

2 November 2021

**Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability**  
**Second Report of the Second Session, Sixty-sixth General Assembly**  
**Committee Activities**

Mr. Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly:

The Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability is pleased to present its second report of the Second Session, Sixty-Sixth General Assembly.

**Committee Mandate**

The Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability is charged with matters concerning agriculture, fisheries, land, water, forests, wildlife, energy, natural resources, environment, climate change, and other such matters relating to natural resources and environmental sustainability.

**Committee Membership**

Permanent members of your committee are:

Cory Deagle, Chair (District 3, Montague-Kilmuir)  
Hon. Darlene Compton (Minister of Finance; District 4, Belfast-Murray River)  
Robert Henderson (District 25, O'Leary-Inverness)  
Hal Perry (District 27, Tignish-Palmer Road)  
Hannah Bell (District 11, Charlottetown-Belvedere) *(as of May 25, 2021)*  
Ole Hammarlund (District 13, Charlottetown-Brighton) *(as of May 25, 2021)*

Former permanent members of your committee include:

Stephen Howard (District 22, Summerside-South Drive) *(until May 25, 2021)*  
Lynne Lund (District 21, Summerside-Wilmot) *(until May 25, 2021)*

Members who have served as substitutes:

Zachary Bell (District 10, Charlottetown-Winsloe)  
Dr. Peter Bevan-Baker (Leader of the Opposition)  
Sidney MacEwen (District 7, Morrell-Donagh)

**Background**

On May 12, 2021 the Legislative Assembly passed a motion to refer the study of a sustainable irrigation strategy to your committee. Your committee prioritized this topic and conducted a series of meetings on considerations for the development of such a strategy.

**Motion No. 43 – Referring development of a sustainable irrigation strategy to committee**

**WHEREAS** water is a critical resource for Island residents, farmers, and ecosystems;

**AND WHEREAS** the Water Act and its regulations will provide a framework for the responsible management of water resources;

**AND WHEREAS** agricultural sector organizations have called for the development of a sustainable irrigation strategy to guide the responsible and fair use of water for agricultural purposes;

**AND WHEREAS** the development of a sustainable irrigation strategy should be done with due regard to the public interest and the needs of various stakeholders;

**AND WHEREAS** government has indicated it intends to develop an irrigation strategy;

**AND WHEREAS** the Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability has done significant work on the issues surrounding the regulation of water use;

**THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that the Legislative Assembly supports, in principle, the development of a sustainable irrigation strategy;

**THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability study and make recommendations regarding the development of a sustainable irrigation strategy;

**AND THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that in its deliberations the Committee consult with the public, government, and any other organizations that the Committee considers appropriate.

The Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action has worked collaboratively with your committee. Department officials have met twice with your committee during this reporting period to discuss the strategy both in the early stages of its creation, and once a draft document was created. The document outlined the department's principles and vision for the strategy, key components, applicability, governance and timelines. The document is available on the government's website for public feedback until December 13, 2021 after which the department will make any necessary revisions. The department is also aware that as new information arises, the strategy will be revisited and amended as needed.

**Committee Activities**

Your committee met on **May 27, 2021** to consider its work plan.

Your committee met on **June 3, 2021** and **June 10, 2021** *in camera* to discuss the referral of the unproclaimed Bill No. 35, *An Act to Amend the Lands Protection Act, P.E.I.* and to consider how the committee would like to move forward. The committee had decided to seek public consultation on any potential impacts of the Bill's pending proclamation. Your committee received six submissions from the public on this topic. Your committee has not included recommendations on this topic in this report to the Legislative Assembly.

Your committee met on the morning of **June 24, 2021** to receive a briefing on the creation of a sustainable irrigation strategy from the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action (Deputy Minister, Brad Colwill; Manager of Water and Air Monitoring, Bruce Raymond; Manager of Drinking Water and Wastewater Management, George Somers).

Your committee met on the afternoon of **June 24, 2021** to receive an update on the work of the Land Matters Advisory Committee and the 2020 AgriRecovery application from the Department of Agriculture and Land (Minister, Bloyce Thompson and Deputy Minister, Brian Matheson).

Your committee met on **July 27, 2021** for an off-site tour of various farms in central Prince Edward Island facilitated by the PEI Potato Board. The board brought the committee members along to view a holding pond, surface water irrigation and a high capacity well. Your committee had the opportunity to ask farmers and experts questions at each site and see firsthand the irrigation methods.

