

# **Roles of Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils**

## **Introduction**

Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils (WPACs) are multi-stakeholder, non-government organizations designated under Alberta's Water for Life Strategy. A mandate and roles for WPACs was first described in the Water for Life report, *Enabling Partnerships*<sup>1</sup>. These organizations are leaders in watershed assessment and planning. They are also very active in educating the public and promoting watershed stewardship. WPACs strive to engage Indigenous peoples and key stakeholders in their watershed, including municipal, provincial and federal governments; conservation groups; agricultural producers; industry; academia and the public.

Alberta Environment and Parks is the lead department for the WPAC program. It has partnered with these organizations by providing annual funding for their operations and assigning staff to sit on and support the WPAC boards of directors, project teams and committees. Additional government funding has also been provided for specific WPAC programs and projects. Other government departments also participate in WPAC governance and projects.

Over the last decade, the Government of Alberta's approach to land use planning and environmental monitoring has evolved to manage growth, sustain a growing economy, and balance Albertans' social, economic and environmental goals. The introduction of the Land-use Framework in 2008 directed government to prepare regional plans that, together, cover the entire province. These regulatory regional plans acknowledge that watershed integrity and values are key to managing the landscape. In addition, the approach government is taking to environmental monitoring and reporting has changed. This function is now guided by the Ministry's Chief Scientist.

## **The Role Review Process**

In light of these changing circumstances, an internal review of the WPAC program commenced in 2016 to ensure continued alignment and efficiency in program delivery. The review was initiated by Ernie Hui, Special Advisor on Water Quality, and collected input from WPACs and government staff.

The review culminated in this updated description of the roles and expectations of the partnership between WPACs and the Government of Alberta. It is acknowledged that not all WPACs will fulfill every role, all of the time, and to its full extent. Each WPAC may focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Alberta. 2005. *Enabling Partnerships. A Framework in Support of Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability.*

some roles more than others based on its experience, expertise, the interest of its members, assessment of watershed stewardship needs and the needs of the government.

This document offers a general overview of WPAC roles but does not describe in detail how and when they will be carried out. It describes how the roles have evolved since the release of Enabling Partnerships (2005). The needs of the WPACs and of government will vary with respect to each watershed. For all roles, there will be regular ongoing communications between each WPAC and the government regarding current priorities and mutual interests.

## **The Roles of Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils**

### **1. Convener and Collaborator**

**Convener Role:** WPACs will provide an important forum where stakeholders meet to share information and identify, discuss and recommend priorities for issues and initiatives within their watershed.

**Collaborator Role:** WPACs will work together in partnership with stakeholders in their watershed to support or lead projects and programs to address watershed-related issues.

### **Expectations of WPACs**

- Maintain a consensus-based, multi-stakeholder process to support watershed management.
- Engage stakeholders to identify watershed issues and collaboration opportunities.
- Maintain a non-partisan approach for addressing issues or concerns brought forward by the community and encourage open dialogue to develop advice, direction and alternatives.
- Provide advice to decision-makers about watershed-related issues and collaborate with relevant watershed stakeholders to find solutions.
- Provide guidance and support to watershed stewardship groups, as appropriate.
- Encourage inclusiveness and broad stakeholder representation in their governance and initiatives.
- When requested, assist the government in stakeholder and public engagement related to watershed health and management initiatives, as WPAC resources allow.

### *Examples of WPAC Deliverables*

- WPACs involve key stakeholders and Indigenous peoples in watershed management through their governance and project work. Stakeholders vary from WPAC to WPAC, and may include municipalities, regional industries, conservation groups, academic institutions, recreation groups, and provincial and federal governments.
- WPAC board composition includes strategic thinkers and decision-makers from a variety of different sectors. Examples include mayors or municipal councillors, environmental managers from industry, government managers and leaders from non-profit organizations.
- WPACs convene and facilitate meetings about priority issues in their watershed, bringing stakeholders together to identify solutions to complex problems.

- WPACs are viewed by many as transparent and trusted stewards of their watershed.
- WPACs collaborate with local watershed stewardship groups to deliver educational events, prepare sub-watershed management plans and to pursue other priority initiatives.
- WPACs have large networks they can mobilize to identify and leverage additional funding and in-kind resources to support their projects and activities.

### **Expectations of the Government of Alberta**

- Leverage government knowledge and relationships, as appropriate, to facilitate WPAC engagement with stakeholders.
- Provide ongoing funding for WPAC operations, as available through Alberta Environment and Parks' budget.
- Provide staff and other resources to WPAC initiatives, as per government priorities.

