

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. Furthermore, recent studies suggest that water supplies may be decreasing as glaciers recede and precipitation decline. Therefore, pragmatic water management policies are required to ensure the health of our rivers and their watersheds, maintain aquatic systems and wetlands and maintain a truly sustainable economy.

Alberta is at a crossroads in terms of its water management. The problem is that the vast majority of Alberta’s population resides in the part of the province that has the least amount of water. The Saskatchewan drainage basin has 80 per cent of Alberta’s population but only 20 per cent of its water. Demands for water in Alberta are increasing rapidly as:

- Municipal populations are on the rise at unprecedented rates
- Drought proofing is a key development of rural development initiatives
- Irrigation expansion and intensification
- Oilsands development, SAGD projects and enhanced oil recovery
- Other economic development

To ensure sustainability of Alberta’s hydrological cycle, the 2003 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.
- Healthy aquatic systems

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 per cent from estimated 2005 levels by 2015.

The Alberta Chambers 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 Alberta Chambers of Commerce 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 Alberta Chambers supports the province's goal of detailing the costs of providing water to encourage more responsible and informed water use decisions.

The Alberta Chambers supports the goals and directions of the strategy, and appreciates the extensive consultation process used to develop the strategy. The Alberta Chambers 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.

It appears that the plan and implementation approach can be strengthened and we recommend a review of the past three years, the defined goals and the measurable outcomes of each goal to determine any critical gaps in the strategy.

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.

The Alberta Chambers 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 the following:
 - a) A comprehensive inventory of the quantity and quality of all water resources (surface and groundwater) within the province, using standardized units of measure.
 - b) The actual amount of surface and groundwater withdrawn, relative to the allocation permitted in every licence or approval, as reported by all water licensed holders (non-domestic/non-farm) using a reporting process that is both comprehensive, timely and uses standardized units of measure.
 - c) 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.
 - d) Integrate the mechanisms used for measuring water in and water out.
2. Continue with the process of having Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils develop comprehensive watershed management plans for the

other seven major river basins in Alberta. This process and the resulting plans must include a focus on quality and quantity, consider both surface and ground water, and must be flexible to allow for modification and updating as conditions change and new information becomes available. For the operations of the Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils to continue to be meaningful and effective, Alberta Environment must continue to recognize its role in providing adequate funding and encourage WPACs to engage in partnerships with other stakeholders to ensure the maximization of all programs.

3. 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. Sufficient funding must be provided to identify and address potential water issues before they become real problems.
4. Ensure Alberta Environment decision makers rely upon these plans unless there is a valid, publicly stated and challengeable reason not to do so. Approved management plans should be developed to provide direction to Alberta Environment directors as to which future uses should be issued allocations, the terms and conditions under which allocations should be issued and uses that should be denied, and new allocations in those basins where allocations have not yet been capped.
5. Develop an overarching 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.

Work with other provincial bodies in developing a master land-use plan for Alberta that recognizes the role that land-use decisions have on water quality and quantity within watersheds.

6. Develop regional planning processes to facilitate the effective use of regional water supply and wastewater 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.

A municipal land-use plan should provide for the protection of groundwater for public water supplies and provide guidance for corrective actions to mitigate discharges into public water bodies. Explore the

feasibility of the development of an incentive program for water users to ensure that return flows are treated meeting and exceeding the standards.

7. Initiate short-term actions such as the immediate cleanup 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 well as groundwater recharge areas. There is a need to clarify which level of government – federal or provincial – has jurisdiction over a wetland. Define a well-articulated understanding of which governing body is responsible for wetlands

The provincial government should develop and initiate an awareness program of wetlands and ensure that private wetlands are managed through a responsible conservation program. Watershed plans and municipal development plans should also address how these important water-related features can be protected and maintained.

10. Ensure, whether through Alberta Environment, the Natural Resources Conservation Board (NRCB), or Alberta Energy and Utilities Board (AEUB), that protection of water quality and quantity 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) and work with municipal governments to develop programs that encourage the installation and use of these devices.
13. Continue to work with the oil and gas industry and regulatory bodies, i.e., EUB, to reduce the amount of fresh water used as an injection material in

favour of other materials and encourage the development and implementation of new technology that continue to reduce fresh water consumption by this industry.

14. Provide incentives such as cost-shared water audits to encourage municipalities and industries (including irrigation industry) to better understand current water use practices, to identify opportunities to increase water use efficiency, and adopt the best technology to reduce overall water consumption. Promote activities that that increase return flows, by which water can be used, treated, and made available for reuse by other users.
15. Continue the efforts of the Alberta Water Council in working with key industries and other water use sectors 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 ability to transfer water licences to ensure that water licence volumes not completely utilized in a watershed or a defined aquifer are 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. Review the process by which transfers are administered and modify these processes to facilitate transfers in a transparent manner and reduce transactions costs for buyers and sellers, while protecting the rights of other water users and in-stream flow allocations.
17. Evaluate and implement 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 socioeconomic impact studies to demonstrate the value of water and use this information to educate residents of all watersheds about the importance of conserving water and using water wisely, and to assist decision-makers make effective water management decisions in situations where there are competing water or other resource demands.
19. Commit that costs for access to expertise and financial requirements for planning, implementing and measuring are not downloaded as primary responsibilities of municipalities.
20. Encourage the federal government to work with provincial and territorial governments to develop a national water management policy, developed in

concert with water use stakeholders, to formulate and implement consistent strategies for managing shared water resources.

21. Complete a long-term water shortage strategy for the province, commencing with the SSRB. Such strategy will identify opportunities, options and priorities. The preparation of these strategies needs to be undertaken with appropriate, phased public consultation and need to be cognizant of water supplies of present water use and irrigation demands.

Submitted by the Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce and the Red Deer Chamber of Commerce; co-sponsored by the Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce and the Taber & District Chamber of Commerce