Your committee met on **September 16, 2021** to receive a briefing from the PEI Watershed Alliance (Mike Durant, Andrew Lush) as part of a series of meetings on considerations for the creation of a sustainable irrigation strategy.

Your committee met on **September 23, 2021** to receive a briefing from the PEI Potato Board (Greg Donald, Rob Green, Wayne Townsend) as part of the series on considerations for the creation of a sustainable irrigation strategy. The board provided a variety of features for the committee to consider on the farm, watershed and provincial levels.

Your committee met on **October 7, 2021** to receive a briefing from the PEI Federation of Agriculture (Ron Maynard and Ann Boswall) as part of the series on considerations for the creation of a sustainable irrigation strategy.

Your committee met on **October 8, 2021** to receive an update on the sustainable irrigation strategy from the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action. The department provided a discussion document that was finalized following the committee's meetings with stakeholders so that their concerns and ideas were taken into consideration. The department has welcomed public feedback on this document and will continue to until December 13, 2021.

Your committee met on **October 28** to consider its report to the Legislative Assembly.

Your committee met **11** times since last reporting to the Legislative Assembly in April 2021. The following recommendations are a product of the committee's work on collecting considerations for the creation of a sustainable irrigation strategy. In addition to the aforementioned meetings, your committee also received a written submission from the Coalition for the Protection of PEI Water on October 10, 2021.

Your committee recognizes the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action has paid attention to the work of the committee and strived to include the considerations brought forward by the stakeholders who had presented to your committee.

## Recommendations

- 1. Your committee recommends that government action an irrigation strategy based on the concepts outlined in the *Irrigation Strategy: A Document for Review, Comment and Discussion* while taking into consideration additional recommendations from your committee and the feedback received from the public.**

Your committee heard from the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action and the Department of Agriculture and Land on October 8, 2021 to receive an update on the development of the irrigation strategy. As this document has been created with the presentations to your committee in mind, your committee feels that the information provided in the document is an appropriate reflection of the evidence heard by your committee during their series of meetings on this topic.

Your committee is pleased to see the department have the draft document open for public consultation until December 13, 2021 and eagerly awaits the final draft of the irrigation strategy with all input having been considered.

- 2. Your committee recommends government ensure there is a requirement for a soil health improvement plan that is tailored to potential crop that will be grown, and that it be tied to the permitting process for supplemental irrigation. Further, your committee recommends baseline data be established for new applicants with short, medium and long-term goals to improve recharge, soil and water health.**

The need for a soil health improvement plan on the farm level was highlighted by the PEI Potato Board. It was stated in the presentation that a soil health improvement plan (SHIP) would allow producers to understand their current soil health status and inset goals to support soil health.

PEI Watershed Alliance also advised your committee that access should be granted for supplemental irrigation based on improvements of soil health and that it be regularly monitored to ensure stability or an increase in soil health. The PEI Federation of Agriculture shared insight into best practices for improving soil health including but limited to the use of cover crops, reduced tillage, increased rotations, alternative rotational crops and tile drainage.

The Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action later told the committee that a system of soil quality monitoring and improvements known as the Soil Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) would be piloted for newly irrigated fields. Your committee recommends that if the pilot proves to be successful, that such a plan permanently tied to the permitting process.

- 3. Your committee recommends that government remain transparent and continue to consult your committee, the public and relevant stakeholders on decision-making around water resources. Your committee believes the establishment of third-party oversight would assist with transparency.**

Your committee acknowledges and is pleased that the department intends to create a central advisory board that will consist of users, conservation groups, senior government officials and other key stakeholders. Your committee also notes that the department also indicated that in instances where watersheds reach 90% of its allocation, a committee of regional stakeholders will be involved with watershed specific decisions. As this committee is said to be made up of local water users, watershed groups and any other relevant stakeholders, your committee recognizes this will further allow for transparent decisions around water resources.

Transparency was identified as a common theme of importance in the feedback received by your committee. The PEI Watershed Alliance stated the need for a steering committee made up representation from key stakeholder groups. In fact, each of the presentations received by your committee outlined the need for some sort of third-party oversight. Provincial water authority, water governance board, provincial water cooperative are all variations of what witnesses have indicated they envision as being part of the decision-making around water use.

- 4. Your committee recommends that government ensure sufficient resources are allocated to allow for appropriate staffing levels for the monitoring and enforcement. Further, your committee recommends government ensure there is a dedicated position assigned to provincial irrigation and water use.**

Appointing a dedicated staff who are assigned to the provincial irrigation and water use will help to ensure compliance, trends and goals at both the provincial and application level are being achieved.

