

# Athabasca Watershed Council

## Integrated Watershed Management Plan - Project Terms of Reference

Approved by the Athabasca Watershed Council on: September 28, 2018

### CONTEXT:

- The Athabasca River stretches from the Athabasca Glacier in the Rocky Mountains, to where it meets Lake Athabasca in northeastern Alberta.<sup>1</sup> Looking from the height of land, the Athabasca River watershed drains an area of approximately 100,000 square kilometres (km<sup>2</sup>), of which 90% is in Alberta (with the remainder in Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories). As Alberta's second largest watershed, it accounts for about 24% of the provincial landmass. In turn, the Athabasca River watershed is a sub-basin of the larger Mackenzie River watershed.<sup>2</sup>
- The Athabasca watershed can be further divided into ten sub-basins. These include five sub-basins that make up the mainstem of the river and the lake (Upper Athabasca, Upper Central, Lower Central, Lower Athabasca, Lake Athabasca) and five sub-basins formed by its major tributaries (i.e., the McLeod, Pembina, Lesser Slave, La Biche and Clearwater rivers).
- The Athabasca watershed also includes numerous smaller named (e.g. Berland, Calling, Mackay, Firebag rivers, etc.) and unnamed creeks, as well as numerous lakes, wetlands, springs and aquifers. This watershed also makes up a part of the Peace-Athabasca Delta, one of the world's largest inland deltas.
- Alberta's *Water for Life* strategy<sup>3</sup> looks at how we can better manage water on a watershed basis to achieve the strategy's three goals including:
  - safe, secure drinking water,
  - healthy aquatic ecosystems, and
  - reliable, quality supplies for a sustainable economy.
- The Athabasca Watershed Council (AWC), a multi-stakeholder not-for-profit organization, uses consensus decision-making and adaptive management to achieve the *Water for Life* goals in the Athabasca watershed in Alberta. Additionally, the AWC is guided by its vision, mission and goals.<sup>4</sup>
- After assessing the state of the watershed, the AWC is now initiating development of an Integrated Watershed Management Plan (IWMP) that will apply to the Athabasca watershed within Alberta's borders. The AWC may also identify transboundary issues to the appropriate authority responsible for transboundary waters management.

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<sup>1</sup> For a good description of the watershed, see the [Athabasca River Basin Research Institute](#).

<sup>2</sup> For information about the Mackenzie River watershed, see <http://www.mrb.ca/information/9/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the Government of Alberta's *Water for Life* strategy, see <http://www.waterforlife.alberta.ca>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the Athabasca Watershed Council, see <https://awc-wpac.ca/>.

- The Athabasca IWMP may at times focus in on sub-basins, specific regions or locations, political boundaries or sectors, as dictated by the issue being addressed. The AWC recognizes the Lesser Slave Watershed Council as the approved Watershed Planning and Advisory Council for the Lesser Slave River watershed. As such, the AWC will not, in general, include this sub-basin in the plan unless there are issues common to it and other sub-basins, or there is an issue arising from the point the Lesser Slave River enters the Athabasca River.
- While the *Water for Life* strategy sets the stage for this planning process, the IWMP will recognize and integrate with a number of existing policies, plans and initiatives that guide development in the Athabasca region including but not limited to the following:
  - Mackenzie River Basin Transboundary Waters Master Agreement
  - Mackenzie River Basin Bilateral Water Management Agreement(s) (e.g. Alberta – Northwest Territories bilateral agreement)
  - *Canada National Parks Act*
  - *Water for Life / Water Act / Environmental Protection & Enhancement Act*
  - *Public Lands Act / Alberta Wetland Policy*
  - Land Use Framework (*Alberta Land Stewardship Act*) / Lower Athabasca Regional Plan / Athabasca River Water Management Frameworks
  - *Municipal Government Act / Individual municipalities' statutory and other documents*
  - Alberta Energy Regulator regulations, directives, guidelines etc.
  - Adjoining WPAC watershed management plans, as well as other sub-basin, stream and lake initiatives (e.g. Lac La Biche, Baptiste and Island Lakes, etc).

**STRATEGIC INTENT:**

The intent of this initiative is to provide recommendations in a plan to improve watershed management such that *Water for Life* and AWC goals are being achieved in the Athabasca watershed. Additionally, an IWMP will work towards ensuring watershed management is integrated with other land and water initiatives and is occurring in a trusting, collaborative atmosphere where water information is shared, stakeholders and the public are knowledgeable about water issues and there are opportunities to be engaged in watershed stewardship.

**OBJECTIVES/TASKS:**

Using the consensus, multi-stakeholder approach to engage its partners, the AWC will achieve the following:

- Building on the [AWC state of reports](#) , other documents, and stakeholder input, identify the issues affecting drinking water, aquatic ecosystems and reliable quality water supplies in the Athabasca watershed;
- Identify major gaps or redundancies in information, processes, and programs as well as any opportunities, particularly mutually beneficial collaborations, for improving water and watershed management in the Athabasca watershed;

- Identify and engage the appropriate stakeholders and decision-makers in identifying what is currently working as well as any new potential goals, strategies, actions, etc. required to address priority issues and gaps in the watershed;
- Develop an implementation section within the plan that clearly identifies how the AWC and the appropriate partners/authorities might implement recommended strategies and actions in order to achieve desired goals and address issues; and
- Complete the final IWMP based on engagement feedback and seek final approval from the AWC Board.

