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DENNIS BUECKERT *Sun Jan 1, 12:49 PM ET*

OTTAWA (CP) - There was an edge of frustration in Paul Cellucci's voice when he raised the topic of fresh water exports in a radio interview last month.

"Canada has probably one of the largest resources of fresh water in the world," the former U.S. ambassador said during a debate on Canada-U.S. relations.

"Water is going to be - already is - a very valuable commodity and I've always found it odd where Canada is so willing to sell oil and natural gas and uranium and coal, which are by their very nature finite. But talking about water is off the table, and water is renewable.

"It doesn't make any sense to me."

It was as close as any high-profile American has come recently to saying what many Canadians have long suspected - Washington wants our water.

Officially, the U.S. government says it's not interested in Canadian water. But many believe the issue will soon break into the open. Maclean's magazine recently ran a cover story arguing that Canada should sell its water "before they take it."

"This country is in a position to provide a solution that would yield enormous economic and humanitarian benefits for the entire continent, even the world," the magazine wrote. Such viewpoints don't sit well with Peter Lougheed, the former premier of Alberta. In a recent speech to the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, Lougheed called for an all-party declaration in the House of Commons confirming Canada's refusal to allow large-scale water transfers to its southern neighbour. "We should not export our fresh water - we need it and we should conserve it," Lougheed said. "And we should communicate to the United States very quickly how firm we are about it."

U.S. water shortages are becoming critical. Flow in the Colorado River, which feeds the Las Vegas Valley, dropped by almost half between 2000 and 2005 due to successive droughts. Yet Canada has major water problems of its own. The International Joint Commission has repeatedly warned about declining water quality in the Great Lakes due to toxic contamination, and water levels in the lakes have dropped to record lows. "Although the Great Lakes contain about 20 per cent of the fresh water on the Earth's surface, only one per cent of this water is renewed each year," the commission noted in a recent report. Ontario, Quebec and eight states signed a deal earlier this month that will prevent thirsty jurisdictions in the southern U.S. from getting access to water from the Great Lakes.

But critics have said the deal still allows for water to be withdrawn at unacceptable levels. The biggest threat, though, hangs over Western Canada. The most important rivers in the Prairies are fed by mountain glaciers, and the glaciers are melting due to climate change.

"The consequences of these hydrological changes for water availability . . . are likely to be severe," said a study published last month in the British science journal, *Nature*. Cities like Calgary, Edmonton and Saskatoon are at risk of literally losing the rivers on which they are built over the next generation or two.

"It's a huge problem," says Andrew Weaver of the School of Earth and Ocean Sciences at the University of Victoria. "These glaciers are basically toast. They won't be around by the end of the century, or they'll be around in such insignificant amounts that it won't be a big source of water. You've got to start thinking about adaptation here." The shrinkage of the glaciers is well-documented. Visitors to Glacier National Park in Alberta can follow the retreat of the Athabasca Glacier over the past century by visiting the cairns that used to mark the toe of the glacier.

"That's fossil water and when it's gone, it's gone," said Tim Barnett of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at La Jolla, California, lead author of the article in *Nature*. "If you really are glacier-fed in a warming world, you're up the creek without a paddle, no pun intended."

Maude Barlow, chairwoman of the Council of Canadians, argues that a global shortage of water will be the most threatening ecological, economic and political crisis in the 21st century. But she says Canada's apparent abundance of blue gold is illusory.

"There is no water to spare in the Great Lakes. The only place one could go for the kind of massive water they're talking about is up north and all those rivers are flowing north, so you'd have to be undertaking huge engineering projects to reverse the flow of water. "So this notion that we have lots of water sitting around is absolutely false." Barlow says the federal government can't legally ban bulk

water exports because water is included in NAFTA. Ottawa has banned inter-basin transfers but she questions whether the ban could be enforced against a provincial government determined to export. She rejects the suggestion that Canada would be doing a service to the world by sharing its water: "I think it would end up going to places that can buy it as opposed to places that need it."

Despite evidence that water is being wasted on a massive scale, municipalities still don't charge residents the real cost of water or effectively promote conservation. Due to budget cuts in recent years, the federal government has cut back on water research, closing monitoring stations and reducing data collection on water supplies. The underground aquifers that store the nation's groundwater haven't been mapped, so there is no way to know if they are being depleted or contaminated. "As a society we are largely forging ahead blindly when it comes to our management of water," the Senate environment committee said in a report tabled just before the government fell on Nov. 28. "We are in essence gambling with our most precious but often under-appreciated natural resource." The committee recommended that Ottawa create a National Water Council to develop strategies on key water issues. But its report went virtually unnoticed amid the excitement of the election call.