

Water, Water, Everywhere... Nor Any Drop to Drink

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Red Deer River from Dry Island Buffalo Jump.

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We begin to realize the intrinsic value of our fresh water resources when we stop to consider the staggering ways in which water impacts every aspect of our lives. It is still early in the day and already I can make a lengthy list of the ways access to ample freshwater has benefited me. After considering how essential clean water is to cook my oatmeal, percolate my coffee, and brush my teeth, water's not-so-obvious functions come to mind. How much water was used to produce these oats and coffee beans? My list could go on and on.

The fact that, in Alberta, we are able to access large amounts of fresh water is a rare, often undervalued, reality. This is a privilege a very small percentage of the world enjoys, and with this benefit comes responsibility. We have the responsibility to use these resources sustainably to enable current and future generations to have continued access to fresh water. We have the responsibility to learn about

the limits of our water resource and the ways in which we can mitigate both our residential and industrial use of water. We also have the responsibility to advocate for the water requirements of other species and ecosystems – those who are unable to speak for themselves.

In 2003, it seemed the Government of Alberta was also recognizing the inherent value of water as both a resource, and a life source. In response to concerns about the future of water management in Alberta, *Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability*, was developed. The *Water for Life* (WFL) strategy focussed on achieving three basic outcomes:

1. Safe, secure drinking water;
2. Healthy aquatic ecosystems; and
3. Reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy.

According to the original document, “the Water for Life strategy outlines the Government of Alberta’s commitment to manage and safeguard Alberta’s water resources, now and in the future.” In order to achieve these outcomes three basic partnerships were proposed to facilitate action and stakeholder engagement at varying levels:

1. Provincial level partnership - expressed through the Alberta Water Council (AWC);
2. Regional level partnership - expressed through Watershed Planning Advisory Councils (WPACs);
3. Local level partnership - expressed through Watershed Stewardship Groups (WSGs).

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The AWC was established to act as an advisory group to government regarding water-related issues as well as to monitor progress on the implementation of the WFL strategy. It is a multi-stakeholder group made up of representatives from government, environmental groups, and industry. The AWC is mandated to provide leadership, accountability, and consultation to assist the province in achieving the three outcomes of the WFL strategy.

Alberta's commitment to the WFL strategy was reiterated in 2008 and a renewed action plan was developed. The renewed strategy incorporated comments and reflections from the AWC regarding the effectiveness of the original strategy and whether or not sufficient progress had been made in safeguarding Alberta's water resources. According to the report, the renewed strategy reflected the government's realization that, when it comes to surfacewater and groundwater and the health and status of our watersheds, there is much to learn. For example, the renewed action plan noted that significant data gaps must be filled through sound scientific monitoring. This information should be used to inform a management approach to monitoring and regulation that accounts for the cumulative effects of current and past human activities upon the landscape. Strategies that promote watershed management and establish water conservation objectives on all major basins were developed and articulated through the action plan.

The goals, strategies, and values described in the WFL strategy project a beautiful vision of future water management in Alberta: all stakeholders are stewards and all sectors are able to access the resources they "need" upon demand. A similar vision appears in many such documents, reports, and strategies in which it seems everyone will continue to have what they feel they are entitled to. No one needs to compromise; no one needs to sacrifice. But, when considering the *Water for Life* strategy, significant work, stewardship, and progress has been made by the regional and local level partnerships. The significant burden of work currently being undertaken by province-wide WPACs and WSGs, while simultaneously educating and engaging stakeholders in water management, is an encouraging step in the direction of water conservation.



Watershed Planning Advisory Councils: Sweeping Mandates, Sufficient Resources?

WPACs are essentially multi-stakeholder, non-profit organizations that involve communities in watershed management through an adaptive planning process based on extensive consultation and collaboration. Their diverse membership includes representatives from municipalities; Aboriginal and Métis communities;

industry; environment and conservation, agriculture, recreation, culture, tourism, education/research groups; individual citizens; and government. According to the Red Deer River Watershed Alliance, WPAC actions include collaborating with land managers, providing advice and support to the local WSGs, presenting issues to the provincial AWC, raising awareness about the state of the watershed, building long-term

WPAC	Status
Battle River Watershed Alliance	- nearing completion of State of the Watershed report - preparing to begin the next phase: Watershed Management Planning
Beaver River Watershed Alliance	- will complete State of the Watershed report by 2011 - hope to complete IWMP by 2013
Bow River Basin Council	- completed State of the Basin report - completed Bow Basin Watershed Management Plan Phase I - currently working on Bow Basin Watershed Management Plan Phase II
Lesser Slave Watershed Council	- completed State of the Watershed report - currently working on IWMP Phase I
Milk River Watershed Council Canada	- completed State of the Watershed report - plan to complete Draft IWMP in 2011
North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance	- completed State of the Watershed report - completed IWMP Discussion Paper - plan to complete Draft IWMP summer 2011
Oldman Watershed Council	- completed State of the Watershed report - completed Phase I of IWMP – “A Vision for IWMP” - currently working on Phase II of IWMP
Red Deer River Watershed Alliance	- completed State of the Watershed report - currently working on IWMP
South East Alberta Watershed Alliance	- completed State of the Watershed Summary report - working to produce final State of the Watershed report
Athabasca Watershed Council	- completed State of the Watershed- Phase I report. - plan to complete Phase 2 Report by end of 2012
Mighty Peace Watershed Alliance	- designated as the WPAC for the Peace River Basin and Slave River sub-basin on March 30, 2011. - hope to complete a watershed management plan by 2019 (as required in WFL strategy).

