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Water for Life – Alberta’s Strategy for Sustainability

On November 27, 2003 Alberta Environment released *Water for Life – Alberta’s Strategy for Sustainability*, a high-level strategic guide formulated to address water quality and quantity issues within the province. The document acknowledges that economic well-being and quality of life depend upon a sustainable water supply. With population growth, droughts and increasing demands from agricultural and industrial development, there is increasing pressure upon our aquatic ecosystems. Therefore pragmatic water management policies are required to ensure the health of our rivers and their watersheds and maintain a truly sustainable economy.

To ensure sustainability of Alberta’s hydrological cycle, the *Water for Life* strategy focuses on three main goals:

- Access to safe, secure drinking water supply.
- A healthy aquatic ecosystem.
- A reliable water supply for a sustainable economy.

To accomplish these goals, the strategy outlines the following key objectives:

- Knowledge and research – including a complete assessment of all drinking water facilities in the province and ensuring Albertans have easy access to water management information.
- Partnerships - to encourage those who are immediately affected by a specific water issue to provide solutions.
- Water conservation – improving water use efficiency and productivity by 30% from estimated 2005 levels by 2015.

The Red Deer Chamber of Commerce is very supportive of the goals and objectives outlined within the strategy. Increasing knowledge of the province’s water quality and supply is an important first step in making responsible water management decisions. Also encouraging is the objective of sharing this information with Albertans through public awareness programs and through easy access to water resource information and services. The Chamber sees communication as key in conveying to Albertans the necessity for gradual change in individual water consumption patterns.

As one of the long-term goals of the strategy, improving overall efficiency and productivity of water use, behavioural change will be necessary. The Red Deer Chamber supports the Province’s goal of detailing the costs of providing water to encourage more responsible and informed water use decisions.



The Red Deer Chamber supports the goals and directions of the strategy, as well as the extensive consultation process used to develop the strategy. However, it appears that the plan and implementation approach can be strengthened.

The Chamber is concerned that the implementation plans for the strategy are not sufficiently detailed so as to allow a meaningful assessment of their impact and effectiveness.

Further, we believe that the three strategies outlined in the plan, and the watershed specific planning approach, must be supplemented by additional strategies and system-wide initiatives if success is to be achieved. The processes must have sufficient flexibility so as to adapt to the knowledge, information and efficiencies acquired.

In particular, the Red Deer Chamber of Commerce recommends that the Government of Alberta:

1. Place a high priority on the development and implementation of a provincial reporting structure that informs Albertans at least on an annual basis of all water sources (including each major river basin) on:
 - A comprehensive inventory of the quantity and quality of all water resources (surface and groundwater) within the province.
 - The actual amount of surface and groundwater withdrawn, relative to the allocation permitted in every licence or approval.
 - The volumes of water returned to the surface from these diversions and identify the water NOT returned to the hydrological cycle where there is sufficient infrastructure in place to record such as a measurement.
2. Work with the Watershed Advisory Councils to develop detailed implementation plans for each watershed and for the strategy as a whole as quickly as possible and demonstrate what can be achieved.
3. Introduce a process for Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils to develop comprehensive watershed management plans for the eight major river basins in Alberta. This process and the resulting plans must be flexible to allow for modification and updating as conditions change and new information becomes available. For these Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils to be established and their continuing operations to be meaningful and effective, Alberta Environment must recognize its role in providing adequate funding.
4. Ensure decision makers (i.e., the Minister and Directors) rely upon these plans unless there is a valid, publicly stated and challengeable reason not to do so.



5. **Develop an over-arching provincial policy framework to provide guidance to the watershed planning authorities and clarify the working relationships between the different partnership levels and with the provincial government. This will include defining the authority, responsibility, and accountability of each partnership level.**
6. **Develop regional planning processes to facilitate the effective use of regional water supply and waste water systems, and encourage responsible land use. To promote better integration of land use planning with watershed management, amendments to Part 17 of the Municipal Government Act should be considered such that one of the elements to be addressed in municipal development plans is the relation of land use to the supply and quality of water and watershed planning.**
7. **Initiate short-term actions such as the immediate clean up of the most contaminated sites such as Nose Creek and White Mud Creek to demonstrate that the government is serious about achieving the plan objectives.**
8. **Clarify the meaning of the terms “Aquatic Ecosystems” to include the riparian areas that border the waterways. We understand that it is currently not clear whether these terms apply to just the waterways themselves or also include the riparian areas. These latter areas are of significant importance in the maintenance of healthy aquatic systems and act to filter and clean the waste materials, which would otherwise pollute.**
9. **Ensure that critical wetlands identification is a mandatory part of the watershed planning process, as should groundwater recharge areas. The government should purchase these lands and establish wetland reserves to ensure they are not developed. Watershed plans and municipal development plans should also address these important water related features.**
10. **Ensure, whether through Alberta Environment, the Natural Resource Conservation Board (NRCB), or Alberta Energy and Utilities Board (AEUB), that water quality and supply issues are maintained as a high priority in determining the acceptability of projects.**
11. **Commit funding to support state of the art waste treatment research, development and demonstration, projects, or processes to showcase Alberta as a world-renowned technology leader. An example is the City of Calgary Pine Creek Water Research Facility that will allow scientists to conduct research using a full-scale wastewater facility, offer a venue for public education, and attract related industry to the province.**
12. **Work with the design and construction industries to amend the building code in favour of utilizing water saving technologies (e.g. low flow toilets).**



- 13. Continue to work with the oil and gas industry to reduce the amount of fresh water used as an injection material in favour of other materials.**
- 14. Provide incentives such as shared cost water audits to encourage other industries to use the latest technology to reduce water consumption. Municipalities must be involved in such programs.**
- 15. Work with the key industries in Alberta to develop water usage and efficiency targets, which tie in to overall water efficiency goals. These goals should be set through mutual discussion and agreement.**
- 16. Exercise, as is permitted under the Water Act, the prerogative to transfer water licenses to ensure that water license volumes not completely utilized in a watershed or a defined aquifer might be made available to other legitimate users in that same watershed or defined aquifer, and to do this in a way that encourages sustainable economic development.**
- 17. Evaluate economic instruments to encourage conservation, meet productivity objectives, increase the effective use of water by including any water supplies that may currently be underutilized, and ensure the highest and best use of water resources, provided they are developed in an open, transparent and fair manner.**
- 18. Conduct socio-economic impact studies to demonstrate the value of water and use this information in decision-making situations where there are competing demands in each water basin.**