Canadians Ready for Water Infrastructure Investment, and Natural Infrastructure Has a Key Role

IISD REPORT

IISD | Natural Infrastructure for Water Solutions

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Natural Infrastructure for Water Solutions

Natural Infrastructure for Water Solutions (NIWS) is a 5-year initiative (2022 to 2026) led by IISD to scale up natural infrastructure across the Canadian Prairies (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta). The NIWS initiative aims for natural infrastructure to be well-understood, adopted, financed, and enabled by policy.

While science and policy are the foundation for this work, IISD is also taking a systems view—looking for opportunities and creative approaches to achieve real impact across the region, working with a network of champions, partners, and decision-makers.

Canadians Ready for Water Infrastructure Investment, and Natural Infrastructure has a Key Role

June 2026

Written by Marina Puzyreva, Justin Duncan, Petra Kiwan, Vanessa Albert, and Nik Nanos

Photo: iStock

IISD's Natural Infrastructure for Water Solutions (NIWS) initiative is funded by the BHP Foundation

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Summary and Key Messages

Five Key Insights

1. **72.5%** of Canadians want urgent action on water infrastructure.
2. **63.8%** have experienced water-related issues in the last 5 years.
3. **More than half** believe water problems are becoming more frequent.
4. **71.1%** view natural infrastructure as an urgent priority.
5. Indigenous respondents continue to experience **disproportionate** water impacts.

The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) commissioned Nanos Research to help design and carry out a national poll to assess Canadians' perceptions of water risk, water infrastructure issues, and the extent of their support for natural infrastructure to address these risks and issues. Polling questions were designed with helpful assistance from the Canadian Water and Wastewater Association (CWWA) and City of Ottawa (Hiran Sandanayake).[1]

The polling results are clear: Canadians are increasingly experiencing water-related disruptions and impacts from events such as flooding, believe things are getting worse, and want governments to take action.

Although there is regional variation in the impacts experienced, Canadians expressed the view that water issues are impacting their lives at a greater rate than just 10 years ago and view water as one of the top priorities for immediate action by governments.

While half of Canadians are not familiar with the term "natural infrastructure," support for natural solutions is high. Support for elected officials prioritizing natural solutions is also strong. In addition, there is support for applying a variety of funding mechanisms for natural infrastructure projects, with a strong emphasis on federal and provincial grants and reallocation of municipal budgets.

Particularly concerning, among those identifying as Indigenous during the survey, it was found that higher rates of exposure to boil-water advisories and water shortages are being experienced compared to the national average, with associated health impacts and missed school and

[1] Robert Haller, Executive Director (CWWA), Madeleine Butschler, Member of the Utility Leadership Committee (CWWA), Hiran Sandanayake, Director, Asset Management Services (City of Ottawa).

work being the result. The infrastructure deficit gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians remains an outstanding issue in need of targeted action.

This survey provides strong evidence that there is broad public support for governments at all levels to allocate budget and implement plans to improve water infrastructure and secure water security for Canadians. There is also very strong support for using natural infrastructure to address infrastructure deficits and improve the resilience and cost-effectiveness of our water infrastructure.

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1.0 Why Action on Water and Nature Matters

Natural ecosystems are our water "savings account." Protection of remaining water systems and restoration planning are needed to support future growth. Nature can and must also be harnessed as a partner to reduce infrastructure costs, improve the reliability of water supplies, and mitigate the severity of climate-related disasters, including floods and droughts, while providing co-benefits such as carbon storage, green space, community well-being, and biodiversity protection.

Canada has a significant water infrastructure deficit. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2025) has estimated a CAD 270 billion infrastructure deficit and identified a need to modernize infrastructure systems across Canada's municipalities. In addition, the Assembly of First Nations (2023) has estimated that CAD 349.2 billion is required to bridge the existing infrastructure gap between First Nations and the rest of Canada, including CAD 30.9 billion to support climate change adaptation and CAD 675 million to completely lift remaining drinking water boil advisories.

