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Province opens floodgates on water debate

By Andy Marshall

Guarded support to outright skepticism have greeted the Alberta government's urgent-sounding "water for life" initiative which has just concluded a province-wide consultation process and is supposed to lead to an action plan by the late fall.

Some see it as an important step to ensure safe and secure water supplies well into the future and to better educate Albertans on critical water issues. Others call it at best a public relations gesture that has excluded basic concerns. A few are convinced it is merely a ploy for Alberta Environment Minister Lorne Taylor to fulfil a long-held obsession to push for bulk water transfers from northern Alberta to the drought-plagued south.

The government says the intent of the new strategy is to hear the views of all Albertans, from conservationists to industry leaders.

"We're asking Albertans to drive this process. We're eager to see (from the consultation process) what we should include," says Alberta Environment spokeswoman Anne McInerney. The general principles for water policy, outlined by Taylor last year, embrace a call for reliable drinking water for all Albertans, dependable supplies for economic development, healthy rivers and lakes, as well as risk-management plans for drought and floods. McInerney denies the minister has already decided to revive water transfer schemes: "We have absolutely nothing (in the way of an agenda)."

The consultation process included 13 public workshops -- two in Calgary because so many showed up for the first one -- to be followed by a ministerial forum in the spring involving what McInerney called 60 or so invited "experts." They will sift through the torrent of material from the workshops and prepare the framework for a provincial water strategy by the fall.

An initial objection to the relatively speedy process -- one critic calls it "an unholy rush" -- is its apparent circumvention of the work already well under way by the four southern Alberta river advisory committees and the revival of topics, such as the issuance of water licenses, already dealt with through the Water Act.

Mark Bennett, executive director of the Bow River Basin Council, acknowledges some council members have expressed that criticism. "I've harboured a bit of concern myself," he adds. But, overall, "we welcome the opportunity to be involved in a province-wide initiative." Basin councils also operate for the Oldman, the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan Rivers.

McInerney says "water for life doesn't preclude any of the other work we have ongoing . . . we're looking 25 years down the road."

Heinz Unger, the Alberta Wilderness Association representative on the Bow River council, doubts the effectiveness of Taylor's initiative. "The minister wants to be seen to be doing something," he says. Although intentions "aren't all evil, he wants public input about things already well under way."

Unger also criticizes what he sees as the omission in the government workbooks used in the consultation process of issues vital to water security and safety. Watershed protection from industrial and recreational activities, the use of vast amounts of groundwater by the energy industry in water-injection extraction





processes, and the looming threat from proliferating pig and cattle feedlots are among the topics he fears are being neglected.

"These are serious gaps," says Unger. "I'm concerned the government's intention is to endorse a growth strategy and find ways for water to support it."

"If something's missing, please bring it to the table," counters McInerney.

So turned off is AWA president Cliff Wallis by the new initiative that he has refused to participate. "It's superseding the work done by the river basin councils with lets-ram-through-some-irrigation-infrastructure undertones," he says. The government workbook used in the consultation process and government energies are directed to "restart discussion on the transfer of all that water from the water-logged north to the drought-stricken south," he notes. "This government has a long history of trying to do things in a way that seems quite natural and that provides for public input. Then they turn around and use the information strictly for their advantage."

The government's priority, says Wallis, should be to follow what the Water Act already prescribes: The development of specific plans for each basin, with no large-scale transfer of water. "That was agreed to, it was legislated. Let's not go back on all that good work."

Priorities for southern rivers would relate to quantity issues. With pulp mill and other industrial effluence affecting northern rivers, water quality would more likely be discussed there, Wallis says. Also, with many rural people dependent on groundwater, "I hope they will start to rail against industries polluting it and sucking it dry." He specifically refers to the energy and agriculture industries, adding, though, "you can't single out one industry."

Speculation about water transfers is certainly substantiated in conversations with southern Alberta's irrigation farmers, desperate for more water but aware that fragile, southern rivers are already fully allocated.