### *Examples of Government Deliverables*

- The Government of Alberta supports WPAC operations through annual grants. In 2019-20, grants totaling \$3.2 million were provided to WPACs by Alberta Environment and Parks.
- The Government of Alberta participates on all WPAC boards and many WPAC committees and project teams.

## **2. Monitoring and Reporting**

**Monitoring Role:** WPACs are a valuable source of information about regional issues and monitoring needs related to watershed health and management.

**Reporting Role:** WPACs will produce “state of the watershed” reports that identify watershed conditions, the local pressures facing the watershed and, data and research gaps that may need to be addressed.

### **Expectations of WPACs**

- Provide input to Alberta Environment and Parks regarding environmental monitoring, identification of specific issues and reporting needs for their watershed.
- Support community-based monitoring using Government of Alberta standards and methods within their watershed, with scientific support from the Government of Alberta, as appropriate.
- Assemble additional information to report on the state of the watershed, including traditional knowledge and local environmental and socio-economic information related to the state of the environment.
- Produce a state of the watershed report to help inform provincial monitoring program design and contribute regional expertise to the provincial assessment of the condition and sustainability of Alberta's water resources.
- As appropriate, produce other reports and outreach resources about the watershed to support their work and meet the needs of the Government of Alberta and WPAC stakeholders.

### *Examples of WPAC Deliverables*

- WPACs analyze the state of the watershed based on available data and stakeholder input and communicate the condition of the watershed through materials such as state of the watershed reports, maps, brochures and websites.
- WPACs identify data gaps and special monitoring needs related to local issues through their stakeholder members and engagement activities. This information is shared to inform government monitoring programs.
- WPACs support community-based monitoring and citizen science through innovative programs like the volunteer-based LakeWatch program.

### **Expectations of the Government of Alberta**

- Consider the input of WPACs in the preparation of monitoring strategies, implementation of monitoring activities, evaluation and reporting plans, and program design.
- Provide feedback to WPACs on how their advice was considered.
- Develop and communicate standards and methodologies for citizen science to guide WPAC monitoring initiatives. Provide WPACs with information and training about scientific data collection, as appropriate and as resources allow.
- Ensure appropriate quality assurance and quality control for environmental data is in place.
- Assemble watershed-specific environmental data and provide it to WPACs on a regular, timely basis to assist with state of the watershed reporting.
- Provide guidance to WPACs regarding environmental data interpretation, as appropriate.
- Provide scientific support to WPAC monitoring and reporting initiatives, including research partnerships, based on government priorities and available staff resources and budget.

### *Examples of Government Deliverables*

- The Government of Alberta provides WPACs with an understanding of monitoring planned in their watershed via the government's 5-year monitoring plan. This allows WPACs to design their own monitoring programs to complement government monitoring activities, using the same methodologies, Standard Operating Procedures and analytical laboratories.
- Alberta Environment and Parks will provide scientific advice on the design of WPAC-led monitoring programs.
- Alberta Environment and Parks regularly provides each WPAC with a package of environmental data relevant to state of the watershed reporting and other WPAC initiatives. These packages will include interpretation of the data patterns by government scientists to help inform state of the watershed reporting. The department will also facilitate access to historic datasets.

## **3. Policy and Planning**

**Policy Role:** WPACs will serve as a valuable source of knowledge and regional perspective for relevant government policy development.

**Planning Role:** WPACs will prepare integrated watershed management plans (IWMPs) as advice to relevant decision-makers, including the Government of Alberta, that identify issues and

examine the best course of action to address them. WPACs will also promote and coordinate implementation of these plans including opportunities to integrate and adopt strategies through other planning, policy and operational products and processes.

### **Expectations of WPACs**

- Develop IWMPs in alignment with relevant government guidance documents, policies and plans. Where warranted, stakeholder input is incorporated in the development of these plans.
- Coordinate IWMP implementation support from jurisdictions (municipal, provincial and federal) and other stakeholders with the authority to implement plan recommendations.
- In collaboration with their stakeholders, assist in the development and implementation of water conservation, water monitoring, source water protection, wetland programs, and other similar initiatives.
- Support government regional, sub-regional and watershed-related planning, as appropriate. WPACs may lead, advise, implement or otherwise participate in components of government planning initiatives, based on government assessment of available opportunities and WPAC capacity.