There is growing recognition that in many situations, nature can help close the infrastructure gap effectively and cost-effectively. In late 2025, the Canadian Infrastructure Council, an expert advisory body formed to support long-term infrastructure planning and decision making, released Canada's first National Infrastructure Assessment. It found that Canada's infrastructure systems,

particularly water and wastewater systems, are under growing strain and will act as a drag on the future growth and the resilience of communities. The Council recommended, for example, that natural infrastructure be enhanced and preserved and that natural infrastructure be used to deliver multiple benefits.

The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) has also been working on natural infrastructure of various forms for decades. Through a collaborative Natural Infrastructure for Water Solutions project focused on Canada's prairie region, it has been determined that natural infrastructure can be more cost-effective than grey infrastructure—around 50% less expensive, on average—and can deliver many of the same, or even multiple and better, outcomes (IISD, 2025). Even where natural infrastructure cannot serve as a complete replacement for grey infrastructure, it can often improve the effectiveness and resilience of grey infrastructure when the two are used together.

However, there is uncertainty about public knowledge and attitudes toward water infrastructure in general and natural infrastructure in particular. IISD's objective in carrying out this poll was to assess Canadians' perceptions of water risk, water infrastructure issues, and the extent of their support for natural infrastructure to address these risks and issues. The poll was also designed to identify any regionally specific experiences with water and levels of support regionally for water infrastructure action. The poll was also designed to identify any gender-specific opinions, disparities based on age, and the experience of Indigenous Peoples with water infrastructure.

2.0 What Did the Survey Cover, and Who Participated?

Nanos Research conducted a hybrid telephone and online random survey of **2,219** Canadians,[2] 18 years of age or older, **from February 28 to March 19, 2026**. The results were statistically checked and weighted by age and gender using the latest Census information, and the sample is geographically stratified to be representative of Canada. Individuals were called using random digit dialling with a maximum of five call-backs. The margin of error for a random survey of 2,219 Canadians is ±2.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

2.1 What Did We Learn?

Canadians Want Action on Climate and Water Infrastructure

Climate Change

A majority of Canadians (60.8%) rate climate action as urgent (7–10 on a 0–10 scale). British Columbia and Quebec show significantly higher urgency than the Prairies (Table 1). Women (68.3%) are significantly more likely than men (52.7%) to rate climate action as urgent.

Table 1. Urgency to take action to respond to climate change*

	Canada (n=2,219)	Atlantic (n=251)	Quebec (n=358)	Ontario (n=468)	Prairies (n=927)	British Columbia (n=215)
Mean	6.6	6.8	7.0	6.7	5.4	6.9
Net—Urgent (7-10)	60.8%	63.9%	68.4%	60.7%	45.6%	65.8%
Net—Neutral (4-6)	19.6%	19.0%	17.2%	21.1%	21.2%	17.7%
Net—Not Urgent (0-3)	18.7%	16.6%	13.9%	17.2%	31.7%	15.7%
Unsure	0.9%	0.5%	0.5%	1.0%	1.5%	0.8%

* How would you describe the urgency to take action to respond to climate change, where 0 is not at all urgent, and 10 is very urgent?

