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MEDIA RELEASE BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF BERN, SWITZERLAND

## **Responsible Water Use**

# **"Blue Community" Labels Awarded to the City and the University of Bern**

**Bern, 18 September 2013. The city of Bern and the University of Bern are participants in an international initiative that advocates safe water and sanitation for all. They have been awarded the "Blue Community" and "Blue University" labels. For the award ceremony, Maude Barlow, initiator of the "Blue Community" initiative and winner of the "Alternative Nobel Prize", travelled to Bern.**

Both the Council of the City of Bern and the University of Bern are leading the way in terms of water rights. They are participants in an international initiative that advocates the rights to safe water and sanitation for all, and promotes water as a public good. In 2010 the United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognized the fundamental human right to water and sanitation, and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realisation of all human rights.

### **Advocating public water supplies ...**

The "Blue Community" initiative calls for publicly financed, owned and operated water and wastewater services to guarantee unimpeded access to safe water for all (see box). Bern's Mayor agrees. At Erlacherhof, the seat of Bern City Council, Alexander Tschäppät told the assembled media, "Safe water supply is a public issue because water is a human right. Water is a civil right."

**... and tap water**

As "Blue Communities", Bern and the University of Bern strongly advocate the use of tap water from publicly-owned water mains. They want to avoid commercially available bottled water shipped across vast distances. This makes perfect ecological sense because up to a thousand times more energy goes into the extraction and shipping of bottled water than distributing the same quantity of water to household taps. Water is a public good that belongs to all of humanity. Using tap water makes a key contribution to this commitment. As a participant in the "Blue Community" initiative, Bern City Council has therefore opted to avoid bottled water, and calls on all of its suppliers and affiliated institutions to follow suit by drinking and using tap water.

**Committed to water research ...**

The University of Bern has committed to all its students and staff having easy access to safe tap water. It is in research, however, that the university makes its main contribution towards the right to safe drinking water. Rector Martin Täuber listed a number of water research projects. Among them is a scenario that tracks and projects changes in water cycles up until the year 2085 to supply adaptation strategies to climate change. The university is also involved in various international research projects, and engages in co-operation with partners in both hemispheres. "There is a serious shortage of clean and safe water, and an urgent need to resolve these pressing issues. Science and research can and must contribute in a significant way," Täuber said.

**... and to the fundamental human right to water**

Professor Walter Kälin, chair in Public and International Law at the University of Bern, illustrated the relationship between the fundamental human right to water and the principle of sustainability. He underscored that Switzerland and the human right to water are entwined. "In upholding the fundamental human right to water, Switzerland shows solidarity with governments that work towards providing free access to adequate amounts of clean and safe water in their countries," Kälin noted. In doing so, he addressed another principle of the "Blue Community" initiative, which is the call for participating cities, towns and institutions to support other countries in their efforts to provide safe public drinking water.

In the context of "solidarit'eau suisse", an initiative by Swiss towns and cities, the Council of the City of Bern has contributed to a drinking water project in North Vietnam.

### **Leading the way for Europe**

Bern has two water pioneers, with Bern the world's first capital city to become a "Blue Community" and the University of Bern the world's first "Blue University". On the occasion of the award ceremony, initiator Maude Barlow stated: "In their commitment to the international 'Blue Community' initiative, the City and University of Bern are leading the way for all of Europe."

#### **The Five "Blue Community" Principles:**

- 1) Recognise the basic human right to safe drinking water.
- 2) Defend and promote publicly financed, owned and operated water and wastewater services.
- 3) Promote the responsible use of water.
- 4) Promote the use of free drinking water from public infrastructure.
- 5) Support other countries in their efforts to provide functioning public safe drinking water services.

The "Blue Community" initiative was launched by the Council of Canadians, Canada's leading social action organisation. The Council's National Chairperson is Maude Barlow.

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**Media Documents:** Find illustrations, background information, reports in English and German at [www.bern.ch/mediencenter/aktuell\\_ptk\\_sta](http://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/aktuell_ptk_sta)

#### **Important Note: Public event on Water Rights at the University of Bern**

Date/time: Wednesday, 18 September 2013; 06:15-08:00pm

Venue: UniS, Auditorium A 003, Schanzeneckstrasse 1, 3012 Bern, Switzerland