

Alberta Water Council **News**

Release

Review finds province is leading the way with *Water for Life*, but more needs to be done

Calgary ... Increasing public awareness, and increasing and sustained funding are two key areas of improvement that can make a good thing even better, according to a comprehensive, objective review of the province's *Water for Life* strategy.

In the *Review of Implementation Progress of Water for Life, 2005-2006*, released May 1 by the Alberta Water Council – a multi-stakeholder, consensus-based organization responsible for overseeing and monitoring the implementation of the water strategy – the Council states good progress is being made on *Water for Life*, but by focusing more on a few areas, Alberta can ensure its approach and practices on water management and use are not only sustainable, but are world class.

“Alberta is on the cusp of something great with *Water for Life*,” said Bill Berzins, Chair of the Bow River Basin Council and one of the co-chairs of the Alberta Water Council. “The actions of the first three years have established a foundation for future initiatives, and now it is vital that the province takes full advantage of the increased funding that has been committed in the past year.”

Ron Pearson, the Council member who led the review team, said the Government of Alberta deserves recognition for this progress, but noted that significant challenges also remain.

“We believe it is now the opportune time to renew and resource the *Water for Life* strategy and commit sustained financial support to ensure its success,” said Pearson, who serves as a non-governmental organization representative on the Council on behalf of Trout Unlimited Canada.

The Council also recommends that an increase in public awareness and understanding on water issues and conservation should continue to be a key priority, as it is an activity that not only impacts all of the other initiatives, but it is also one that can net short-term results.

“In the long run, we believe the wise use of water is critical,” said the Council’s Industry Co-Chair Dave Hill, who is also the Executive Director of Alberta Irrigation Projects.

“The recent South Saskatchewan River Basin Water Management Plan emphasized the need to improve water conservation measures across the province,” Hill said. “We believe you need to manage demand in relation to improvements in supply management, such as storage infrastructure and water re-use.”

This is the second review of the provincial water strategy by the Alberta Water Council. In early June, the Council will be announcing details of a *Water for Life* renewal process,

which it will lead at the request of the government. The *Water for Life* renewal process will include specific information on how stakeholders and the public can provide input. The *Water for Life* renewal is a key priority listed in Premier Ed Stelmach's mandate letter to Alberta Environment Minister Rob Renner.

“Based on the recent review, combined with a number of other reviews by other organizations that have been done over the past three years, the Council feels that *Water for Life* is a strong, sound and appropriate water management strategy for Alberta,” said Berzins. “However, we see areas for further action and improvement based on our review, and now we feel it is important to seek out the ideas and input of others who are actively involved, and who have a vested interest, in the sustainability and safety of Alberta’s water supply.”

Minister Renner said he is pleased an objective, multi-stakeholder review of *Water for Life* shows good progress is being made and that the actions and investments to date are making a difference.

"Alberta is committed to *Water for Life* and the role of the Alberta Water Council in monitoring the progress of this comprehensive strategy," said Renner. "Building from the foundation of this review, I have asked the Alberta Water Council to lead the renewal of the *Water for Life* strategy and provide me with solid recommendations for ensuring the continued success of this plan."

Established in 2004, the Alberta Water Council is a multi-stakeholder partnership with 25 members from governments, industry, and non-government organizations. Its primary task is to monitor and steward implementation of the *Water for Life* strategy and to champion achievement of the strategy’s three outcomes of a safe, secure drinking water supply, healthy aquatic ecosystems, and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy.

More information on the Council, including the complete *Review of Implementation Progress on Water for Life, 2005-2006* report, can be found at www.waterforlife.gov.ab.ca/awc

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Backgrounders

Highlights: Review of Implementation Progress of *Water for Life*, 2005-2006

Outcomes

In assessing the progress made to date in the three strategic outcomes of *Water for Life* – safe, secure drinking water supply; healthy aquatic ecosystems; and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy -- the Alberta Water Council notes the following:

Safe, Secure Drinking Water

- The Government of Alberta has made excellent progress toward the completion of the short-term actions in *Water for Life*, and the drinking water strategy is well on track.
- A comprehensive facility assessment has been completed, emergency protocols have been strengthened, independent audits have been conducted and regionalization projects are under an initial review. There has also been a focus on providing information for the design, operation and maintenance of private water systems.
- The next step in the strategy involves significant capital investments. There is an opportunity to work closely with municipalities on planning, funding requirements and source protection measures.
- In the longer term, work is underway on a comprehensive “Source to Tap Multi-Barrier Approach” to drinking water protection.