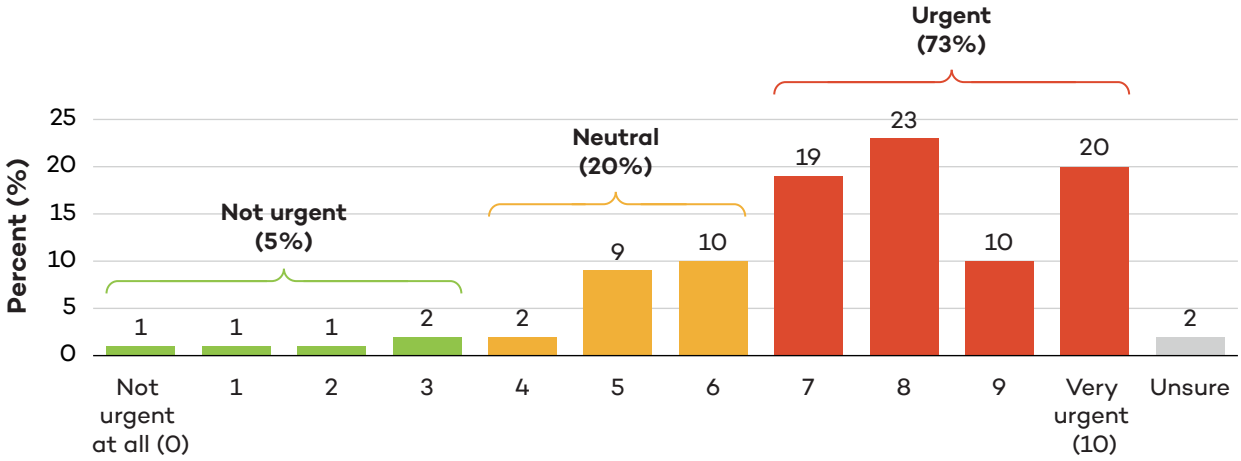
Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

[2] With an oversample in the Prairie provinces—Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

Water Infrastructure

Nationally, nearly three quarters (72.5%) of Canadians feel governments should act on water infrastructure (Figure 1). Notable are the differences between women and men: almost four out of five (78.1%) women say taking action to improve Canada's water infrastructure is urgent, compared to two thirds (66.5%) of men. Atlantic Canada (77.3%) and Quebec (74.3%) show a particularly large proportion of residents who view government action on water infrastructure as urgent, both above the national average.

Figure 1. Urgency for governments to take action to improve Canada's water infrastructure*



* On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all urgent, and 10 is very urgent, how urgent do you think it is for governments to take action to improve Canada's water infrastructure—such as drinking water, wastewater, stormwater, and flood-protection systems—to prevent future problems?

Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

Water Issues Are No Longer Abstract

63.8% of Canadians report experiencing water-related issues in the past 5 years. The most commonly experienced problems are street/yard flooding (25.7%), seasonal water shortages (22.0%), and water main breaks (17.1%).

Important geographic distinctions: Residents of BC (51.7%) and Atlantic Canada (38.1%) list seasonal water shortages, restrictions, or drought-related impacts as their top water issue, more than double the Canadian average of 22%. The regions of Quebec (24.2%) and Atlantic Canada (21.5%) are five times more likely to have had immediate family experience a boil-water advisory than those from Ontario (4.4%). Approximately a third of all Canadians (36.2%) say their immediate family has not experienced any of the listed water-related issues.

Table 2. Water issues experienced by Canadians and their immediate family in the past 5 years* (top issues identified)

Water issue	Canada (n=2,209)	Atlantic (n=250)	Quebec (n=354)	Ontario (n=466)	Prairies (n=924)	British Columbia (n=215)
Street or yard flooding caused by heavy rainfall or rapid snowmelt	25.7%	22.6%	26.3%	28.6%	22.7%	21.6%
Seasonal water shortages, restrictions, or drought-related impacts	22.0%	38.1%	12.6%	13.1%	24.4%	51.7%
Water main breaks affecting water supply or pressure	17.1%	15.9%	10.5%	15.8%	33.2%	11.9%
Poor taste or odour in tap water	16.5%	16.5%	14.6%	17.0%	19.6%	14.0%
Erosion of riverbanks, shorelines, and roads	12.8%	23.1%	8.2%	14.3%	9.7%	15.0%
Boil-water advisories	12.2%	21.5%	24.2%	4.4%	9.6%	12.7%

