



Wild Lands Advocate 10(1): 17-18, February 2002

Managing Water in the Bow River Basin

By Heinz Unger

When I returned to southern Alberta in the summer of 2000 after an absence of over 15 years, it was thanks to AWA that I became very quickly involved in issues close to my heart, i.e. wilderness, environmental protection and water resources management. I was honored to follow in Stella Riesen's footsteps (or rather, in her wake) to represent AWA on the Bow River Basin Council (BRBC).

The involvement with the BRBC led to my subsequent work on the Urban Stormwater Implementation Project (USMIP), which was initiated by the BRBC, and also to my more recent delegation to the Bow Basin Advisory Committee (BAC). Stella is still supporting and backstopping me, and we are fortunate to have another relatively new AWA member, Mona Keffer, a fisheries biologist, who is also getting involved in these water-related issues.

USMIP was initiated at a 1999 conference where the proper management of urban stormwater was recognized as an issue of high priority for the Bow River basin. The BRBC was directed to initiate the process of implementation of Best Management Practices (BMPs). BMPs address local specific objectives and appropriate standards for the improvement of water quality in the Bow River and its watershed. They can be structural, such as stormwater retention ponds, or non-structural, such as an awareness campaign concerning fertilizer, herbicide and pesticide on suburban lawns.

Some of the objectives and initiatives of the USMIP are to:

- Control the spread of contaminants in the water supply
- Define monitoring and enforcement needs
- Identify suitable incentives (such as for developers) and funding sources
- Develop locally appropriate BMPs
- Prepare an education and communication program to raise awareness at all levels, including rural local governments, schools, politicians, the media, etc.
- Move towards watershed-level planning and implementation of stormwater management programs and projects
- Initiate pilot projects and research to improve stormwater management in the Bow River basin; and, lastly
- Set up an urban stormwater management website for easy access by all interested stakeholders sometime later in 2002.

The work on USMIP has been challenging and rewarding because so many enthusiastic and hardworking volunteers are involved. Ingenuity and great efforts were needed to stick to a reasonable completion date without burning out the pro bono services given by the City of Calgary, Alberta Environment (AE) and other firms and individuals. Over the years, the BRBC has provided wonderful support for the USMIP.

In October 2001 I was invited to represent the "ecosystem protection" category on the Bow Basin Advisory Committee (BAC), which was set up by AE to obtain public and stakeholder inputs during the first phase of the water management plan for the South Saskatchewan River Basin (SSRB). Since the basin is divided into four sub-basins, i.e. Red Deer, Bow, Oldman, and South Saskatchewan, four BAC were set up, each with representatives for the various categories ranging from rural and urban municipal to industry, irrigation, fisheries, recreation and health.





Water management plans are being prepared by AE since they are a requirement of the new provincial Water Act, which came into effect in 1999. Under the act AE is required to develop a Framework for Water Management Planning, which has just been completed and is posted at <http://www3.gov.ab.ca/env/water/legislation/index.html>. This site also has more details about the new water act and associated regulations. Among others, the new act has provisions for the transfer of water allocations, and the BACs were asked by AE to provide input and suggestions on how the applications for such transfers should be considered.

Let us consider the various aspects of the water allocation transfer program: as much as some people think that transfers of water rights for money are a bad idea, there can be positive aspects to such transfers. Firstly, a licence holder is being encouraged to conserve water and make more efficient use of it so he can transfer some of the allocation. Secondly, the act provides that up to 10 percent of the transferred volume can be held back by AE for water conservation objectives (WCO) or "in-stream" needs for:

- Protection of a natural water body or its aquatic environment, or any part of them
- Protection of tourism, recreational, transportation or waste assimilation uses of water, or
- Management of fish or wildlife.

The second phase which is planned to start later in February 2002 and is much more important and critical for the aquatic environment, will focus on determining the flows to remain in each river. This will require an assessment of the volumes for human demands and the flows for the aquatic environment. Studies by AE are ongoing or completed, and they hope "... to reach compromises between competing interests"

Right from the start of phase one it was clear to many BAC members that phase two should have been done first, but AE admitted that they were under political pressure to quickly develop a system for facilitating transfers of water allocations. Another obvious flaw in the new law is the low limit on the holdback in case of transfers, i.e. a maximum of 10 percent regardless of how stressed the river section may be. Moreover, the AE director has the discretion to withhold less than that low maximum. In this context, AE admitted that there are serious deficits to existing in-stream objectives (IO) on the Bow River (especially downstream of Calgary), and probably on the Red Deer and Oldman Rivers as well – although limited data are available for these rivers.

Fortunately, there were enough concerned people on the BACs to make sure that reasonably adequate conditions were imposed, especially for the first stage of water allocation transfers, such as a requirement to always withhold the maximum 10 percent; to review the process and its impacts after two years (by which time phase two must be completed); and to analyze and /or post all data for the public to see. In any case, the AE director is also required to consider the existing, potential and cumulative effects of any transfer application on the aquatic environment, on hydraulics, hydrology and hydrogeology, on human health and safety, and on any existing WCO.

On this context Stella raises a concern that addresses the need to have more than one person from than one provincial government department involved in reviewing and approving any water transfer application. To illustrate this point, the implications of any potential water disaster would affect, in addition to Alberta Environment, also Alberta Health and the relevant regional health authorities, Health Canada, Environment Canada, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, etc.

It is highly recommended that experts who specialize in occupational health and communicable diseases make up the water allocation transfer review panel as part of their department's health protection mandate. In times of fiscal constraints and stream lining of services, we need to see local, provincial and





federal governments working together and regularly forming partnerships to ensure that the health and safety of humans, animals and ecosystems alike are fully protected for generations to come.

Lastly, to further illustrate the point above, which department would be more qualified to assess which groups of people are more susceptible to illness or death by their level of exposure to a chemical or microbial agent?

On paper the requirements seem to be adequate although a lengthy debate on socio-economic effects and how they should be considered did not bring forth a clear conclusion. There is concern that AE may not have adequate staffing capacity and financial resources to carry out all the tasks assigned to them under the law (such as determining the flows to remain in the river), especially in the face of political pressure for action – which is bound to happen occasionally.

Public consultation and inputs, plus a good flow of information to the public will be important to monitor the implementation of the new systems, but AE did not perform very well in this regard during phase one, despite this being pointed out to them repeatedly by BAC members. There were a few open houses organized in the first part of January, including one in Calgary, to inform the general public about the arrangements for transfers. However, there was only about 10 days' notice, little information was provided to some of the media, and practically no time was allowed for interested parties to study this complex matter in advance. Little surprise then, that fewer than 50 people turned up at the open house in Calgary.

In the course of the BAC meetings, it was heartening to see that many members showed great concern for the river and the ecosystem. The various ecosystem representatives on the four BACs will be meeting some time later in February or in March to compare notes and exchange views. We are hoping that, together with the AWA team, we can come up with a joint approach and strategy for phase two.

For more information on the Bow River Basin Council and the Bow River see www.brbc.ab.ca and www.cwra.org.

