



What We Heard

Developing a Wetland Strategy for the North Saskatchewan River Watershed



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BACKGROUND

The NSWA provides a forum to recognize and address issues affecting the North Saskatchewan River (NSR) watershed in Alberta. It also initiates and supports activities that will positively impact the watershed. In 2005, the NSWA was appointed as the Watershed Planning and Advisory Council (WPAC) for the North Saskatchewan River watershed. The appointment was made by Alberta Environment and Parks under the terms and concepts embodied in *Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability*.

The NSWA has made substantial progress under this mandate and in 2012 released its *Integrated Watershed Management Plan for the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta* (IWMP). This major undertaking provides advice and direction to protect the long-term supply and quality of water resources for future generations. The IWMP is based on extensive public engagement and consultation, and is supported strongly by its members, stakeholders, and the GOA.

IWMP implementation is ongoing through work with municipal watershed partnerships and local stewardship groups. It provides the general direction for addressing water and watershed management issues, including the improvement of water quality (Goal 1), water supply (Goal 2), and aquatic ecosystem health, including maintaining and restoring wetlands (Goal 3).

The IWMP offers advice to the Government of Alberta and watershed stakeholders for guiding watershed management decisions. It identifies specific actions that could be implemented, outlines roles and responsibilities of various players, and suggests an implementation strategy based on both voluntary and statutory activities. Specifically, Watershed Management Direction 3.2 is to *"Maintain and restore wetlands considering their number, areal extent and function."*

The NSWA has been engaging municipalities at the subwatershed level to implement the goals of *Water for Life* and the NSWA's IWMP (2012). For each of the priority subwatershed regions—upstream/headwaters, Sturgeon, and

Vermilion—the NSWA has formed a partnership of local municipalities who meet regularly to encourage greater responsibility of land and watershed management. These groups recognize that coordinating their interests will lead to an improved watershed for everyone. The NSWA has provided a platform for these discussions to take place, and to empower these municipalities to act in a coordinated fashion.

ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Purpose

To understand the current situation and issues surrounding implementation of the Alberta Wetland Policy and Wetland Replacement Program, and to begin conversations around developing a strategy for the conservation and restoration of wetlands in the NSR watershed.

Process

Municipal partners and Alberta Environment and Parks came together to discuss implementation of the Alberta Wetland Policy and the Wetland Replacement Program from a municipal perspective in the NSR watershed. These sessions were followed by an online survey sent out to municipal representatives from subwatershed alliances to better understand their knowledge, use, and limitations regarding current wetland data, tools, and policies.

WHAT WE ASKED

Online Engagement Sessions

- What is the GOA doing to implement the Alberta Wetland Policy?
- How well is the Wetland Replacement Program working for municipalities in the NSR watershed?
- Are there other wetland initiatives we should be aware of?
- Is there value in working together on a regional wetland strategy for the NSR watershed?
- What are our goals for a wetland strategy?
- What is our vision for a wetland strategy?

Online Survey

- What wetland data are you aware of and/or use?
- What do you use wetlands data for?
- Where do you get wetlands data from?
- How do you update your wetlands data?



- What kind of wetlands data resources do you have?
- What are the biggest challenges to current wetlands data?
- What are your primary needs for wetlands data?
- Does your municipality have wetlands policy?
- What are the key objectives or targets of your municipal policy/strategy?
- What do you see as the functions of a wetland strategy?
- What do you think should be included in the engagement process?

WHAT WE HEARD

Online Engagement Sessions

The partnering municipalities of the subwatershed alliances identified wetland conservation and restoration as an important aspect of watershed management that is an ongoing challenge to implement due to capacity limitations and data gaps. Many of the partnering municipalities have adopted programs— *Alternative Land Use Service (ALUS)*, *Clearwater LandCare*, *Green Acreages*— that incentivize landowners to adopt best management practices (BMPs) on private property. Furthermore, municipalities have legislative authority to conserve and restore wetlands through implementation of the Alberta Wetland Policy and can access specific funding through the Wetland Replacement Program by partnering with the GOA. However, there remain significant capacity limitations that prevent utilization of these resources and implementation of desired wetland restoration work.

Through these engagement sessions, **strong support for a regional wetland strategy was achieved** among municipal partners, with a desire to:

- Define a shared mission and vision for wetland health;
- Define wetland health objectives and targets among neighboring municipalities; and
- Develop more consistency between municipal policy and programs.

Furthermore, guided sessions resulted in the development of a vision statement and set of goals to be achieved as a part of a wetland strategy.

Online Survey

Through the online survey (results provided in Appendix), we heard that wetlands data used by municipalities came from several different sources, but most municipalities used and accessed data available from the GOA, namely the Alberta Merged Wetland Inventory. Wetland data is used for many different purposes, but most respondents use it to identify opportunities for wetland restoration and as a part of their development review process. Despite





this, most municipalities have no mechanism for updating wetland data, citing that it is too expensive to gather and update. This is likely due to another challenge identified, that most municipalities have limited capacity in terms of expertise and personnel.

Though most municipalities have a Municipal Development Plan (MDP) that mentions the importance of wetlands and access to wetland data (though limited to piece-meal, outdated sources), to support site-specific planning, data that are up-to-date and with better resolution, classifications, and dimensions are needed for wetland restoration decision making and planning.

When asked about what the functions of a wetland strategy should achieve, the most critical functions identified were that a regional strategy would lead to more consistency between municipal policies and programs and that it would define wetland objectives and targets for wetland health among neighboring municipalities.

Finally, respondents identified that future engagement for a regional wetland strategy should include presentations to municipal councils that could invoke greater council approvals and actions moving forward.

SUMMARY

Municipalities involved in subwatershed alliances of the NSR watershed have a desire to protect and restore wetlands and support the development of a regional wetland strategy. Municipalities have the authority to protect and restore wetlands through their planning and development processes and do so with the resources they have. Through the GOA's Wetland Replacement Program, municipalities can access specific funds towards the restoration of wetlands. However, there remain gaps in capacity for data, tools, expertise, and personnel that make this task more difficult and costly to implement.

WHAT'S NEXT?

1. The NSWA will continue to work with subwatershed Technical Advisory Committees to develop actions that will support goals identified for a regional Wetland Strategy.
2. The NSWA and subwatershed Steering Committee members will work together to expand engagement opportunities to other stakeholders and rightsholders within the NSR watershed to better align the goals and actions of the Wetland Strategy.
3. Together, the subwatershed alliances will formalize a written document portraying the regional Wetland Strategy for the NSR watershed.
4. The NSWA will present the Wetland Strategy to municipal councils across the watershed to gain further municipal support and approval.



5. The NSWA and partnering organizations will apply for funding to support actions laid out in the Wetland Strategy.
6. The NSWA will develop communications and outreach tools that further support the delivery of the Wetland Strategy to stakeholders and rightsholders across the watershed.