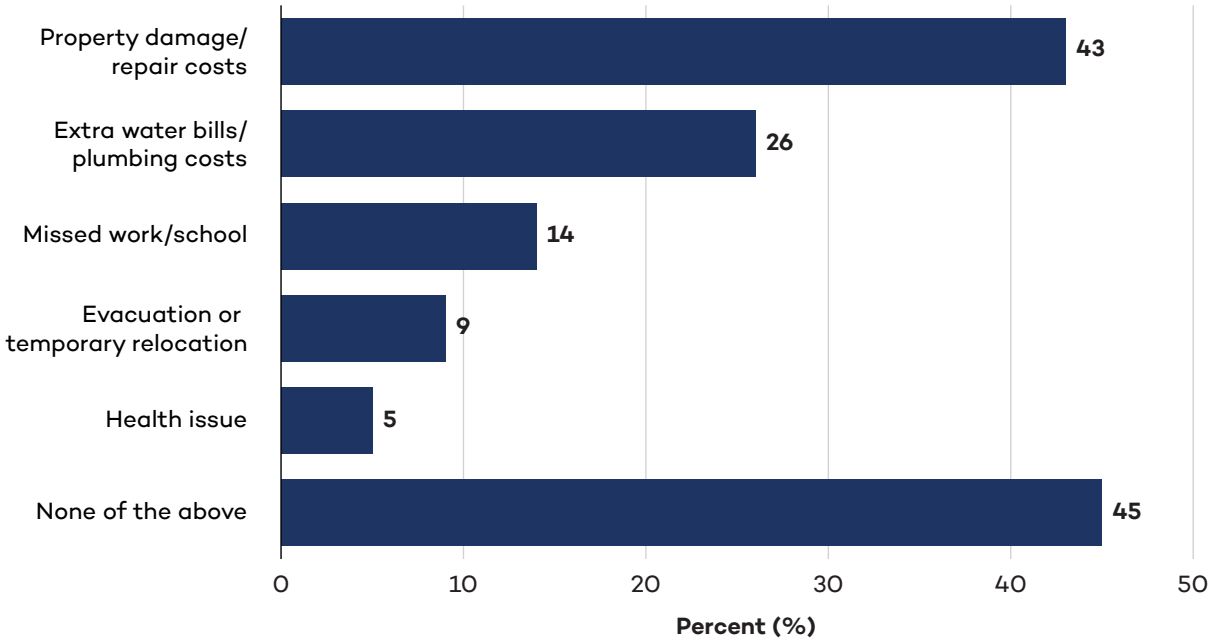
* Have you or your immediate family experienced any of the following issues related to water in the past 5 years?

Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

Water Problems Are Causing Significant Financial and Personal Impacts

Among those experiencing water problems, 43.4% report property damage or repair costs, 25.8% faced extra water or plumbing bills, and 14.0% missed work or school (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Reported impacts of water-related problems on Canadians and their households, friends, or close acquaintances*



* Have any of the water-related problems experienced by you, someone in your household, a friend, or a close acquaintance caused any of the following impacts?

Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple answers.

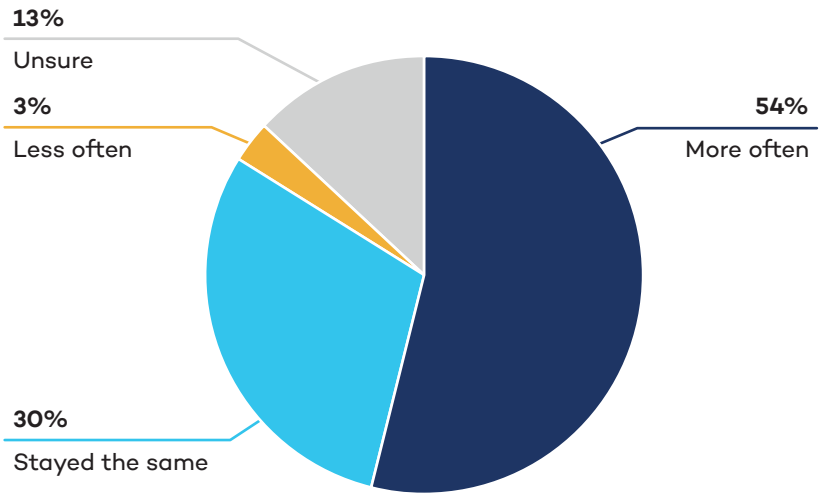
Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

People See the Problem Growing

1 in 2 Canadians think that water problems are happening more often than 10 years ago.

