

Regional Strategic Planning – Summary

During the final week of discussion our guest moderator, Dr. Lorne Taylor, former Minister of Environment for the Government of Alberta, shared an example of regional strategic planning for mountain watersheds – Alberta’s Water for Life – and asked for feedback. We have summarized this feedback below, including some comments about Alberta’s Water for Life, as well as resources related to this discussion.

Two Key Elements of Regional Strategic Planning

The political process is as important as compelling science or public consultation

Lorne Taylor argued that, in addition to conducting scientific research and public consultations anyone wishing to influence policy must also actively convince elected politicians that a course of action is necessary. Furthermore, to do this one must understand the nature, values and political mechanisms of a government. Without recognizing, understanding and working within this political process, argued Taylor, people cannot influence public policy.

For example, in Alberta’s Water for Life strategy, the provincial Water Policy Advisory Council is expected to communicate recommendations but also to understand of the values and roles of government. Although elected politicians have the final say on all policy decisions, a sophisticated knowledge of the political process is considered necessary to the Advisory Council’s role.

Engaging local jurisdictions

As before, participants agreed that engaging local jurisdictions was necessary to successful water policy and planning. However, most participants felt that if local jurisdictions were to develop plans of their own, they would benefit from certain kinds of support.

Scientific research

Lorne Taylor and Don Weir both argued that local jurisdictions need more scientific research in order to steward water resources effectively – this includes data about the quantity and quality of water both on the surface and in aquifers. Taylor suggested that the provincial government will need to be convinced to underwrite more of these studies.

Political process

Lorne Taylor reiterated that local groups can make recommendations, but only elected officials may make decisions. Therefore, local jurisdictions must make concerted efforts to develop political sophistication – within their own groups or through partners – in order to ensure that their recommendations are actually adopted, and their needs met.

Funding

Lorne Taylor acknowledged that local jurisdictions may need seed funding to develop more formal instruments for engaging the public – such as the Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils suggested by Alberta’s Water for Life. He suggested that government could provide seed funding for these groups,

and that this funding could be replaced and/or supplemented with grants and corporate sponsorships. During the previous week of discussion participants also suggested that all levels of government should be responsible for providing some support.

Interest-based negotiation & "real" commitments

Danielle Droitsch suggested that local groups will need to develop expertise in interest-based (rather than position-based) negotiation between stakeholders, and press for commitments to water stewardship action. She reminded participants that even local jurisdictions can find it challenging to create common ground between multiple stakeholder groups, and that meaningful recommendations may be difficult to make, if local stakeholders cannot find consensus.

Weaknesses of Alberta's Water for Life

Some participants raised concerns with certain aspects of this plan.

Possibly over-simplified views on management

Danielle Droitsch expressed concern that Alberta's Water for Life did not reconsider some of the more traditional principles of water management. She argued that apportionment agreements define how much water is allotted to whom, but that we could also consider for what purposes that water may be used and at what times of the year. In addition, Droitsch suggested that the plan should take into account flow variability from year to year, and month to month, which is likely to change with climate over time.

Lorne Taylor agreed with Droitsch that it may be a good idea to discuss when water is used, particularly in rural areas, and how it is apportioned on a day-to-day basis, by TransAlta for example. However, he cautioned that any discussion dealing with the entrenched "first in time, first in right" principle would have to be conducted in a transparent manner due to the political ramifications of opening this discussion – an example of how policy and politics are closely related.

Taylor also suggested that Alberta needs to take a more aggressive approach to conservation by conserving more of the spring runoff and by asking Albertans to pay the actual cost of delivering water to consumers – a significantly higher amount than they currently pay.

High expectations for proposed Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils

Virtually all participants praised this plan for advocating basin-based watershed planning and advisory councils – such as the Bow River Basin Council. However, some concern was raised over the expectation that these not-for-profit groups should be solely responsible for watershed planning, consultation, stewardship, reporting, and education – particularly as no additional sources of funding have been earmarked to support their activities.

Moderator, Lorne Taylor suggested that these councils would likely be eligible for seed funding from government, as the Bow River Basin Council was, and would be able to raise money as not-for-profit organizations through grants and corporate sponsorship. He stressed that this model has been successful for the Bow River Basin Council and that the quality of the Council's work has been outstanding.

Strengths of Alberta's Water for Life

Participants were very positive about Alberta's Water for Life strategy and had particularly appreciative comments for the following two aspects of this plan.

Local engagement

Several participants praised Alberta's Water for Life for being inclusive, for formally recognizing grassroots Watershed Protection Groups as primary partners in water stewardship, and for advocating community-driven, not-for-profit Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils – such as the Bow River Basin Council.

Prioritizing quantity and quality

Participants were also pleased with the fact that this plan prioritizes both quantity and quality of water.

Resources

Alberta's Water for Life

<http://www.waterforlife.gov.ab.ca/>

Bow River Basin Council

<http://www.brbc.ab.ca/>