### *Examples of WPAC Deliverables*

- WPACs produce IWMPs that complement government's regional, sub-regional and operational level planning.
- WPACs work with the decision-makers to implement recommendations in their integrated watershed management plans.
- WPACs produce other planning products, such as source water protection plans, that are well researched and consensus-based. These materials are provided to the Government of Alberta as input toward policy and planning initiatives.
- WPACs identify local issues through their stakeholder networks and relay this information to inform policy and planning needs within the region.
- WPACs provide the Government of Alberta with policy advice, based on consensus, among a wide range of regional interests.
- WPACs apply a systems-thinking approach to complex watershed issues that balance the needs of stakeholders throughout the watershed.

### **Expectations of the Government of Alberta**

- Develop water and watershed-related policies, plans and conservation objectives. Invite WPACs to provide input and request their assistance with associated stakeholder or public engagement, where appropriate.
- Identify opportunities for WPACs to contribute to development and implementation of regional, sub-regional and management planning, including the various environmental management frameworks and other components, where appropriate.
- Provide direct support to WPAC planning initiatives, based on government priorities and available staff resources and budget.

- Collect WPAC advice and report on how the advice was considered in government deliberations or decisions.

#### *Examples of Government Deliverables*

- The Government of Alberta will actively pursue the goals of Water for Life and other government water-related strategies as they are developed.
- The Government of Alberta considers the pool of current and former WPAC board members as a source of knowledge and historical context that has value to relevant policy, planning advisory panels and committees.
- The Government of Alberta will regularly share its planning priorities with WPACs.

## **4. Literacy and Education**

WPACs will enhance environmental literacy throughout their watersheds by developing and delivering education programs that foster land and water stewardship.

### **Expectations of WPACs**

- Work collaboratively with municipal, provincial and federal governments, watershed stewardship groups, industry, non-profit organizations, academia, local stakeholders, Indigenous peoples and other WPACs in the development and delivery of basin-oriented education programs.
- Serve as a reliable source of information about watershed education programs and resources offered by watershed educators in the region.
- Develop or assist in the development of basin-oriented education programming that aligns with provincial literacy outcomes and the goals of the Water for Life Strategy.
- Deliver water-related education programming to a variety of audiences in the watershed.
  - Conduct education and awareness programs such as riparian health assessments, field demonstration sites, and other stewardship activities.
  - Promote awareness and implementation of best management practices by landowners and other stakeholders in the watershed.

#### *Examples of WPAC Deliverables*

- WPACs conduct watershed-scale assessments of water-focused educational activities and programs to identify gaps and opportunities to develop a targeted education and outreach program within their watershed.
- WPACs develop and implement annual outreach plans that support WPAC education goals.
- WPACs support the development and delivery (where appropriate) of projects and initiatives undertaken by the Government of Alberta to carry out Alberta's Water Literacy Strategy.
- WPACs incorporate Alberta Environment and Parks messaging in their education and outreach initiatives, where applicable.

- WPACs establish themselves as a trusted and reliable source for watershed-specific information and educational resources.

### **Expectations of the Government of Alberta**

- Develop a provincial water education strategy that details key literacy outcomes. The strategy will be informed by input from WPACs.
- Develop provincial water education tools that can be used by literacy practitioners, with input from WPACs.
- Collaborate with WPACs in delivering education programs, based on government priorities and available staff resources and budget.

### *Examples of Government Deliverables*

- The Government of Alberta develops annual implementation plans to support the completion of projects identified in literacy strategies.
- The Government of Alberta provides external partners with access to a suite of water-related educational resources and programs.
- The Government of Alberta provides financial and/or in-kind resources, as available, to enable external partners to deliver water-related educational programming that supports outcomes established in Alberta's Water Literacy Strategy.
- The Government of Alberta collaborates with WPACs on campaigns and events, such as the Alberta Recreational Lakes Forum, Aquatic Invasive Species workshops and the Water Week social media campaign.
- The Government of Alberta provides education materials to WPACs to support their community-based outreach efforts.

## **Conclusion**

The Government of Alberta's partnership with WPACs improves the success of watershed policy, planning, monitoring, reporting and education in Alberta. By pursuing the roles outlined above, WPACs bring additional resources and approaches to support the Water for Life Strategy and many other government policies and programs. Especially important are the relationships established with key stakeholders throughout the province. This benefits both the Government of Alberta and the stakeholders who participate in WPAC initiatives.