A majority of Canadians (53.6%) believe water problems are occurring more often than 10 years ago (Figure 3). Only 3.5% think problems have decreased. Women (60.3%) are significantly more likely than men (46.7%) to perceive problems as increasing.

Figure 3. Frequency of water problems compared to 10 years ago*



* Do you think these water problems are happening more often, less often, or have stayed the same compared to 10 years ago?

Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

Natural Infrastructure Has Strong Potential

General Support

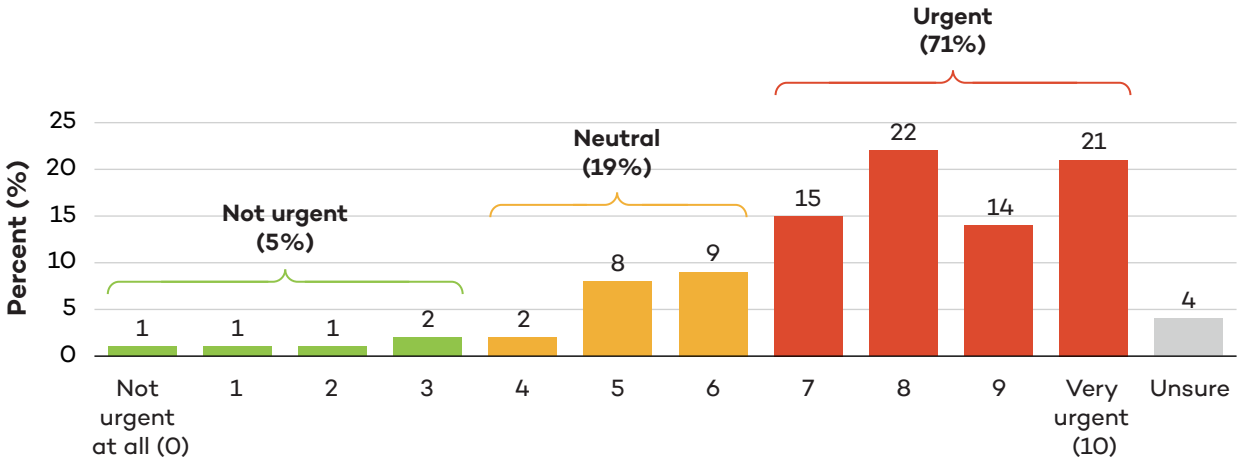
Natural infrastructure can be a conserved ecosystem (e.g., wetland), a restored ecosystem (e.g., replanted riparian area), or even a constructed asset (e.g., green roof or retaining pond). Natural infrastructure is managed to provide specific infrastructure benefits, with the potential for many associated social, economic, and environmental benefits. These systems differ from "plain old nature" in that they are specifically designed and/or managed to support infrastructure service delivery or acknowledged and accounted for as part of infrastructure.

Natural infrastructure can be around 50% less expensive, on average, and can deliver many of the same, or even multiple and better, outcomes. Despite this, 47% of Canadians have not heard the phrase "natural infrastructure," 31% say they think they have heard of it, and 13% say they definitely have. Younger Canadians (19% of 18 to 34) have definitely heard of natural infrastructure, almost double older age groups (11% of 35 to 54; 11% of 55 plus).

A majority (71.1%) of Canadians responded that planning and implementing natural infrastructure is an urgent priority.

Respondents were provided with a brief overview of what natural infrastructure is and asked questions about how they would rate it as a priority: 71.1% responded that natural infrastructure is an urgent priority.

Figure 4. Urgency planning and implementing natural infrastructure in communities*



* On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all urgent, and 10 is very urgent, how urgent of a priority is planning for and implementing natural infrastructure to manage water services in your community?

Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

Benefits and Drawbacks

Top responses when asked what the main benefits of using natural infrastructure were, almost a quarter of Canadians (23.4%) reported that lower costs and savings were the main benefits (Table 3). Other top responses were environmental protection and lower ecological harm (12.8%), natural approach works better (10.9%) and flood mitigation and water damage prevention (10.4%). The two top responses Canadians gave when asked what the main drawback to the use of natural infrastructure solutions were: no real drawbacks (17.3%) and high costs and funding gaps (15.5%) (Table 4).

Table 3. Benefits of using natural infrastructure solutions, top responses*

Top benefits	Canada (n=1,977)
Lower costs and savings	23.4%
Environmental protection and lower ecological harm	12.8%
Natural approach works better	10.9%
Flood mitigation and water damage prevention	10.4%
Cleaner water with fewer chemicals	8.6%
Long-term sustainability and durability	6.1%
Other	5.9%
Not sure	3.2%
Other	3.2%
Not sure	7.5%

* What do you think is the main benefit, if any, of using natural infrastructure solutions as buffers to help clean water and protect communities from floods and droughts?
Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

Table 4. Drawbacks to the use of natural infrastructure solutions*

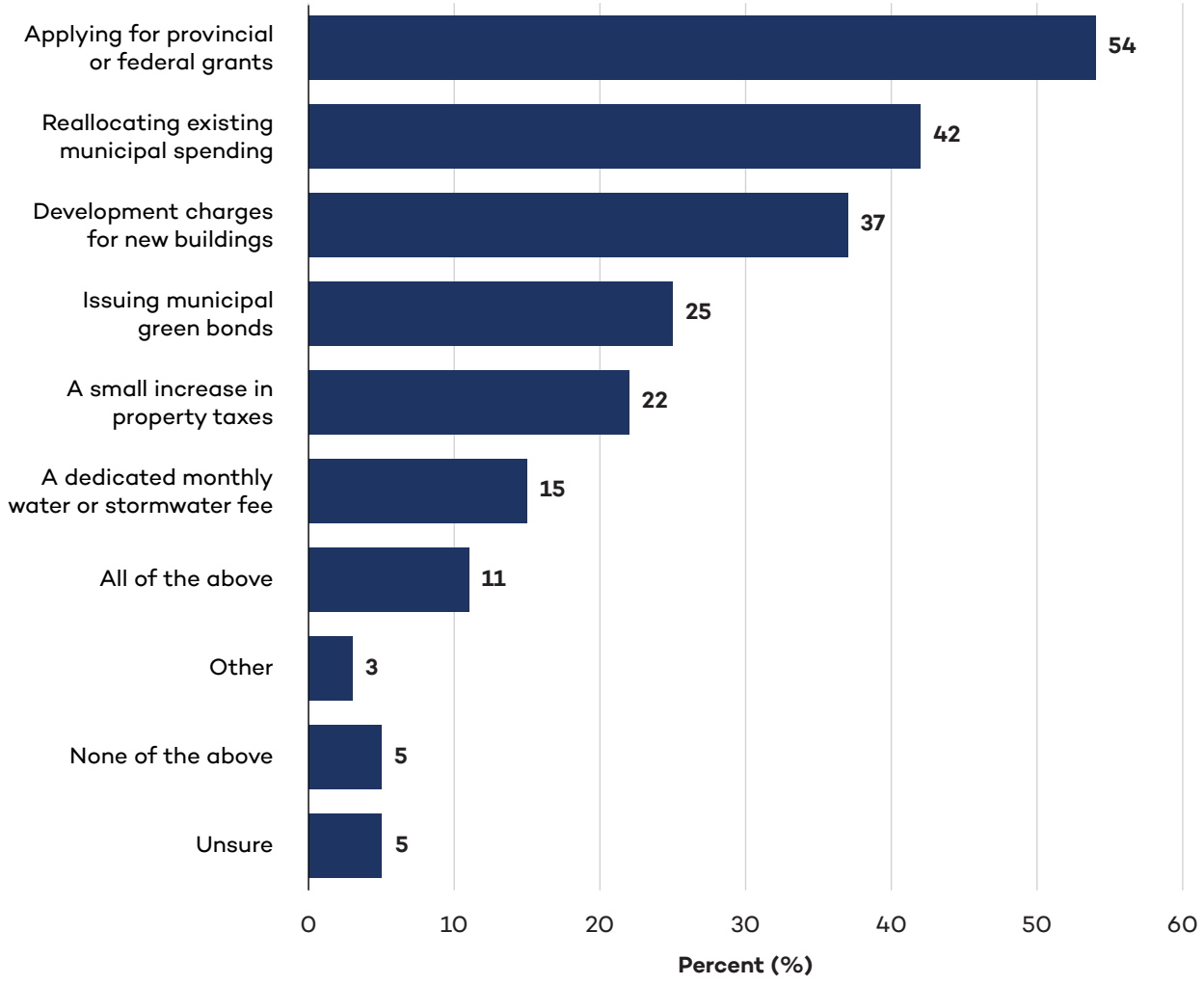
Top drawbacks	Canada (n=1,878)
No real drawbacks	17.3%
High costs and funding gaps	15.5%
Insufficient performance in extreme or high-demand conditions	7.1%
Implementation and management challenges	7.1%
Competes with other land uses	6.2%
Large land requirements	5.5%
Slow implementation and delayed benefits	5.6%
Weak public understanding and buy-in	5.4%
Other	3.2%
Not sure	7.5%