partnerships that examine watershed issues, and making recommendations to water/land-use decision-making authorities. Currently eleven watershed councils throughout the province have been designated as WPACs. Each of these WPACs represents a different region of Alberta and will encounter changing land uses, varying degrees of human impact upon the watershed, and unique challenges and solutions. Each WPAC has a government mandate to prepare a state of the basin report; this is essentially a watershed assessment report that characterizes a watershed's ecological functioning. These reports contain significant data regarding watershed health and status and issues that must be addressed. They require extensive research, resources, and on-the-ground

monitoring. WPACs are also required to prepare an Integrated Watershed Management Plan (IWMP) based on the findings of the state of the basin report which should provide tangible management strategies to address specific watershed issues. The IWMP should provide the government with information regarding specific stakeholder concern and work towards fulfilling the three goals of the WFL strategy. Each WPAC is currently at different stages in this process; some watershed councils have existed for over a decade while others only received official designation as a regional WPAC this past year.

The extensive work undertaken and performed by each WPAC has contributed greatly to our provincial knowledge network surrounding surface

and groundwater in Alberta. It has also illuminated significant data gaps and watershed issues that require immediate and intentional action. It seems the more we discover about our water resources the more questions we face moving forward. This important work has not come without challenges the WPACs face. In order to obtain meaningful water quality data rigorous monitoring is required. This often exhausts the resources available to WPACs. In order to obtain the high quality information required by decision-makers each WPAC must retain experienced staff and sufficient project funding capacity. Though most WPACs receive funding from a variety of sources most are financially dependent upon the Province for funding. The long-term stability of this funding remains largely



Fall on the Peace River.

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unknown and, although the WFL renewal assures that all partnerships will be sufficiently resourced, this complicates long-term project planning and ensuring organizational sustainability. As a result, WPACs are reliant upon alternative revenue sources such as industry funding. The collaborative approach of WPACs and inclusion of all interested stakeholders in project planning is necessary to ensure diverse participation, funding, and “buy-in” to management plans.

Another challenge faced by WPACs is that the implementation of management recommendations relies primarily upon voluntary action. Completed draft IWMPs must be submitted to the director appointed under the *Water Act*. Final approval of a water management plan rests with the Minister of Environment. Currently no statutory framework exists to ensure recommended water management strategies are applied through legislation.

Watershed Stewardship Groups: Volunteerism at Work

The third partnership outlined in the WFL strategy is maintained at the local level by Watershed Stewardship Groups (WSGs). WSGs are essentially

volunteer-based groups that act as stewards to protect local water sources – the creeks, streams, rivers, and lakes that flow through our landscapes. There are currently over 140 stewardship groups in Alberta performing these essential on-the-ground community-based activities. WSGs are eligible to apply for some financial support from the Alberta government through the Alberta Stewardship Network’s Watershed Stewardship Grant Program; also a great deal of their work is community supported. In 2009, according to the final report on the Watershed Stewardship Grant Program, approximately \$250,000 was disbursed to 24 different WSGs. It was estimated that the programs and activities undertaken by the grant recipients resulted in on-the-ground community-based stewardship activities valued at nearly \$1.1 million. The work of the WSGs is an extremely important part of the WFL strategy. Their dedicated stewardship efforts are essential given the Scrooge-like nature of the provincial government when it comes to environmental protection.

The work of both WPACs and WSGs is integral in achieving the goals of the WFL strategy. They may well be Albertan examples of what Paul Hawken described

in the following quote: “When asked if I am pessimistic about the future, my answer is always the same; if you look at the science of what is happening to the earth and aren’t pessimistic, you don’t understand the data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, and you aren’t optimistic, you haven’t got a pulse. What I see everywhere in the world are ordinary people willing to confront despair, power and incredible odds in order to restore some semblance of grace, justice and beauty to the world.”

The essential work of the dedicated individuals who give their time to these bodies needs to be supported and recognized by Albertans, funded more generously by the Alberta government, and implemented by the Province. Their work offers a meaningful avenue to foster local community participation and engagement in safe-guarding and restoring local watersheds. It allows watershed health to be considered in a holistic manner where both quantitative and qualitative data are incorporated. By allowing the stories of Alberta’s watersheds to be told by our water keepers we may finally deepen our appreciation of this precious lifeblood. 🌊