

### **North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance**

On some days wading into the tangled web of environmental politics in Alberta can be less than uplifting. We can all too easily overlook the good news stories and forget to celebrate the people working tirelessly on the ground day after day. Within the North Saskatchewan River (NSR) watershed, a group composed of municipalities, organizations, and individuals has been tasked with promoting an understanding of watershed issues in this region of Alberta, a large watershed with a diversity of stakeholders and unique challenges. The North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance (NSWA) is a non-profit society, formed with the purpose of protecting and improving water quality and ecosystem functioning in the NSR watershed in Alberta.

As set out in the 2003 provincial *Water for Life* (WFL) strategy (renewed in 2008) the NSWA is the

designated Watershed Planning and Advisory Council (WPAC) for the North Saskatchewan River watershed, a regional level partnership created to facilitate action and stakeholder engagement in watershed issues at the regional level. Throughout the province there are eleven designated WPACs, each charged with the following three major responsibilities: preparing a “state of the watershed” report; preparing an Integrated Watershed Management Plan (IWMP); and undertaking ongoing information, education and consultation activities on watershed issues and management.

Since 2005, the NSWA has been working to complete an IWMP for the NSR watershed, a significant accomplishment and huge undertaking, which was completed in June 2012. Throughout this time the NSWA has also spearheaded and participated in a variety of other studies and reports, some of which include the following:

- In 2009, the NSWA initiated the first sub-watershed planning project for the NSR basin in collaboration with local municipalities for the Vermilion River sub-watershed.
- The NSWA has participated in the development of the Water Management Framework for the Industrial Heartland and Capital Region.
- Along with local groups, the NSWA assisted with the completion of the Mayatan Lake State of the Watershed Report, which serves as a localized example of water management within the NSR.

The completion of the IWMP signals a point of transition for this group. In order to achieve the goals outlined in the IWMP, the NSWA ideally will act as a bridging organization, bringing people together to develop various implementation initiatives, while expert working groups will be established to address priority tasks. As per the WFL strategy, completed IWMPs are submitted to the director appointed under the *Water Act* and final approval of a water management plan rests with the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD).

On paper, the IWMP is a comprehensive document, and encompasses over a decade of scientific research, community collaboration and

engagement, and public and stakeholder input. However, there is currently no statutory framework to ensure the recommended water management strategies are applied through legislation. As stated in the IWMP, “implementation of certain recommendations will be achieved through the voluntary choices and actions of individual decision makers in government, industry, municipalities, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders. The value of the plan will only be realized to the extent that stakeholders, individually and in collaboration, act on the recommendations as there is no specific statutory framework yet in place to require adoption and implementation of IWMPs.”

It remains to be seen how the Minister of ESRD treats this valuable document and whether or not these recommendations will be incorporated in provincial land use plans. If the provincial government fails to heed these recommendations, it will be our loss indeed. Both the board of directors and the staff of the NSWA are made up of highly educated and experienced individuals coming from a wide variety of backgrounds. The expertise, tenacity, and commitment this group has devoted to completing the IWMP is commendable and worth both recognizing and celebrating.

- Madeline Wilson