* What do you think is the main drawback, if any, of using natural infrastructure solutions as buffers to help clean water and protect communities from floods and droughts?
Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

Preferred Funding Approaches

Among funding approaches, applying for provincial/federal grants (53.5%) and reallocating existing municipal spending (41.6%) receive the strongest support (Figure 5). Notable are the differences between women and men: three in five women (59.8%) support their local government funding natural infrastructure projects by applying for provincial or federal grants, compared to 46.9% of men. Residents of Quebec (30%) and the Prairies (30%) report lower support for funding natural infrastructure projects through development charges for new buildings compared to those from Ontario (42%), Atlantic Canada (42%) and British Columbia (41%).

Figure 5. Preferred funding approaches for natural infrastructure projects, top responses*



* If your local government were considering different ways to fund natural infrastructure projects, such as wetlands, green spaces, or flood-protection landscapes, which of the following approaches would you support?

Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple answers.

Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

Support for elected officials backing natural infrastructure is high at 67.6%, and only 2.3% of Canadians would view elected officials less positively for supporting natural infrastructure (Table 5).

Table 5. Impact on the favourability of elected officials who support natural infrastructure*

	Canada (n=2,219)	Atlantic (n=251)	Quebec (n=358)	Ontario (n=468)	Prairies (n=927)	British Columbia (n=215)
More positively	67.6%	66.0%	70.8%	68.0%	58.7%	72.9%
Less positively	2.3%	2.8%	1.6%	2.1%	4.0%	2.0%
No impact	24.2%	24.2%	22.3%	24.5%	30.0%	19.4%
Unsure	5.9%	6.9%	5.2%	5.4%	7.3%	5.7%

* If an elected official supported natural infrastructure, would you view this individual more positively, less positively, or would it have no impact on how you view that individual?

Source: Authors, based on Nanos polling data.

Regional Realities Matter

Polling has helped reveal various regional infrastructure challenges and variations in public opinion and preferences. Below is a summary of some regional highlights.