"As we move down the road to having less water available and more people to take care of, we need to have land that will produce the most amount of food per acre. As far as Alberta is concerned, that means irrigation," says Keith Francis, head of the Alberta Irrigation Projects Association, representing all 13 southern irrigation districts and about 6,000 farmers. "We have lots of water in Alberta, it's just in the wrong place."

He is keen for the water-for-life initiative to prompt active study of the economic and environmental feasibility of water transfers. While dams and river diversions may not be the order of the day, pipelines could have a place.

"They find ways to move natural gas and oil from Prudhoe Bay to California and Chicago," he says from his Taber home. "Surely, they can find a way to pipe some water from up there to down here in the south where it's so needed."

But, with the south outnumbered, he fears the impact from the naysayers: "People in the cities who don't understand irrigation try to set the rules and don't estimate the benefits." He suggests that all Albertans enjoy considerable economic spinoffs from a healthy agricultural industry in the south.

If farmers are to meet the burgeoning needs of a province that grew about 10 per cent a year in the most recent census period, they have no alternative but to use more efficiently the water they have and ship it from the north, Francis says. Since the 1990 cap on water licences, great strides have been made in





efficiencies -- moving water by pipeline within irrigation districts, rather than by open canals, for example - but both prospects are beyond the financial means of the farmers themselves, he notes.

"I think we can work out a strategy where water provides for the needs of our ecosystems and for the needs of irrigation and industry," he says.

He is dismayed, though, by proposals of people like University of Calgary professor Dixon Thompson for a water pricing system. But Thompson says that if inter-basin transfers have a price associated with them, and such transfers pass business and environmental standards, "then that would allow us to identify transfers that make sense." He acknowledges those kinds of criteria would impose heavy constraints, though.

Wallis, meanwhile, is adamant that bulk water transfers make no economic or ecological sense. Once the question of pipelines is on the table, "it opens up a can of worms about the size of transfers," he says. Not only are the northern rivers not particularly large, but transfers of any size risk transmitting aquatic organisms that may cause problems in southern waterway systems, he points out. "Any such idea would be a net drain on the rest of Alberta."

Once the northern water is flowing to the south, it would head right across the border, warns Bill Fuller, a retired zoology professor living in Athabasca who once was involved in the study of northern rivers' basins. Northern rivers already have enough concerns from chemicals released by industry, he adds.

Cheryl Bradley, a member of the Oldman River advisory committee, says even some irrigation farmers consider the bulk transfer concept "pie in the sky." The agriculture industry "have a lot of room for improvement in the ways they use water," says the AWA member. "We have to come to terms with the limits of our water supplies."

Alberta Environment's overall water-for-life initiative may have merit in raising public awareness about urgent water issues, but Bradley joins other participants in the process who worry the issues may be oversimplified.

Ken Trout, a participant in the Calgary workshop who is connected with the energy and agricultural industries, is critical of government policies of promoting further economic development in southern areas already suffering from water shortages. The aptly named Calgarian is particularly concerned about the impact on the Bow and the fish population of soaring industrial and residential development along the river.

But, he's confident a reasonable balance can be found among the many interests drawing on the Bow and other river systems.

The Bow River council's Bennett believes the government's water-for-life process can lead to positive outcomes. But, like many participants, he questioned some of the wording in the water-for-life workbook.

For example, participants are invited to respond whether they agree, disagree or are unsure of such statements as: "Albertans will have to choose between the sustainability of aquatic ecosystems and economic growth."

"It suggests we have to choose between economic growth and ecological considerations," says Bennett. "We categorically don't believe that's a choice that has to be made . . . those factors need not be mutually exclusive."





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Links:

River Basins in Alberta: <http://www3.gov.ab.ca/env/water/Basins/>

Alberta Environment website for Water: <http://www3.gov.ab.ca/env/water.html>

Water for Life (Alberta Environment's Water Strategy website): <http://www.waterforlife.gov.ab.ca>

Watershed and Riverwatch Groups in Alberta:

<http://www.albertawatersheds.org/>

<http://www.riverwatch.ab.ca/>

Waterkeeper Website: <http://www.waterkeeper.org/intro.html>

