

WATER FOR LIFE STRATEGY

At the turn of the millennium, a severe and multi-year drought elevated concerns about water in Alberta, especially the future of water resources management. In response, the Government of Alberta initiated a province-wide public consultation between November 2001 and June 2002 to gather the opinions and ideas of Albertans in crafting a provincial water strategy. What emerged was *Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability*, which was released in 2003 and updated in 2008. The strategy recognizes that Albertans' quality of life—and life itself—depends on a healthy and sustainable water supply for the environment, for growing communities, and for Albertans' continued economic wellbeing.

The strategy is a broadly-worded document with a vision for water that spins tightly around three specific objectives: (1) safe and secure drinking water, (2) healthy aquatic ecosystems, and (3) reliable and quality supplies of water for a sustainable economy. The strategy goes on to identify three core areas of focus in achieving these objectives:

Vastly expanding our knowledge and research of the province's water, its water challenges, and potential solutions: This is perhaps the most critical element affecting Alberta's ability to manage water effectively. The strategy commits the province to enhancing scientific knowledge of Alberta's water resources, better understanding of both current and emerging water issues, and ensuring that Albertans are aware of the issues and have the knowledge and tools to make good decisions. In short, a critical part of the solution is to invest in knowledge, research, and technology.

Developing partnerships to manage the province's water resources within local and regional watersheds: Each watershed has its own unique set of issues. Best practice asserts that water be managed within the local and regional watershed. To give this realization traction, to involve all stakeholders, and to promote shared responsibility, three partnerships are envisioned. The provincial *Alberta Water Council (AWC)* is a multi-stakeholder advisory body that will oversee overall implementation of *Water for Life*, examine water issues across the province and prioritize them, provide policy advice, and recommend solutions to the province. *Regional Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils (WPACs)* will take the lead in watershed planning and will foster stewardship, educate water users,

This backgrounder is part of "From H₂O: Turning Alberta's Water Headache to Opportunity," a forthcoming research paper by Casey Vander Ploeg identifying Alberta's water challenges and opening discussion on possible solutions.

Canada West Foundation is the only think tank dedicated to being the objective, nonpartisan voice for issues of vital concern to Western Canadians.

Visit us on-line at www.cwf.ca.

Head Office:
 900 – 1202 Centre Street SE
 Calgary, AB Canada T2G 5A5
 ph: 403-264-9535
 fax: 403-269-4776
 toll-free: 1-888-825-5293
 email: cwf@cwf.ca
 website: www.cwf.ca

British Columbia Office:
 810 – 1050 West Pender St.
 Vancouver, BC V6E 3S7
 ph: 604-646-4625
 fax: 604-684-7957
 email: kunin@cwf.ca

Saskatchewan Office:
 KW Nasser Centre
 256 – 3 Avenue South
 Saskatoon, SK S7K 1L9
 ph: 306-966-1251
 fax: 306-966-8812
 email: vicq@cwf.ca

Manitoba Office:
 900 – One Lombard Place
 Winnipeg, MB R3B 0X3
 Phone: 204-947-3958
 Fax: 204-942-3563
 email: carson@cwf.ca

Head Office:

900 – 1202 Centre Street SE
 Calgary, AB Canada T2G 5A5
 ph: 403-264-9535
 fax: 403-269-4776
 toll-free: 1-888-825-5293
 email: cwf@cwf.ca
 website: www.cwf.ca

British Columbia Office:

810 – 1050 West Pender St.
 Vancouver, BC V6E 3S7
 ph: 604-646-4625
 fax: 604-684-7957
 email: kunin@cwf.ca

Saskatchewan Office:

KW Nasser Centre
 256 – 3 Avenue South
 Saskatoon, SK S7K 1L9
 ph: 306-966-1251
 fax: 306-966-8812
 email: vicq@cwf.ca

Manitoba Office:

900 – One Lombard Place
 Winnipeg, MB R3B 0X3
 Phone: 204-947-3958
 Fax: 204-942-3563
 email: carson@cwf.ca

and create and implement watershed management plans for all major provincial watersheds. *Local Watershed Stewardship Groups* (WSG) will gather together volunteers to protect their local creek, streams, or stretch of river.

Conservation: The strategy notes that within each watershed there is a limited amount of water that can be withdrawn or diverted for use and still maintain a healthy aquatic ecosystem. Once this limit has been reached, there is no further water available without significant ecological effects. In several watersheds, the available limit has already been reached and others are approaching the limit. A key focus is to improve the usage of water, by conservation, increased efficiency, and higher productivity. The strategy calls for the development of water plans for various industry, implementation of best practices, water re-use, and a significant conservation effort that would increase the productivity of water province-wide by 30% in 2015.

The strategy goes on to highlight a dozen principles that will guide water resources management in the future. Albertans must recognize that there are limits to the available water supply, they must begin using and reusing water more effectively and efficiently, and all water resources must be managed within the capacity of individual watersheds. Further, healthy aquatic ecosystems are vital to sustaining both water quantity and quality, and citizens, communities, industry, and government all share responsibility for water management and must work together to preserve the quality of both surface and groundwater while pursuing economic and community development. Alberta remains committed to meeting its transboundary agreements on water, and is equally committed to preserving the current system of prior allocation (“first-in-time-first-in-right”). Alberta will pursue policies that ensure safe and secure drinking water and that the province’s water infrastructure are managed for long-term sustainability. Most importantly, *Water for Life* recognizes that knowledge and research is the foundation for effective water decision-making, that best practices and market-based instruments will also be used to maintain flexible and adaptive water resources management, and that the goals and aims of *Water for Life* will be integrated into other policies and plans such as the province’s new *Land Use Framework* released in 2008.

The conventional wisdom on *Water for Life* is that the document constitutes an excellent strategy, although questions do remain concerning the implementation of these ambitious goals. The strategy promotes public education on water conservation, promotes water savings plans for sectors that use significant

Head Office:

900 – 1202 Centre Street SE
Calgary, AB Canada T2G 5A5
ph: 403-264-9535
fax: 403-269-4776
toll-free: 1-888-825-5293
email: cwf@cwf.ca
website: www.cwf.ca

British Columbia Office:

810 – 1050 West Pender St.
Vancouver, BC V6E 3S7
ph: 604-646-4625
fax: 604-684-7957
email: kunin@cwf.ca

Saskatchewan Office:

KW Nasser Centre
256 – 3 Avenue South
Saskatoon, SK S7K 1L9
ph: 306-966-1251
fax: 306-966-8812
email: vicq@cwf.ca

Manitoba Office:

900 – One Lombard Place
Winnipeg, MB R3B 0X3
Phone: 204-947-3958
Fax: 204-942-3563
email: carson@cwf.ca

amounts of water, and has an explicit goal of increasing the productivity of water by 30% between 2005 and 2015. The strategy commits the province to expanding knowledge and research of this critical resource, including the merits of various economic and market-based instruments to meet the strategy's ambitious goals.

Sources:

Alberta Environment. 2003. *Water for Life Strategy*.

Alberta Environment. 2008. *Water for Life Renewal*.