Prairies

Prairie respondents report higher frustration with aging water infrastructure and service disruptions, and rated water authorities most poorly, reinforcing the need for place-based solutions:

- 33.2% of Prairie respondents experienced water main breaks—nearly double the national average (17.1%) and more than triple that of Quebec (10.5%).
- 23.8% of Prairie respondents rated infrastructure maintenance as poor/very poor vs. 13.9% nationally.
- 45.6% of Prairie respondents rated climate action as urgent, compared to 60.8% nationally, suggesting stronger resonance for messaging focused on infrastructure reliability and cost.
- Rate water infrastructure authorities most poorly—24% say poor or very poor (vs. 14% nationally).
- Lowest awareness of the concept of natural infrastructure—50% have never heard of it.

Atlantic

The perceived urgency to address water infrastructure issues is high in the Atlantic, with water shortages and boil-water advisories standing out as top issues of concern:

- Seasonal water shortages are a top concern at 38%, well above the national average of 22% and second only to BC.
- Boil-water advisories stand out at 22%, nearly double the national rate of 12% and five times Ontario's 4%.
- Erosion of riverbanks, shorelines, and roads is the highest of any region at 23% vs. 13% nationally.
- Most likely to say water problems happen more often than 10 years ago (60% vs. 54% nationally).

Quebec

Respondents from Quebec have revealed that boil-water advisories are particularly high in the province and that the public has the strongest interest in addressing climate change:

- Boil-water advisories are the highest of any region at 24%, double the national average.
- Strongest sense of climate urgency among all regions—68% rate it as urgent vs. 46% in the Prairies and 60.8% nationally.

Floating treatment wetlands in the Rural Municipality of Springfield, Manitoba, 2026. Credit: IISD.

Ontario

Ontario stands out as the region with the lowest level of boil-water advisories but with the highest reported levels of property damage resulting from water issues:

- Boil-water advisories are remarkably low at just 4% — the lowest by a wide margin.
- Most likely to report property damage/repair costs from water problems (53% vs. 43% nationally).
- Strongest preference for development charges on new buildings as a funding approach (42%).

British Columbia

Respondents from British Columbia highlighted seasonal water shortages and the strongest interest in support for public officials championing natural infrastructure:

- Seasonal water shortages dominate at 52%—more than double the national average and the highest of any region by far.
- Strongest support for a small property tax increase to fund natural infrastructure (28% vs. 22% nationally).
- Most likely to view natural infrastructure–supporting elected officials more positively at 73% compared to 67.6% nationally.

Indigenous Communities Continue to Experience Disproportionate Impacts

Indigenous respondents reported significantly higher rates of boil-water advisories, seasonal water shortages, and persistent sewage odours, resulting in high rates of missed work and school, compared to non-Indigenous respondents nationally:

- **30.0%** seasonal water shortages/drought impacts (vs. **21.8%** non-Indigenous).
- **21.0%** boil-water advisories (vs. **11.9%**).
- **10.4%** health impacts related to water issues (vs. **4.4%**).
- **20.1%** missed work/school (vs. **13.7%**).

These gaps point to systemic water and wastewater infrastructure challenges disproportionately affecting Indigenous communities.

A Clear Opportunity for Leadership on Water and Natural Infrastructure

This survey provides strong evidence that there is broad support for governments at all levels to improve water infrastructure, ensure water resilience and prevent water-related problems. Additionally, there is very strong support for allocating budgets specifically to natural infrastructure as a response to outstanding infrastructure deficits:

- 72.5% of respondents call water infrastructure investment urgent.
- 53.5% of respondents support the utilization of public funding for natural infrastructure projects through provincial and federal grants.
- 41.6% support reallocating existing municipal spending toward water and natural infrastructure solutions.
- 67.6% of respondents would increase support for an elected official who champions natural infrastructure.

Polling has also helped tease out regionally specific challenges, needs, and preferences, while also confirming that Canadians in every province support the utilization of natural infrastructure and would support elected officials taking a leadership role on the issue and applying public funds to implement projects.

Additionally, the Indigenous respondents to this poll have revealed that Indigenous Peoples continue to suffer disproportionately from a water infrastructure deficit and that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians remains an outstanding issue in need of targeted action.

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