Healthy Aquatic Ecosystems

- There has been progress toward the goal of healthy aquatic ecosystems through the work underway on a wetlands policy by the Alberta Water Council and the setting of water conservation objectives under the *South Saskatchewan River Basin Water Management Plan*.
- The work underway to develop assessment and monitoring tools for aquatic ecosystems has proven to be very complex, and will not be completed on schedule. In hindsight, the timelines for this project were too optimistic. It is apparent that the research and monitoring work will take time to generate meaningful data and assessment tools. However, an opportunity now exists to renew and resource a plan for these tools as a result of the recent government commitment of financial support for water research.
- The Government of Alberta’s plans to develop a new framework for effective land use creates a longer-term opportunity for protecting aquatic ecosystem health, which would strengthen the strategic outcomes of *Water for Life*.
- The Alberta Water Council believes it is important to develop programs for the immediate protection of critically sensitive aquatic ecosystems, especially in light of rapid growth throughout the province. Many of these programs could engage non-government stakeholders in the execution of *Water for Life*.

Reliable, Quality Water Supplies for a Sustainable Economy

- While the specific actions listed in *Water for Life* are underway to meet the objectives of ensuring reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy, and some good foundation pieces are in place, the Alberta Water Council believes that the actions and potential of this outcome should focus on more innovative tools for managing supply and demand.
- In the context of a finite water supply, there is an opportunity to develop a renewed focus on programs encouraging leading edge information systems, effective reallocation practices, short-term water markets, strategic infrastructure planning and holistic management practices. Non-governmental stakeholders should be actively involved in these initiatives.
- The Alberta Water Council believes the province should strive for world class capabilities in water management tools and techniques around a clearly stated vision of supply limitations.

Water Management Practices

The Alberta Water Council also observed progress in terms of the three water management practices, or priority areas of action, outlined in *Water for Life*:

Knowledge and Research

- There has been excellent progress in this area:
 - A research strategy has been defined and approved.
 - The *Alberta Water Research Institute* has been formed, under Alberta Ingenuity, to implement the strategy.
 - The government has allocated \$30 million in funding for water research. The advisory boards of the institute will provide a governance structure to involve a broad range of stakeholders in addressing research needs.
- It is notable that some of the medium and longer-term actions are being developed ahead of schedule, including improved mapping, monitoring and distribution of information on flood risks, surface water quantity and quality, and groundwater resources. This is a recognition of the importance and potential of investments in knowledge and research.
- This direction has become a key strength of the strategy, and as a result Alberta is in a position to achieve world class capabilities.

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Partnerships

- Good progress has been made in developing partnership capabilities to support participatory watershed planning in the province:
 - As the Alberta Water Council enters its third year of operation, seven Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils have been formed and the government has developed a grant program to fund initiatives led by local Watershed Stewardship Groups.
 - The support given to fulfilling the capacity and output of these three levels of partnership has been encouraging. The initial short-term targets, however, were very aggressive and are being redefined.
 - Developing true and meaningful partnerships takes time and commitment to a desired set of shared outcomes. Given the complexities, this initiative is making good progress.

- The approval of the South Saskatchewan River Basin Water Management Plan demonstrates the potential and critical role Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils across Alberta.
- These are innovative governance models for watershed planning. The initial enthusiasm being shown by stakeholders to participate indicates that their potential could go far beyond the basic principles outlined in the *Water for Life* strategy. The challenge is to maintain volunteer commitment through the actual capability of these groups to lead and influence planning. Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils, in particular, require sustained funding to support their activities.

Conservation, Efficiency and Productivity

- After a challenging start in the first year, this direction now has momentum. Progress is being made in:
 - Monitoring actual water use
 - Understanding the value of water for economic and social purposes
 - Exploring the use of economic incentives to enhance the wise use of water
 - Improving public awareness and knowledge of the importance of conservation
- Many of these initiatives outlined in *Water for Life* are complex and involve changes in public expectations and behaviour. Changes may be needed in legislation and regulations compelling the wise use of water.
- The Alberta Water Council believes that, in the long term, the wise use of water, through the effective management of demand is critical and fundamental to the success of *Water for Life*.

