

In a departure from our normal practice this issue of the *Advocate* features information about two of our partner associations: the Oldman Watershed Council and the Cochrane Ecological Institute. Check out these pages in June for a recap of another very successful Climb and Run For Wilderness.

Oldman Headwaters Action Plan 2013-14:

Maintaining and Protecting the Headwaters and Source Waters of the Oldman Watershed

By Connie Simmons

The Oldman headwaters are the source of 90 percent of the water in the Oldman River - a critical water tower for southern Alberta. The headwaters area lies along the Rocky Mountains and foothills of southwest Alberta and into Montana, from Chain Lakes and Willow Creek in the north to the southern headwaters tributaries of Glacier National Park, Montana. It is an iconic landscape – rich in beauty, wildlife, history, and opportunity. As such it attracts a myriad of uses, from communities and rural residential development to recreation, tourism, forestry, mining, agriculture, and grazing.

The Oldman Watershed Council (OWC) was created to work with communities, stakeholders, non-government organizations, First Nations, and governments to help address *Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability*. OWC worked during 2012 and 2013 on an important element of the *Oldman Integrated Watershed Management Plan*: the need to maintain and protect headwaters and source waters of the Oldman watershed. The *Headwaters Action Plan 2013-14* is the first iteration of a plan to begin addressing cumulative impacts on headwaters health – and to engage a wide spectrum of stakeholders and the public in stewardship actions to address these concerns with measurable actions on the ground.



The Oldman Headwaters area is defined as the land west of Highways 22 and 6, and is based on precipitation contribution to the flow of the Oldman River. CREDIT: OLDMAN WATERSHED COUNCIL

The Headwaters Action Plan process involved several important steps. They included: scientifically assessing headwaters health using the best available data and information; hearing what local communities had to say about headwaters health and stewardship needs; engaging key stakeholders who have the capacity and commitment to work for headwaters health over time; and reviewing other initiatives related to the headwaters to understand and consider their outcomes in the planning process.

Throughout this process the Partnership Advisory Network, a group of stakeholders and resource people from a broad spectrum of interests, agreed to work through a consensus process to develop the first iteration of the Headwaters Action Plan 2013-14. Starting with three important indicators of headwaters health, the PAN participants agreed on targets (desired outcomes), recommendations to decision-makers, and stewardship action needed to begin to address issues and concerns related to each indicator. The first three indicators of headwaters health addressed in this first iteration of the Headwaters Action Plan are:

1. **Presence and abundance of fish** - especially native populations (an indicator of biodiversity and watershed integrity)
2. **Density of linear features** (cumulative disturbance of roads, seismic lines, pipelines, power lines, railroads, cutlines, off-road vehicle trails across each sub-watershed in the headwaters area)
3. **Aquatic invasive species** (e.g.: zebra mussels (*Dreissena polymorpha*), quagga mussels (*Dreissena rostriformis bugensis*), and Eurasian watermilfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*)) are classified as major threats to aquatic ecosystem health that we need to keep out of Alberta.

Highlights of the Headwaters Action Plan 2013-14

The Partnership Advisory Network participants agreed on the following **targets** for the three priority indicators of headwaters health:

- Maintain current native and naturalized fish populations within the headwaters area and explore opportunities to increase native fish populations in their current range.
- Restore native fish in selected streams* in the headwaters. (*selected streams = streams with sufficient or restored habitat value for native fish; streams where native fish have been extirpated from their historic range).
- In urban centres and major transportation corridors, no linear thresholds will be set; however, mitigation of the impact of linear features will be actively pursued.
- Maintain negligible and low linear features density where it currently exists; ensure no net increase of linear features in each sub-watershed.
- Decrease density of linear features where there is moderate to high pressure/risk rating in the headwaters.
- Keep aquatic invasive species (Zebra mussels, Quagga mussels and Eurasian watermilfoil) out of Alberta.

Actions were developed to address each target, as well as recommendations to decision-makers to assist reaching these targets. Some key actions of the plan are:

- Determine where native fish remain and why they are declining. Use citizen science to assist and share data and results with the public.
- Develop an education and outreach program about headwaters health, the importance of healthy trout streams, and provide opportunities for people to get involved through an “Adopt a Watershed” program
- Initiate a pilot restoration project in one watershed to improve water quality and fish habitat.
- Explore options for recreational user fees to fund enforcement, education, and stewardship projects.
- Improve landscape connectivity for fish and wildlife, especially across highway 3.
- Classify linear features according to

their intensity of use, overall impact on watershed health, and priority for reclamation.

- Reclaim linear features in high priority areas.
- Assist Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development with education activities to prevent aquatic invasive species (AIS) from getting into Alberta.

Some key recommendations to decision-makers are:

- Adopt the linear features density targets as determined in the Headwaters Action Plan 2013-14 into the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan.
- Develop an Access Management Plan and a Recreation Management Plan for the headwaters.
- Increase enforcement of existing laws and policies related to recreational use in the headwaters.

What's next?

A Headwaters Action Plan Steering Committee, comprised of representatives from key sectors who participated in the development of the plan, will work on an implementation strategy of prioritized actions in 2014-15. The committee will monitor, evaluate, and report on progress annually. The Headwaters Action Plan 2013-14 is the first iteration of a plan committed to implementing actions on the ground to begin the task of addressing key risks to headwaters health. Its ultimate success depends on the collaborative strength and commitment of key stakeholders, the public, and the OWC.

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