Your committee heard from the PEI Potato Board who expressed to your committee that appointing an irrigation and water use specialist who is dedicated to working with farmers would be beneficial. Your committee believes that a dedicated point of contact for producers will assist in the streamlining of support and services. This position may be a serve to be a valuable addition in working alongside the Department of Agriculture and Land's Soil and Water Conservation Specialists who will be delivering the SHIP service.

- 5. Your committee recommends that government consider continuous updates to ground and surface water monitoring technologies as such methods should be used to efficiently and appropriately measure, monitor and assess all significant impacts on the watershed. It is important to ensure appropriate and up-to-date technology is being used to monitor the province's most valuable resource.**

A common trend amongst the evidence heard by committee was that effective monitoring is a necessity.

During the off-site tour in July, your committee heard directly from farmers that the weather and topography can differ drastically across the Island. Watersheds situated in microclimates that experiences less rain and therefore require farmers to use supplemental irrigation are particularly and in need of accurate monitoring.

The PEI Potato Board told your committee that in order to manage water responsibility, we must be able to accurately measure the impacts on watersheds of all significant human activity, including all high capacity water withdrawals.

Your committee also encourages government to explore and consider investments in new methods for precise weather forecasting. The PEI Potato Board stressed to your committee the importance of accurate weather forecasting as the forecast can drastically impact the decisions made by producers on a daily basis. Your committee believes the exploration of such technologies would help to alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty that farmers face as it relates to watering of crops.

The department has made known to the committee that weather stations, crop modelling, monitors, and sensors provide data to farms to encourage selective application of supplemental water to meet crop requirements. The Department of Agriculture and Land currently is said to provide financial and technical support for innovation in irrigation efficiency, your committee urges government to use the same innovative approach as it relates to measuring and monitoring water within individual watersheds.

**6. Your committee recommends government expand the current surface and groundwater monitoring locations and that the results from those sites be transparent and publicly available.**

The PEI Potato Board voice the importance for more robust provincial testing across the province to have a better understanding of the impacts on each watershed to therefore manage the water use more responsibly. The board stressed that all monitoring information should be made publicly available. “Moving forward, the more we can measure things, make them publicly available and transparent, that’ll go a long way to reassuring all of us that we’re doing the right thing, we’re protecting our resource, our environment and ensuring that we’re able to produce quality food here on PEI.” – Greg Donald, PEI Potato Board.

**7. Your committee recommends government explore the idea of creating an irrigation plan for users in each watershed that must be adhered to.**

In the presentation to your committee the PEI Potato Board it was stated that producers should have a plan that outlines when to irrigate and the amount of water that would be irrigated at each application. Your committee recommends this idea be explored.

8. **Your committee recommends that government launch a public education campaign to allow for the public to fully understand the state of the province's ground and surface water, and how it is managed.**

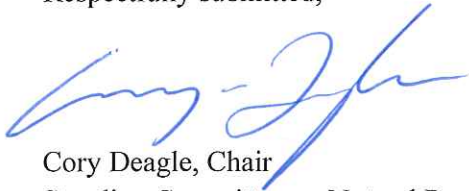
Your committee believes that public engagement and education is vital, this was made clear by the PEI Watershed Association.

The information gathered for the water registry that is currently under construction will serve as a good foundation for what the public could benefit from learning from. As stated in the *Irrigation Strategy: A Document for Review, Comment and Discussion* “[The water registry] will also show the status of watershed health and identify the issues that stress them. Water availability by watershed will eventually be added. There will be links to water quality data, relevant science reports and annual state of the water reports. The registry will include such information as current groundwater levels and stream flow. Tracking this information is critical to both determining what is an appropriate amount of water to use in a watershed but also acts as a double check to confirm that usage and its impacts are staying within acceptable limits.”

### **Conclusion**

Your committee thanks all those who had presented to your committee, provided written correspondence as well as those who allowed the committee to see firsthand the supplementary irrigation systems. Your committee also thanks the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action for their collaboration as the process has proven to allow for stakeholder input to be considered simultaneously to the committee's receipt of the information. Your committee is pleased with the department's work thus far on the creation of the irrigation strategy and looks forward to its final form and implementation.

Respectfully submitted,



Cory Deagle, Chair  
Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability