



Lay of the Land

A Survey of Watershed Leaders in Alberta



Water Matters



Lay of the Land
A Survey of Watershed Leaders in Alberta

July 2008

By Meghan Beveridge, Policy Associate
Water Matters Society of Alberta
P. O. Box 8386
Canmore, Alberta
T1W 2V2
phone: 403.762.0361

Acknowledgments
Water Matters wishes to thank The Calgary Foundation and Alberta Ecotrust Foundation for their generous support of this project.



Layout by Jenaya Webb

Cover Photograph: *North Saskatchewan River Near Elk Point* by Susan Webb

Download a PDF version of this report from our website at: www.water-matters.org

Contents

Introduction	5
Executive Summary: Key Findings	6
Who did we talk to?	9
What did we learn?	11
What are the key concerns?	11
The Alberta context from their point of view	12
What are watershed leaders doing right now?	14
Where do respondents devote their time?	14
Where would respondents like to devote more of their time?	14
How can Water Matters work with organizations and citizen leaders in Alberta?	15
Suggestions for collaboration among citizen organizations	16
What Water Matters activities would watershed leaders value most in their efforts for watershed protection?	18
What overall direction on Water Matters activities did respondents suggest?	18
Appendix – Survey Questions	20

Introduction

As an emerging not-for-profit organization focused on watershed and water resources issues in Alberta, Water Matters explored its potential future role in Alberta's organizational landscape. Using an online and phone survey, we investigated the concerns, needs and challenges of citizen leaders representing watershed groups or working independently across Alberta. The survey highlighted key concerns and perceived gaps in watershed protection. Respondents identified where Water Matters should put its energy and best contribute to watershed protection in Alberta.

The survey also offered the opportunity to introduce Water Matters to key stakeholders.

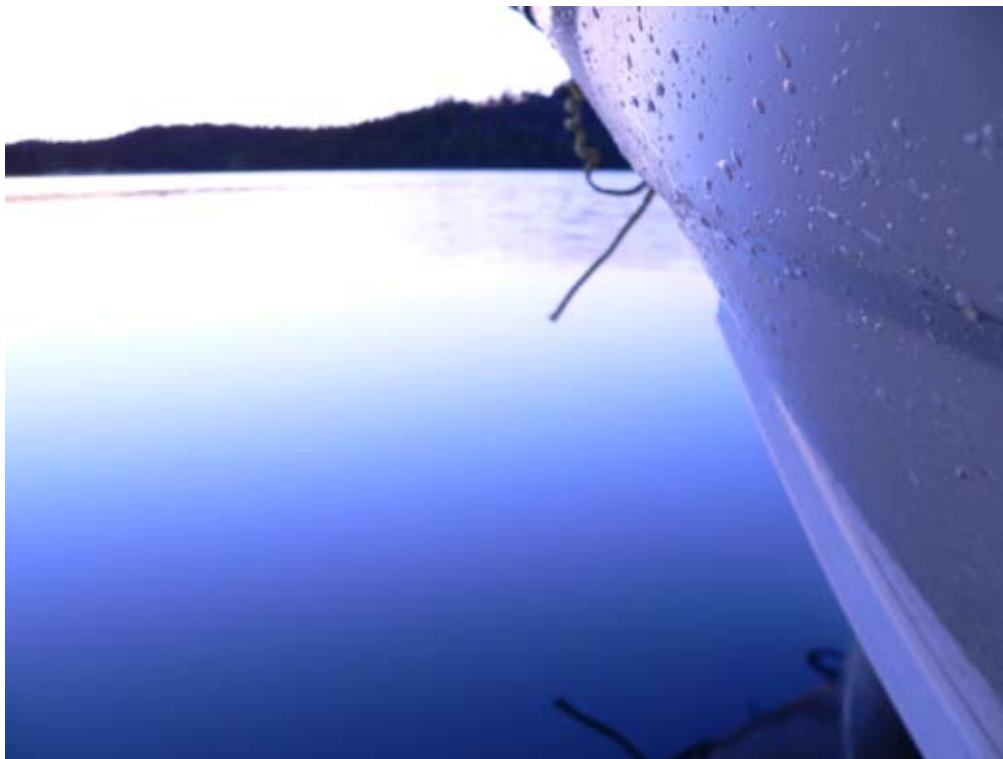


Photo:Trevor Dwyer

Using an online and phone survey, we investigated the concerns, needs and challenges of citizen leaders representing watershed groups or working independently across Alberta.

Executive Summary: Key Findings

Watershed leaders in Alberta are very concerned about the growing impact of land use on watersheds and want to see stronger leadership by government.¹

From our survey of 54 watershed leaders across the province, respondents expressed their concern about the threats to Alberta's watersheds. A very high number of respondents identified the health of aquatic ecosystems as a top concern. They are also well aware of the linkage between watershed planning and land-use planning, ranking them almost equally as important. Respondents considered industry, including oil and gas activities, intensive livestock operations, forestry, and mining, as a key culprit in watershed degradation. A related priority to many of the respondents is the need for effective watershed planning as a means to link and improve water and land decision making and to protect aquatic ecosystems.

More often than not, respondents linked their concerns for watershed health back to actions – or lack thereof – by the provincial government. For example, 23 percent of watershed leaders perceive a lack of political will as a key barrier to the protection of watersheds. One respondent suggested there will be no meaningful or sustainable improvements in watershed protection until some fundamental major gaps in governance and public accountability are addressed. Twenty-one percent of watershed leaders also noted a lack of coordinated efforts between levels of government as well across government departments, from which stems the problem of isolated water and land decision making and inadequate watershed protection efforts. Respondents also identified the lack of legislation and enforcement and clear government roles in multi-stakeholder watershed planning to support watershed protection. Compounding the failure to protect watersheds, 71% of watershed leaders felt that Albertans either have little awareness about watersheds or, if they are aware, do not act on this awareness.

In this survey, 54 watershed leaders across the province expressed their thoughts and concerns about the future of Alberta's watersheds.

¹ Watersheds are the units of the land that link land and water, where water drains off the land to a common point of a river, lake, or eventually an ocean.



Photo: Moose Lake, Susan Webb

Respondents resoundingly identified the need for a stronger political climate for watershed protection in Alberta as a top priority.

Respondents were also asked to provide their input on where Water Matters should direct its programming. Overall, respondents supported three major areas for Water Matters programming:

- 1) Encourage stronger government commitment for watershed protection: 90.2%
- 2) Improve government policies on watershed protection: 86.3%
- 3) Build more public awareness for watershed protection: 72.5%

Respondents resoundingly identified the need for a stronger political climate for watershed protection in Alberta as a top priority. A close second to this direction was improving government policies for watershed protection, followed by building more public awareness for watershed protection. These responses suggest Water Matters should direct their outreach efforts not just to the government but also to the public. While most respondents noted provincial government actions as a priority, responses also suggested a strong feeling that Water Matters should also address issues at the local government level.

When provided with specific examples of potential Water Matters programming, 67 percent of respondents said they would value investigation into issues facing their watershed. Respondents were also supportive of assistance with policy analysis and advice. Although a number of the respondents are affiliated with groups with significant organizational capacity, more than half of the respondents would value capacity building assistance, where Water Matters would help build their capacity to work on various issues or effectuate their approaches. Almost as many respondents would value additional information on their watersheds. At the same time, a number of respondents suggested that a significant amount of information already exists but “acting on the information” seemed to be the challenge.

Not only did the survey results identify where more work is needed in the province and what Water Matters can do to fill those gaps, the results indicated which groups are doing what where in Alberta.

Respondents work independently or represent watershed groups at the local, regional, provincial, and some even national and international levels. Overall, respondents spend more of their time doing advocacy action and collaborative action followed by public outreach. Some spend a great deal of time engaged in policy work and research. On-the-ground demonstration projects and coordinating issue-based campaigns or collaborative efforts were activities where respondents spend little time. Litigation holds the least amount of the respondents' time, most not engaging in litigation at all. We did not pursue why these activities were more or less popular (e.g., funding, interest, or effectiveness for change), but the results are notable.

Survey results suggest that respondents would like to devote more of their time in the future (resources permitting) to public outreach and citizen engagement, water policy, and watershed planning. Interestingly, respondents spend only a moderate amount of time overall involved in policy work, yet many would like to participate more actively in water policy initiatives. Significantly, engaging in the *Water for Life* strategy was consistently the least popular activity where respondents would like to spend more time. A remaining question is how Water Matters and others can enable these respondents to focus their time as they would like.

As a new and growing organization, Water Matters has a great opportunity to build synergies with watershed groups, fill gaps, and push for change at provincial and local levels. There are clearly many opportunities to collaborate for change, including engaging with Alberta's indigenous peoples, sharing information and defining shared goals with the watershed community, promoting forums for ideas exchange and campaign building, fostering capacity of small groups and providing direction on priority areas, as well as raising public and decision maker awareness around watersheds and their protection. We have an exciting future.

Survey results suggest that respondents would like to devote more of their time to public outreach and citizen engagement, water policy, and watershed planning. However, engaging in the Water for Life strategy was consistently the least popular activity where respondents would like to spend more time.

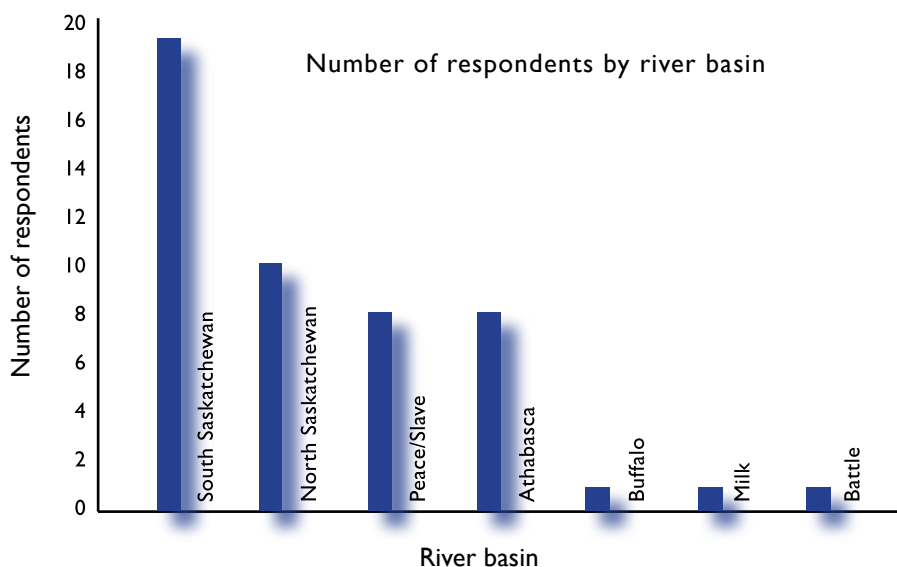


Photo: North Saskatchewan River at Edmonton, Susan Webb

Who did we talk to?

From March 26 to May 30, we surveyed 54 people from across Alberta who each responded to the survey as an individual citizen (15 respondents) or on behalf of an organization (39 respondents). On the phone we interviewed 32, the remaining 22 people completed the survey online for a total of 54 respondents. We surveyed people from across Alberta. Unfortunately, we were unable to survey contacts in the Hay River Basin or Beaver River Basin due to lack of contacts and time limitations. Our survey respondents included:

- South Saskatchewan River Basin - 35.2% (19 respondents)
- North Saskatchewan River Basin - 18.5% (10)
- Peace/Slave River Basin - 14.8% (8)
- Athabasca River Basin - 14.8% (8)
- Buffalo River Basin - 1.9% (1)
- Milk River Basin - 1.9% (1)
- Battle River Basin - 1.9% (1)



We spoke to 54 people from across Alberta representing both individuals and organizations engaged in watershed protection.

Eleven respondents (20.4%) identified their work to be provincial in scope. The 54 respondents identified their work to focus regionally (48.1% or 26 respondents), provincially (35.2% or 19 respondents), locally (35.2% or 19 respondents), or nationally (18.5% or 10 respondents). Nineteen respondents (35.2%) also focus their work internationally, bioregionally, or at specific local areas, such as the Sturgeon River watershed, Lake Wabamun, or the City of Calgary.

As a new and growing organization, Water Matters has a great opportunity to build synergies with watershed groups, fill gaps, and push for change at provincial and local levels.



Photo: Athabasca River, Dave Kalbfleisch

What did we learn?

What are the key concerns?

We asked respondents to identify their key concerns. The top themes—listed in order of priority to respondents—were as follows:

- Industrial activities (e.g., oil and gas, intensive livestock operations, forestry, mining), affecting quality and quantity of surface and groundwater (24 of 54 respondents)
- Healthy aquatic ecosystems and natural systems in general (23)
- Protection of wildlife and natural habitat (21)
- Land-use planning and water integration (including watershed planning) (15)
- Public education and awareness (11)
- Government decision-making, tools and processes, lack of enforcement (10)
- Management of mountain pine beetle problem (3)
- Cumulative effects management (3)

We asked respondents to rate specific areas of concern by importance to their work. The percentage of respondents who ranked these issues as of high concern is as follows:

- Health of aquatic ecosystems - 88.9% (48 of 54 respondents)
- Land-use planning - 83.3% (45)
- Watershed planning - 81.5% (44)
- Water pollution and water quality - 79.6% (43)
- Source water protection - 75.9% (41)
- Riparian protection - 74.1% (40)
- Domestic/industry water consumption - 66.7% (36)
- Groundwater - 66.7% (36)
- Wetlands - 64.8% (35)
- Water allocation - 51.9% (28)



Photo: Trevor Dwyer

Industrial activities affecting quality and quantity of surface and groundwater were identified as a top concern among watershed leaders in Alberta.

The Alberta context from their point of view

We asked respondents to identify major gaps in watershed protection in Alberta. The following themes were identified as major gaps or challenges to protecting watersheds:

Crosscutting Issues

Political Will is Absent

- *There is a lack of political will and effort to instigate and practice watershed protection or take precautionary action on many issues (e.g., wetlands policy at provincial and local levels). Little political will means few committed dollars and stalled implementation. Respondents want to see solutions not just platitudes.*

Where is Government?

- *There will be NO meaningful or sustainable improvements in watershed protection until some fundamental *major gaps in governance and public accountability* are addressed.*
- *Governments and government departments lack coordination and integration. Lack of leadership, too much downloading, jurisdictional confusion, and lack of coherent policy across departments are undermining watershed protection.*
- *Provincial and municipal governments' role in multi-stakeholder processes is unclear. Respondents question the ability of a government representative, who is agreeing to outcomes at the multi-stakeholder table, to influence day-to-day decision making in multiple departments.*
- *Watershed planning lacks legal teeth where government staff may or may not consider a plan if a plan is advisory. Funding is not sustained. Gaps between emerging science/ knowledge and watershed planning and between watershed planning and plan implementation leave watershed planning two gaps behind where it should be. Not all major watersheds have a Watershed Planning and Advisory Council (WPAC) (e.g., Peace) and major basin planning might not address challenges of smaller watersheds (e.g. Lake Wabamun).*
- *Legislation and enforcement are inadequate to impose legally binding protections for watersheds. Outdated law and policy lags behind new science, approaches, and technologies, leaving room to get around these laws. Enforcement lacks resources, is inconsistent, and relies too much on an "honour system"*
- *Land-use and water decision making are not integrated. Multi-layer jurisdictional approvals (at municipal and provincial government levels) happen on the same landscape without putting environmental concerns first.*

Lack of political will was identified as a major gap.

Respondents want to see solutions from their governments.



Photo: Jenaya Webb

Public is Not Aware

- *Public awareness is insufficient.* People take water and ecological goods and services for granted. People have little awareness of what is a watershed.
- *Lack of public awareness* on how protection of watersheds will help protect the supply and quality of water in our children's future. Because little to no public awareness, they don't push our politicians to protect watersheds.

Specific Issues

- *Industrial water use* is not held to a high enough standard.
- *Industrial environmental initiatives* are voluntary.
- *Wetlands* are being drained and riparian areas destroyed.
- *Groundwater* understanding and management is inadequate.²
- *Surface water* monitoring is inadequate.
- *Municipal-level decisions* are often made with limited experience and expertise for water protection mandates.
- *Mismanaged watersheds* (e.g., off-highway vehicle use causing erosion and contamination, movement of water between watersheds, mountain pine beetle strategy).
- *Wastewater regulation* allows inappropriate discharges in municipalities.
- *Public engagement* in decision-making processes is limited.
- *Pursuit of profit at all costs* as opposed to looking after public needs.



Photo: Red Deer River, Carla Stevens

Gaps between emerging science/knowledge and watershed planning and between watershed planning and plan implementation leave watershed planning two gaps behind where it should be.

² Groundwater gaps: understanding of surface and groundwater connection; groundwater use; ongoing monitoring, data and, analysis; a common database for quality and quantity of groundwater; abandonment of old wells; and industrial contamination.

What are watershed leaders doing right now?

Before we began to assess how Water Matters might best work with the organizations and citizen leaders, we explored how the respondents spend their time and how they would like to direct their efforts in the future.

Where do respondents devote their time?

Selected activities in which respondents spend between 75 to 100 percent of their time:

- Advocacy action - 15.7% (8 respondents)
- Collaborative action - 15.7% (8)
- Outreach, public education, awareness-building - 7.8% (4)
- Capacity - 5.9% (3)
- Research - 5.9% (3)
- Policy work - 3.9% (2)
- On-the-ground demonstration projects - 2.0% (1)
- Litigation - 2.0% (1)
- Coordinating issue-based campaigns and/or collaborative efforts - 2.0% (1)

Selected activities in which respondents spend between 0 to 25 percent of their time:

- Litigation – 72.5% (37 respondents)
- On-the-ground demonstration projects – 64.7% (33)
- Coordinating issue-based campaigns and/or collaborative efforts - 49.0% (25)
- Policy work - 47.1% (24)
- Capacity building - 45.1% (23)
- Research - 41.2% (21)
- Advocacy action - 39.2% (20)
- Collaborative action - 33.3% (17)
- Outreach, public education, awareness building - 25.5% (13)

