

DRAFT National Watershed Stewardship Policy

Report: *Prairie Region*

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of the prairie portion of the National Watershed Stewardship Policy Discussion, a Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) project supported with Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) funding in support of Canada's Stewardship Agenda goal to "Strengthen policy and legislative support for stewards, by providing the essential economic, policy and legal tools and instruments required to support stewardship programs and activities". As a regional partner, the Land Stewardship Centre of Canada, working with the Saskatchewan Network of Watershed Stewards (SNOWS) and the Manitoba Conservation District Program, mailed out surveys to 13 watershed groups of various sizes and experiences across the three prairie provinces. These and a number of other groups were then invited to a May 2 Forum to discuss the survey topics in person.

Key messages from the survey and the forum include:

- Long-term, stable funding is essential to sustainable stewardship programs.
- Volunteer stewardship groups need technical and administrative support to maintain momentum and long-term initiatives.
- Of the 11 topics discussed, six (funding mechanisms, watershed boundaries, funding support, external governance, information access and engaging volunteers) were considered to be high priorities for policy level assistance.

Background

To carry out this project, the Langley Environmental Partners Society (LEPS) in British Columbia, the Clean Annapolis River Project in Nova Scotia, the Strategies Saint-Laurent in Quebec, the Ausable Bayfield and South Nation Conservation Authorities in Ontario and the Land Stewardship Centre in Alberta, engaged community members to participate in policy development dialogues with each other and government where 'policy' was broadly defined as a course of action or principle adopted by a government. Each group used a combination of surveys and forums to distill the successes, barriers and recommendations to watershed policy. As well, each region formulated a report that will be posted to an on-line forum for discussion throughout May at www.stewardship2003.ca. A meeting of regional groups July 2, 2003 in Langley BC will facilitate further dialogue. A list of recommendations on how government policy can more effectively support stewardship activities and programs from these discussions will be presented at the Leading Edge Conference *Stewardship and Conservation in Canada*, from the 3rd to 6th July 2003 contributing to the conference objective – "To develop a bold 10 year vision for stewardship for Canada".

Across the three Prairie Provinces, a diversity of organizations are carrying out watershed activities within a diversity of formal and informal government and non-government structures and network relationships. While most of these watershed organizations are '*finding their own way*', many felt that they could benefit from sharing an examination of how each is structured and how each is succeeding. This examination could then shift its focus to broader issues including policy changes and networking possibilities.

The Manitoba Water Services Board (MWSB) is the provincial authority responsible for Manitoba's ten major watersheds. Currently, 16 Conservation Districts covering approximately 60% of Agro-Manitoba manage the natural resources in their respective areas under the authority of the Conservation District Act. A Conservation District is made up of a group of "neighbours" (stakeholders) working in partnership with the Province to develop resource management programs. Stewardship groups also exist outside of this program. A secretariat providing day-to-day assistance to all districts is provided by the MWSB. Each Conservation District hires a District Manager and other staff, as necessary, to carry out integrated resource management programs. The Province matches local municipal levies on a 3 to 1 basis.

Saskatchewan has five major watersheds, four of which cross into Manitoba. The provincial authorities for water are Saskatchewan Environment and the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority. The Saskatchewan Network of Watershed Stewards (SNOWS) is an umbrella organization for local watershed groups, arising out of recommendations of the 1999 Water Management Framework. SNOWS currently has six local watershed groups listed on its website (www.inter.ab.ca/spec/snows) however this site is very new and expected to expand in the near future.

Alberta has eight major watersheds with four of these watersheds crossing the border into Saskatchewan. Alberta has recently seen a rapid development in stewardship groups at both the local and basin level. A listing of many (~30), but not all, of these organizations can be found on-line at www.albertawatersheds.org. Although there is currently no overall provincial umbrella in Alberta, many local groups are now forming alliances with each other to represent broad regional areas (e.g. Red Deer - Bow Regional Alliance). A draft of the new provincial water strategy is currently being reviewed. This strategy provides for the establishment of watershed groups at the provincial, regional and local level.

What Stewardship Activities are Prairie Watershed Groups Participating In?

Prairie watershed groups are involved in a number of stewardship activities involving both water and the uplands within their watershed areas. Some of these include:

- Working with neighbours to raise awareness of watershed boundaries and functions
- Conducting riparian area and other assessments
- Monitoring water quantity and quality
- Gathering information on the pressures acting on land and water
- Assisting land owners with programs promoting alternative stock watering methods (off-site watering), stream bank fencing and stabilization, rotational grazing and erosion control
- Planting and maintaining shelterbelts and woodlots
- Enhancing habitat for fish, ducks and other wildlife
- Conducting bird, plant, amphibian and other biodiversity measures
- Conducting conservation awareness programs to schools and youth clubs
- Producing state of the basin reports and watershed management plans
- Sharing information and experiences
- Working with policy setters to develop programs that enhance the ability of watershed groups to sustainably manage the natural resources in their area

Prairie Survey and Forum Results: The following 11 topics and questions were used as the basis of survey and forum discussions. Eleven watershed groups responded to surveys and 27 individuals representing 22 organizations participated in the forum.

1. Founding mechanisms:

What mechanisms lead to the establishment of watershed stewardship organizations? Organizations and alliances arise out of a need for like-minded stakeholders to communicate and work together more effectively; to provide awareness and educational materials; or to achieve similar goals. Watershed groups work to address issues of:

- Water quality (pollution) and quantity (low levels; flooding; dewatering of drainage basin) and/or public discontent with either; competing users and allocations
 - Interference with waterways from damming, diverting, contamination, etc. from gravel operations, asphalt plants, oil and gas and other mineral extraction and industrial activities
 - Riparian health concerns; watershed deforestation
 - Fish, fish habitat, fish movement, spawning, bed and bank modifications
 - At-risk species and protected areas
 - Unwanted private access to public waterways and greenbelts
 - The need for long-term, comprehensive management tools to address water and soil concerns as well as recreation, wildlife, forestry, fisheries and other resource issues
 - Environmental education and awareness
- **Successes To Founding Mechanisms:**
 - Awareness, empowerment and knowledge; working together; synergy
 - Founding issues lead to public, industry and government concern and a willingness to address the problems with stakeholders that are proactive and collaborative; strong inter-jurisdictional partnerships are formed
 - Watershed issues are local issues and receive local support and buy-in with community-based action
 - Successful watershed groups often have more than one “champions”
- **Barriers To Founding Mechanisms:**
 - Founding is often reactive (crisis management) rather than proactive
 - Start-up funds are often lacking and new groups may rely on Director's to burden the costs
 - So you've formed a group. Now what? Difficult going from complaints to actions
 - Groups have to devote a lot of time and money to be prominent in the face of decision-makers
 - Lack of political will; ignorance of consequences; industry and economic pressure on governments; conflicting policies
 - Restrictions on information
- **Recommendations to Founding Mechanisms:**
 - Give forethought to the future – a “vision”; keep the scope of focus small

- Provide a body/Secretariat that facilitates knowledge-sharing, networking, technical expertise, coordination and funding with continuity to stewardship groups; have a central organization for each watershed area
- Customize a user-friendly template for action (toolkit) that can be used by start-up groups; provide mentoring and cross-support between groups
- Need a group champion (individual) and a government or conservation agency (i.e. technical) champion
- Focus on fixing the problem, not the blame
- Be inclusive but clarify the roles of members

2. Watershed boundaries: Watershed boundaries are defined by nature and do not adhere to municipal, provincial or federal boundaries. Whether the watershed organization is local or basin in size, it may have to deal with a confusing number of jurisdictions and must come to understand the roles and policies of each. Watershed groups are trying to lessen jurisdictional disputes by developing a set of common watershed boundaries for all agencies to use consistently and encouraging the exchange of information so that everyone is working from the same knowledge base.

Is there a conscious effort by the organization to maintain a particular size or sphere of influence? Many watershed organizations felt they were not big enough to change or develop policy but certainly would try to influence policy development. Some basin-level organizations are working to support and partner with sub-basin groups that can do more of the on-the-ground “grassroots” work.

- **Successes To a Watershed Boundaries Approach:**
 - It brings awareness of watershed boundaries to different jurisdictions
 - Landowners that know they are a part of a watershed are more willing to cooperate in programs that benefit downstream users
 - Watersheds provide a good framework for dealing with ecological units and their functions; it embraces integrated resource management at the landscape level
 - Watershed level management is truly member and consensus driven where multi-stakeholders subscribe to a common vision; forces political jurisdictions to cooperate; a preventative approach
 - Provides a universal identification system for permanent/ephemeral wetlands;
- **Barriers To a Watershed Boundaries Approach:**
 - Jurisdictional disputes/confusion over roles
 - The rules may change after water crosses a particular boundary
 - Lag time in government response to requests for technical information
 - Lack of full cost accounting (including social and environmental costs/benefits) in land-use planning and decision-making
 - Local organizations are sometimes frustrated and feel they are too small to effect policy changes
 - Participating in policy level planning takes time and resources away from maintaining grassroots support and activities
 - There may be disparities in resources and programs between groups
 - No formal, legal recognition or valuation of watersheds, floodplains, aquifers and groundwater systems

- **Recommendations to Watershed Boundaries Approach:**
 - Teach awareness of watershed definitions and boundaries from both an ecological and legislative aspect but acknowledge existing boundaries
 - Harmonize between jurisdictions legislation, taxation, planning and policy Policies should strive for consistency among watershed agencies while recognizing the uniqueness of each and provide a mechanism for different jurisdictions and groups to meet and work together
 - Produce state of the basin reports that outline the status, cumulative effects, thresholds and limits of the watershed. Management Plans force everyone to work together
 - Develop a network of grassroots level local and sub-shed organizations that feed into a regional basin-level and provincial umbrella
 - In Alberta, complete and implement the Wetlands Policy as a part of the Water Strategy

3. Internal governance structures:

What are the systems, hierarchy or mechanisms of authority within the organization? While some watershed organizations work on an informal basis or verbal agreements to cooperate or share tasks, a volunteer Board of Directors governs most with member nominated from stakeholders and partners and elected annually at AGMs. Some groups have a volunteer, elected Steering Committee. Some of the larger, basin-level groups have a hired Executive Director/Manager and other staff. In an effort at building networks, some basin level organizations encourage sub-sheds to participate at the director level.

Is there an effort to achieve or maintain a particular size of a board of directors or other decision-making body? Boards vary in size and organization (often 12-15 members). Some follow established business plans. Project ideas and focus areas usually come from the members. Interestingly, in Manitoba, Conservation Districts have the power to study and investigate the resources of the watershed, to prepare and implement a management plan, and to enter into agreements necessary to implement the plan.

- **Successes To Internal Governance Structures:**
 - A Board of Directors form of governance ensures member-driven, participatory, long-term decision making that is fair and transparent
 - Where municipalities are on the Board, it ensures representation from across the watershed
 - Having staff/directors with technical expertise can greatly enhance program delivery
- **Barriers To Internal Governance Structures:**
 - Volunteers have a limited amount of time to commit
 - Board members may have limited amounts of technical and financial resources; burnout, cynicism
 - Board members may be in a conflict of interest
 - Lack of input from all key players
- **Recommendations to Internal Governance Structures:**

- Provide long-term, stable funding to ensure Board continuity
- Provide a template of organizational structure and governance to new organizations
- Provide core funding for administrative and secretariat services
- Implement reward and recognition mechanisms
- Align with the municipalities in your watershed for political support
- Have access to charitable status for fund raising
- Be inclusive and recruit all of the stakeholders in the watershed
- Develop a shared vision, terms of reference and funding priorities
- Consider having partners sign MOU's that are not restrictive but that give everyone a clear understanding of what is expected

4. External governance:

What is the Government's (municipal, provincial, federal, First Nation) role over the organization? In most cases, governments do not have a direct role over the organizations but may participate as full, equal partners.

Is the organization supported through specific legislation or policy? In all three Prairie Provinces there is some policy direction through provincial water strategies/acts, industry codes of practise, etc. In several areas, watershed groups and/or their provincial agencies are in the process of preparing state of the basin reports and/or watershed management plans although many groups are still in the process of gathering information and looking for funding to do so.

- **Successes To External Governance Mechanisms:**
 - Structures that are partnership-based ensure watershed management is inclusive, participatory and consensus-driven
 - Government agencies facilitate but do not drive the process
 - Federal and provincial agencies have successfully used watershed stewardship groups to deliver a variety of conservation programs
 - External agencies can provide much needed technical support for small groups, help with funding proposals and direct groups to the resources they need (In Alberta, AESA Field Technicians are fulfilling this role in some areas.)
- **Barriers To External Governance Mechanisms:**
 - "Silo" mentality of different ministries impedes integrated approach to watershed management; closed ears, tunnel vision, lack of integrated management vision and system
 - External governance can slow down implementation of stewardship initiatives
 - Lack of access to technical support and experts
 - Biased or restricted data
- **Recommendations to External Governance Mechanisms:**
 - All government levels should better articulate their role, responsibilities and accountability
 - Government agencies should provide technical expertise, funding, information and commitment

- Watershed groups can be the canaries, putting up the red flag when there's a problem
- Municipal level governments should remain closest to the process
- Provide a level playing field by providing the even application of current laws and using enforcement where required;
- Governments should be partners not overlords; keep it grassroots
- Governments should assist groups to conduct inventories, monitoring and analysis of the resource

5. Funding structures to support the initiative:

How are the organization's funds secured and sustained? While there are a number of sources of funding (Directors, EcoAction, PFRA, AESA, ACA, Federal Community Riparian Program, counties and municipalities per-capita grants, private foundations, government and industry partners), funding is a chronic limiting factor.

- **Successes To Funding Structures:**
 - Manitoba's structure where the province matches municipal grants 3:1 seems successful at long-term funding requirements
 - Start up funds/Seed money can be leveraged with other partners
 - Funding to local organizations can strengthen ties with landowners
- **Barriers To Funding Structures:**
 - Difficult to maintain initial funding
 - Peaks and valleys make long-term staffing difficult
 - Proposal writing take time away from important goals and objectives
 - Narrow criteria for fund use
 - Annual funding versus sustained funding
 - Funding directs objectives
- **Recommendations To Funding Structures:**
 - Long-term commitments and core funding are critical to success,
 - Recognize in-kind funding
 - Connect land and water stewardship to health issues
 - Funding agencies should streamline and widen criteria for applications
 - Provide training and support for proposal writing
 - Harmonize funder and recipient needs
 - Develop a nucleus/pot for holding and distributing funds
 - Support long-term programs not "flavour-of-the-month" projects
 - "Take it forward"; don't get hung up on who used to fund what, just move forward with today's needs and how you will secure funding for them

6. Information Access:

What information is used to decide on priorities for action? Is that information drawn from government sources/citizen science/universities? Are stewardship activities driven by integrated, long-term watershed management plans? Stewardship organizations gain information from conducting their own needs assessments (e.g. Riparian assessments, state of the basin reports, etc.) Several groups survey their members and watershed associations to determine priorities for action. NGO's, government policy setters, law centres, universities, colleges and tech schools,

industry associations, focus group discussions and general member input is used to obtain information. Steering committees and managers may help guide the strategic direction of the organization through a strategic planning process however members often decide on priority action areas and projects. (Meewasin Valley Authority in Saskatchewan has a 100-year plan, a 20-year vision and 5 year work plans.)

- **Successes To Information Access:**
 - There appear to be many sources of information available to watershed groups
 - Traditional environmental knowledge

- **Barriers To Information Access:**
 - There may be a disconnect between what info is available and what is needed / misuse of data
 - It may be costly to obtain
 - Turf wars over data/ non-sharing/ confidentiality
 - Lack of funding to disseminate information to volunteers
 - Timeliness
 - What does the information mean? Common terminology is not always used/ information may be biased

- **Recommendations to Information Access:**
 - Share, share, share / make info sharing a requirement of funding
 - Use common terminology/ user-friendly format
 - Develop mechanisms for better, more equitable access to and sharing of information
 - Information that is collected should be stored consistently in an appropriate format for broad use
 - Provincial governments need to make base maps and other baseline data available at no cost
 - Create awareness of what information needs to be collected and for what purpose
 - Whistleblower protection

7. Engaging Volunteers:

How are volunteers recruited, engaged and maintained in the organization?

Local groups tend to draw volunteers from local landowners who live in the watershed and who show a willingness to change practises. In several organizations, members are nominated and elected at annual AGMs for 1 or 2 year terms. Working groups of volunteers are often formed for particular projects, events and initiatives. Individuals from outside the organization are asked for their assistance if particular expertise is required. Many groups encourage members to become involved in areas of interest to them. (Meewasin has 25,000 volunteers and puts a significant amount of effort into recruiting and keeping them.)

- **Successes To Engaging Volunteers:**
 - It maintains grassroots support at the local and county level
 - River valley clean-ups, fish rescues and tree plantings can be fun outings for young and old and can instil a conservation ethic

- **Barriers To Engaging Volunteers:**
 - Competition for volunteers is huge.
 - It takes organizational dollars to recruit, organize and maintain volunteers
 - Liability issues
 - Groups can experience volunteer burnout and be discouraged by public apathy; lack of public awareness; lack of or false empowerment
- **Recommendations to Engaging Volunteers:**
 - Make projects fun! Engage volunteers in project's that they desire to carry out / appreciate and encourage
 - Have clear defined roles for volunteers
 - Align with other conservation-minded volunteer groups
 - Recognize the efforts of volunteers (rewards, recognition, tax incentives)
 - Provide funding for cost recovery
 - Reduce liability issue
 - Provide orientation and training to volunteers
 - Reduce administrative overhead
 - Focus on recruitment and retention – 2 very different activities
 - Provide feedback to volunteers

8. Forging Partnerships:

How were partnerships established through the initiative? Partnerships sought by managers and board members are with organizations that can add to the success of the program, leverage funding, are mutually beneficial or have a shared vision or mission. Partnership hunting may be done casually or by directed out-reach programs to encourage membership and partnering. A Memorandum of Understanding may formalize partnerships. Interestingly, when SNOWS formed, it invited agencies and groups to participate in the establishment of the network. The majority who went through the strategic planning process stayed on as members. Many local and regional watershed stewardship organizations seek partnerships with provincial and national conservation organizations such as DUC, WHC, TNCC, PFRA, as well as academic and research institutions.

- **Successes To Forging Partnerships:**
 - *“A diverse membership allows us to resolve concerns effectively through cooperative dialogue”*
 - Partnerships bring more resources to the table / create win-win solutions / and can leverage additional resources
- **Barriers To Forging Partnerships:**
 - Too many partners can make reaching consensus a challenge
 - Sometimes there are too many strings attached to partnership dollars
 - Ulterior motives, distrust, NIMBY,
- **Recommendations to Forging Partnerships:**
 - Strongly encourage stakeholders in a watershed to work *“with their neighbours to respect the biodiversity, sustainability and the nature of any area used...”*

- Balance dollars put into administration, research and on-the ground projects
- Stagger partnerships over time
- Articulate objectives to motivate partnerships
- Go through a facilitation process to determine shared interests, resources, benefits and governance issues
- Continually review and reaffirm partnership goals and objectives
- Create buy-in from the start
- Define what “consensus driven” means to your group
- Be true to your objectives/mission

9. Monitoring Results:

How are results monitored and how do the results guide the activities of the organization? Success in the field may be monitored by improved riparian assessments, an overall water quality improvement, shelterbelt establishment, erosion control, the number of attendees at field days, tours and workshops, the uptake of new ideas, a change in behaviour on the landscape or the number of watershed success stories. GIS, GPS and fly-overs might be used to monitor changes in land use against objectives such as a no net loss of riparian habitat.

Organizational results may be monitored by formal member satisfaction surveys and evaluation forms; tracking website hits and number of phone calls to toll-free numbers; informal verbal feedback from members; the sales and distribution of publications; the level of financial support generated from member and partner contributions; changes to government policy; increased cooperation between jurisdictions and the sharing of information between NGO’s, government and industry.

- **Successes To Monitoring Results:**

- As important to measure our successes as it is to measure our failures
- Also important to communicate those successes
- Monitor results through regular meetings and information sessions, continual feedback mechanisms
- Monitoring results facilitates adaptive management

- **Barriers To Monitoring Results:**

- Might be hard to measure results where there is non-compliance from non-participating agents within the watershed
- Lack of consistent monitoring when funding changes
- Weakest on groundwater and non-point source pollution monitoring
- Time and resource commitment
- Baseline data missing
- Monitoring sites might be physically lost and unable to provide long-term trend data

- **Recommendations:**

- Encourage and assist non-compliers to become better neighbours/better stewards
- Host watershed tours to showcase projects
- Target reports for their intended audiences
- Establish benchmarks to measure success
- Track ecological and social change

- Make consistent collection and storage of data
- Develop community monitoring tools / engage educational institutions
- Commit to and provide long-term, core-funding for monitoring
- Funders must be patient – monitoring is long-term
- Provide training for consistent methods of data collection
- Develop a set of common indicators
- Have good sets of “before” and “after” photos

10. Sustainability of the initiative:

What mechanisms has the organization established to ensure long-term success?

In the field, long-term success can be measured by the number of capital projects/mechanisms (e.g. off-site watering systems) that are in place and maintained. Within the organization, sustainability is a factor of the commitment of members, their ability to raise funds, a solid business plan, long-term strategic planning and funding requirements. Many organizations hold annual conferences or workshops to deal with issues and topics of interest as well as to celebrate their successes.

- **Successes To Sustainability:**
 - Long term plans that are supported by the community
 - Publicize and market successes
 - Bring about a social attitude change within the community
 - Associate with long-standing institutions
 - Encourage youth involvement
- **Barriers To Sustainability:**
 - If government driven, political process works against a sustained effort because governments and their priorities change
 - Initiatives are crisis-driven
 - Unrealistic goals
 - Too large / narrow of a focus
 - Treating the symptoms rather than the cause
- **Recommendations to sustainability:**
 - Long-term, core funding is essential to sustaining the initiative
 - Institutionalize initiatives at all levels of government
 - Provide training in marketing and communication
 - The goal is to change attitudes leading to voluntary changes in action
 - Learn to say no to activities that fall outside of your mission
 - Set measurable, achievable goals
 - Have strong memberships and partnerships
 - Maintain one-on-one contact

11. Accountability:

How does the organization build trust and maintain accountability in a collaborative environment? Everyone must start by embracing a sustainable, watershed level and ecosystem approach to planning and decision-making. They must

also show respect for differing opinions (no finger-pointing). Criticism must be constructive. Fix the problem, not the blame.

Trust in local watersheds can be built by having a local landowner operating programs such that other landowners can see the impacts and relevance of changes to improve the watershed. At the organizational level, management must show open, transparent, consensus-based and stakeholder-driven decision-making. The organization and all of its members must function with honesty and integrity. Collaboration is the key to forming partnerships with those who subscribe to a shared vision. Positive results generate trust and ensure partners will continue in a shared vision. Some NGOs feel that they are more able to build trust than government agencies are.

- **Successes To Accountability:**
 - Accountability is shown by conducting successful projects
 - Meeting the reporting requirements of funding agencies
 - Constructive criticism
 - Maintain initiatives and follow through to completion
 - Maintain communication and solicit feedback

- **Barriers To Accountability:**
 - Good Treasurer's can be hard to come by!
 - Lack of a coordinating government department
 - Lack of regular reporting

- **Recommendations to Accountability:**
 - Communicate
 - Show results
 - Work at building trust and a good public image
 - Have transparent goal setting, regular reaffirmation of goals in a public process
 - Maintain "grassroots" community approach
 - Provide regular, updated reports on activities and progress to funders, members and the general public
 - Review terms of reference on a regular basis
 - Develop a plan showing a broad base of support for your initiative

Concluding Statements

As seen above, both the survey and the forum generated good discussion on a variety of topics. Many individuals expressed their appreciation for having a chance to contribute and most desire to continue such dialogues in the future.