaty. The IJC has six Commissioners. Three are appointed by the President of the United States, with the advice and consent of the Senate, and three are appointed by the ministers of the Canadian Cabinet on the advice of the Prime Minister. The Commissioners work to achieve consensus on solutions that are in the best interests of both countries. They are independent and operate without negotiating instructions from their respective governments.

The IJC has established more than 20 boards and task forces to help carry out its responsibilities along the boundary from coast to coast. Joint fact-finding is essential to IJC board work as it builds a foundation of sound science for reaching consensus on appropriate actions. Board and task force members are drawn equally from both countries and are expected to work in their personal and professional capacities, not as representatives of an organization or region.

Overseeing efforts to protect water quality

In the Boundary Waters Treaty, Canada and the United States agreed that neither country will pollute boundary waters, and waters that flow across the boundary, to an extent that would cause injury to health or property in the other country. When asked by governments, the International Joint Commission investigates, monitors and recommends actions regarding the quality of water in lakes and rivers along the Canada-United States border. The IJC has water quality responsibilities in the St. Croix River, the Great Lakes, the Rainy River and the Red River.

Reporting on Great Lakes Water Quality

A major responsibility of the IJC is to evaluate progress toward restoring and maintaining the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes basin ecosystem. In 1972, the United States and Canada signed the first Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and set goals to clean up waste waters from industries and communities. In 1978, the countries signed a new agreement that also committed them to rid the Great Lakes of persistent toxic substances. These substances remain in the environment for a long time and can injure the health of animals and people. Amendments to the 1978 agreement established a process for restoring contaminated Areas of Concern in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River, and eliminating critical pollutants through Lakewide Management Plans. Every two years, the IJC issues a comprehensive report assessing progress and advising the governments on how to meet the goals of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. The agreement established a Great Lakes Regional Office to assist the IJC in this process.



Managing water levels and flows

Changing water levels can affect drinking water intakes, commercial shipping, hydroelectric power generation, agriculture, shoreline property, recreation, fisheries, wildlife, wetlands and other interests. When it approves a project, the IJC sets requirements for managing the flows in order to protect the interests of both countries. Projects approved by the IJC include hydroelectric power projects in the St. Croix River, Great Lakes, St. Lawrence River and Columbia River basins. The IJC also has responsibilities regarding emergency water levels in the Lake of the Woods basin, and water apportionment in the Souris River, St. Mary River and Milk River basins (see map).

Responding to changing needs

Some of the projects approved by the IJC are now more than 80 years old. Over the years, use of the waters has changed, including increased recreational use, and more is known about the watersheds and the environmental impacts of the projects. The IJC is systematically reviewing its requirements for managing water flows through these projects to account for these changes while insuring that the terms of the Boundary Waters Treaty continue to be met.

Boundary Basins



- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Alaska-Yukon | 6. Rainy River |
| 2. Columbia River | 7. Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River |
| 3. Old Man River and Milk River | 8. Lake Champlain |
| 4. Souris River | 9. St. Croix River |
| 5. Red River | |



Advising on air quality issues

The United States and Canadian governments have asked the IJC to bring to their attention, or to investigate, air pollution problems in boundary regions. Air pollution can travel thousands of miles and settle on land or in water far away from the source of the pollution. When air pollutants fall on rivers or lakes they can affect the quality of the water.

In 1991, the two governments signed the Canada-United States Air Quality Agreement and set up an Air Quality Committee to report every two years on progress. The International Joint Commission has been asked to invite comments on the Committee's reports from individuals and groups and to prepare a summary report of the views expressed.

The Ecosystem Approach

Every part of an ecosystem — the air and land, the lakes, rivers and streams, plant life, wildlife and humans — depends on the other parts for its own health. No single group or organization in our society can restore health and balance to the ecosystem, so we must all work together to find solutions to problems and to protect the ecosystems in which we live.

To take an ecosystem approach to its responsibilities, the IJC has begun to combine boards that once had separate responsibilities in various transboundary watersheds. Under the *International Watersheds Initiative*, the Commission is working to strengthen the capacity of existing boards through,

- ~ employing a broader, ecosystemic perspective;
- ~ expanding outreach and cooperation among organizations with local water-related interests and responsibilities;
- ~ promoting the development of a common vision for each basin;
- ~ developing a better understanding of the water-related resources; and
- ~ creating conditions for the resolution of specific watershed-related issues.

Find out more and become involved

The IJC publishes reports on the progress made and the challenges that remain in restoring and protecting the waters along the Canada-U.S. boundary. It also seeks to involve the public in its investigations through public meetings, roundtables, comment periods and other forms of discussion.

For more information,

- ~ visit our website at **www.ijc.org**,
- ~ subscribe to our email list serve or
- ~ contact an IJC office.

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