The IWMP will be considered a ‘living/evergreen’ document. It will be guided by a long term (30 year) vision and principles, but management strategies and actions will guide a ten year period, starting with 2020 – 2030. IWMP progress will be reported on by the AWC annually. The plan will be reviewed in detail, and if required, renewed, every five years, or as special circumstances warrant.

## **SCOPE AND CONTENT**

Major components of the IWMP *may* include (but are not limited to):

- Surface and ground water quality (for source and treated drinking water, agriculture, industry, recreation and aquatic life) including risk mitigation and source protection planning;
- Surface and ground water quantity including river flow and lake level, flow functions (flushing flows, channelization, sediment transport, etc.) and water use/ allocations;
- Aquatic ecosystem health (fish and other aquatic biodiversity, wetlands, riparian lands, flood plains, instream flow needs, etc.);
- Land cover and land use (i.e. point and non-point pollution; surface –groundwater interactions)
- Cumulative effects, climate variability/change and mitigation;
- Integrating policy, planning, and other tools (i.e. how we are managing the resource including legislation, regulation, enforcement, voluntary practices, etc.);
- Knowledge and research (what do we know, where are there gaps, how will we fill); and
- Education and Outreach (how do we engage all in being good stewards of the watershed).

The IWMP will strive to answer the following five questions for each of the above topic areas:

- Where are we at today (what is the state of)?
- Where do we want to be tomorrow (what is our goal)?
- What is standing in the way of achieving our goal (issues, gaps, etc)?
- How will we achieve our goal (solutions, opportunities, strategies, actions)?
- How will we know when we’ve achieved it (what are our performance measures)?

## **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

The AWC is the champion of the Athabasca IWMP and will be responsible for working with others to see it endorsed and implemented. Specific roles are described below:

## Board

The AWC Board of Directors is ultimately responsible for the IWMP and for ensuring that the recommendations in the plan are taken to the appropriate decision-makers. Hence it is very important that all Board Members see themselves as champions of the plan on behalf of the sectors and communities they each represent. Each Board Member will be asked to communicate plan progress to their networks, and to bring their sector/community concerns to the Technical committee.

Consensus decision-making is how the Board of Directors operates and this will also be the approach for the IWMP. Consensus is reached when everyone agrees they can live with the outcome, although the decision may not achieve all the desired outcomes of every sector. In the case that no consensus can be reached, those who do not support the direction or decision are expected to explain what they cannot agree to, provide the rationale for their position and offer alternative solutions or changes that would make the idea acceptable. If there is still no consensus reached, the group will agree on the remainder of the IWMP, noting the areas and reasons why consensus could not be reached and then accept the IWMP including caveats with consensus. The Board can delegate responsibilities or duties to committees, staff (with tasks identified in workplans) and consultants, as capacity allows.

## IWMP Committee

A standing Technical Committee has been struck by the board and a Technical Committee Terms of Reference has been approved. Members of the Technical Committee may include members of the board, staff, stakeholders, interested community members, etc. The Technical Committee will also seek appropriate expertise where applicable. The Technical Committee may engage consultants as determined to be useful. Both the Board and the Technical Committee may solicit funds for this project. The Technical Committee reports directly to the AWC Board of Directors via the Technical Committee Chair or his designate.

## SUGGESTED IWMP SECTOR MEMBERSHIP:

Industry: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Forestry</li><li>• Oil and Gas/ Mining</li><li>• Agriculture</li><li>• Tourism and Recreation</li></ul>	Non-Governmental Organizations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Health &amp; Environment</li><li>• Academia / Member at Large</li><li>• Stewardship</li></ul>
Municipal and Indigenous Governments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Municipalities /RMA, AUMA</li><li>• First Nations</li><li>• Métis</li></ul>	Government of Alberta and Provincial Authorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Alberta Environment and Parks</li><li>• Alberta Agriculture and Forestry</li><li>• Alberta Energy / AB Energy Regulator</li></ul>

\* Additional sectors may be identified as the IWMP process moves forward.

## **ENGAGEMENT PROCESS:**

The AWC has undertaken several public, sector and Indigenous engagement initiatives since it formed in 2009. Learnings from this work will be summarized to inform the values, principles, and issues to be addressed in the IWMP. Additionally, the Technical Committee will continue to engage sectors, Indigenous communities and the public throughout the development and implementation of the IWMP, using a combination of surveys, workshops, social media or other methods as deemed appropriate in discussions with various sectors, communities, etc.

## **IWMP EVALUATION AND APPROVAL:**

Consistent with an adaptive management approach<sup>5</sup>, once completed, the Athabasca IWMP will be regularly reviewed on a five-year cycle. The plan will be assessed for its effectiveness and relevance and the results of this assessment will guide any necessary revision of the plan. Integral to effective planning is appropriate, relevant and current information; as such, the State of the Watershed will also be renewed regularly to inform the planning process.

The success of this plan can be measured by several performance indicators. One performance indicator is the approval of this IWMP by all sectors represented on the AWC board. Another performance indicator is the recognized support for plan implementation from all the stakeholders identified by the plan. The number of recommendations that are adopted is also a performance indicator. A final means of evaluating the success of this planning process will to be review the plans using the indicators identified in the State of the Watershed Report.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the adaptive management approach used in watershed management, see page 9 of [Enabling Partnerships: A Framework in support of Water for Life](#) .