

Provincial Candidates at AWA Water Forum



By Chris Saunders, AWA Board Member

Preservation of water resources is a foundational issue and fundamentally affects human life as well as the ecosystem as a whole. In Alberta water should be a particularly sensitive issue because much of its source, the watersheds of the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, have been under attack for many years as a result of government neglect and negligence. The damage has largely come from forestry, oil and gas operations, development in sensitive areas, and the widespread use of off-highway vehicles, all of which are within government control.

It was with this in mind that the AWA held an “all-candidates” forum on water in advance of the May 5, 2015 election. The panel comprised the following candidates: Evert Smith, Alberta Party; David

Reid, Green Party; David Swann, Liberal Party; Robyn Luff, New Democratic Party, and Leah Wamboldt, Wildrose Party. Strenuous efforts were made by AWA staff to ensure the governing Conservative Party was represented; personal invitations were sent to 18 Conservative candidates as well as calls made to the party head office. Amazingly, no candidate or party representative could be found who was prepared to talk about Conservative policy positions on water. The failure of the Conservatives to provide a speaker meant that the moderator from CBC Calgary was unable to appear because to do so would have contravened CBC policy. Nevertheless, without a representative from the then-governing party and with an amateur moderator, the forum went ahead.

There were a number of common factors in the policy statements by the candidates. All agreed water resources required management through real long-term planning. Several candidates, including Robyn Luff and David Reid, noted that this requires the creation of comprehensive baseline data and monitoring against that data before major decisions are made about land use that could affect water quality and quantity. David Swann noted that the Alberta government has, over the years, lost its technical capacity to do meaningful work in this area. He said the government is a “shriveled shell of what it used to be and should be.” Evert Smith, who has 32 years experience in the forestry departments within the Alberta government, emphasized the importance



Provincial election candidates at AWA's Water Forum. PHOTO: © R. REIMER

of good monitoring and commented that the government has not invested enough in the science and technology required. David Reid called for more widespread water metering and a different approach to pricing. Leah Wamboldt said there was a much greater need for polluters to be accountable and called for greater enforcement of the regulations and higher penalties for contravention.

On the question of headwaters preservation Robyn Luff said “the number one thing to do is to protect our headwaters.” She talked of the damage being done by logging on the Eastern Slopes. David Swann went further, saying in order to preserve the watershed Alberta should purchase the logging contracts that have been given to private logging companies by the Alberta government. He noted that the city of New York has spent very large sums of money to purchase its watershed lands and that this is seen by many

as enlightened policy to conserve a vital resource. David Reid noted that the companies provided with logging contracts have little incentive to keep the land in good condition; they have the right to log without ongoing obligations of ownership. Robyn Luff stated she would advocate for a logging moratorium.

The candidates were asked to outline positions on flooding and drought. Robyn Luff was sceptical about the cost and effect of engineering projects and said the best protection against flood is intact ecosystems, healthy riparian areas and buffer zones. David Swann said there should an examination of who controls water flow upstream of Calgary where there are 11 dams controlled by TransAlta. He noted that these dams contain a great deal of silt and considerable flood control capacity could be gained by dredging.

On industry’s responsibilities with respect to water usage there were calls for

more science to improve the understanding of the use of water by the oil and gas industry and for more regulation. There were also calls for greater transparency in the way irrigation districts manage Alberta’s water. David Swann said there have been 102 sales of water licenses in the last 5 years.

In summing up David Reid talked about the woolly mammoth in the room. We don’t have enough water to meet the needs of a growing population and the government does not have a plan. Other candidates built on this by saying the government needs to take on the role of protecting the public interest regarding water matters.

On election night Robyn Luff and David Swann were elected to the legislature. Albertans need to hold them accountable for the commitments they made to improve our management of water resources. 🌱

Featured Artist Bonnie Curran



Now On To The Ridge, acrylic, 12" x 16" PHOTO: © B. CURRAN