Conclusions and Common Themes

- The review covers the first three years of a 10-year implementation program for the strategy, and the Alberta Water Council notes that progress has been achieved in all of the strategic actions.
- There is momentum in most areas, and, in general, the *Water for Life* strategy is on track, and the foundation for specific strategic commitments and programs in water management is coming into place.
- The Alberta Water Council believes the ultimate achievement of the *Water for Life* outcomes involves ambitious and complex measures, and this is an ideal time to reassess the overall progress of the strategy and to renew and make appropriate commitments to its success. The Implementation Review noted three common themes in this regard:
 - There is an opportunity to review and define an appropriate governance structure to direct the long term implementation of *Water for Life*.
 - An overall plan to provide significant and sustainable funding for the *Water for Life* strategy is required.
 - The *Water for Life* strategy cannot be implemented in isolation from public awareness of the issues. A comprehensive approach to promoting public awareness of water management issues would be a timely addition to the strategy.

A complete copy of the report is available at www.waterforlife.gov.ab.ca/awc

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About the Alberta Water Council

The Alberta Water Council is a partnership between governments and stakeholders with a vested interest in water issues. Membership consists of a co-chair and representatives of four broad categories including: industry, non-government organizations, government, and Government of Alberta and provincial authorities.

Industry

- Irrigation - David Hill, Executive Director, Alberta Irrigation Projects Association (*Industry Co-Chair*)
- Power Generation - Mike Kelly, Director, Environmental, Health, and Safety Services, TransAlta Utilities
- Chemical and Petrochemical - Al Kennedy, Senior Environmental Engineer – Water & Wastewater, NOVA Chemicals
- Forestry - Keith Murray, Director, Environmental Affairs, Alberta Forests Products Association
- Livestock - Larry Nolan, Director, Alberta Cattle Feeders' Association
- Mining - Judy Smith, Manager of Environment for Athabasca Oil Sands Project, Shell Canada Ltd.
- Oil and Gas - Kevin Stashin, Vice President, Operations, Devon Canada Corporation

Non-Government Organizations

- Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils - Bill Berzins, Chair, Bow River Basin Council (*Non-Government Organizations Co-Chair*)
- Environmental - Danielle Droitsch, Member, Bow Riverkeeper
- Fish Habitat Conservation - Ron Pearson, Trout Unlimited Canada - Alberta Chapter
- Wetlands Conservation - Dr. Jonathan Thompson, Senior Research Biologist, Ducks Unlimited Canada
- Lake Environment Conservation - Jay White, Member, Alberta Lake Management Society

Government

- First Nations - Lisa King, Member, First Nations of Alberta (*Governments Co-Chair*)
- Large Urban - Al Maurer, City Manager, City of Edmonton
- Small Urban - Richard Quail, Municipal Manager, Town of Okotoks

- Rural - Brian Hammond, Reeve, Municipal District of Pincher Creek
- Metis Settlements General Council - Gerald Cunningham, Vice President, Metis Settlements General Council
- Federal - Jim Vollmershausen, Regional Director General, Environment Canada Prairie and Northern

Government of Alberta and Provincial Authorities

- Alberta Environment - Peter Watson, Deputy Minister (*Government of Alberta and Provincial Authorities Co-Chair*)
- Alberta Health and Wellness - Dr. Nicholas Bayliss, Provincial Health Officer
- Alberta Agriculture and Food - John Donner, Assistant Deputy Minister, Sustainable Agriculture Sector
- Alberta Energy - Joe Miller, Executive Director, Policy, Planning and External Relations
- Alberta Sustainable Resource Development - Brad Pickering, Deputy Minister
- Alberta Economic Development Authority - Kim Sturgess, Board Member
- Alberta Science and Research Authority - Linda Van Gastel, Board Member

More information on the Alberta Water Council, including biographies of all Alberta Water Council members are available on-line at www.waterforlife.gov.ab.ca/awc

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