Where would respondents like to devote more of their time?³

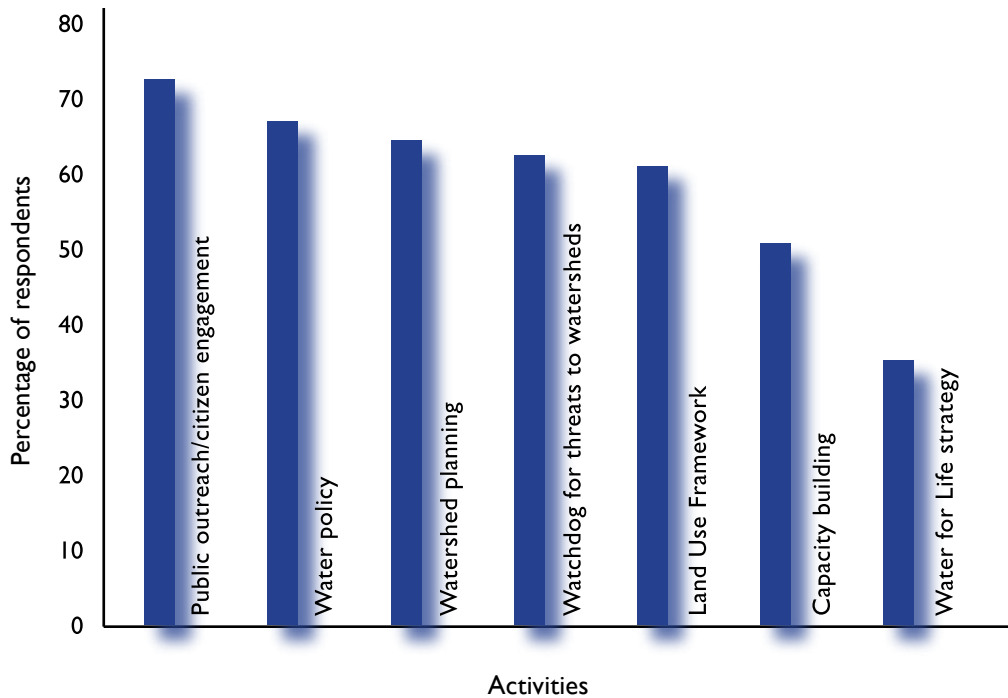
A large percentage (72.5%) of respondents would like to devote more time to public outreach and engagement.

Percentage of respondents who would like to spend more time on each of the following activities:

- Public outreach/citizen engagement – 72.5% (37 respondents)
- Water policy – 66.7% (34)
- Watershed planning – 64.7% (33)
- Watchdog for threats to watersheds – 62.7% (32)
- Land Use Framework – 60.8% (31)
- Capacity building – 51% (26)
- *Water For Life* strategy – 35.3% (18)

³ Some of these activities are activities in which the individual or organization is already involved. More active involvement in these activities is dependent on funding for many respondents.

Respondents who would like to spend more time on each of the following activities:



How might Water Matters best work with organizations and citizen leaders in Alberta?

A central purpose of this survey was to determine where Water Matters should direct its future programs to assist citizen leaders in their work and, more broadly, to improve watershed protection in Alberta.

We asked the respondents to state how helpful specific Water Matters activities would be to their work. Of activities we selected, the percentage of respondents who identified the following activities as helpful to their work is as follows:

- Investigation into issues facing your watershed – 67.3% (33 respondents)
- Water policy analysis – 59.2% (29)
- Capacity building – 55.1% (27)
- Policy or legal advice for your organization – 53.1% (26)
- Information on watersheds (e.g. guides/primers) – 49.0% (24)
- Networking opportunities – 42.9% (21)
- Communications (e.g. media) assistance – 28.6% (14)
- Online seminars – 26.5% (13)

A high percentage of respondents (67.3%) indicated that Water Matters could help them most by investigating issues facing their watersheds.

Of the selected activities, the percentage of respondents who identified the following activities as NOT helpful to their work is as follows:

- Communications assistance – 28.6% (14 respondents)
- Online seminars – 20.4% (10)
- Water policy analysis – 14.3% (7)
- Policy or legal advice for organization – 10.2% (5)
- Capacity building – 10.2% (5)
- Information on watersheds – 8.2% (4)
- Investigation into issues facing your watershed – 8.2% (4)
- Networking opportunities – 6.1% (3)



Photo: Danielle Droitsch

To develop synergies with existing groups and citizen leaders, we should aim to bring groups together on an ongoing basis, rather than in response to crises, including social events.

Suggestions for collaboration among citizen organizations

As Water Matters plans to develop synergies with existing organizations and active citizen leaders, we asked respondents to suggest mechanisms to improve collaboration among organizations.

The key ideas and messages that emerged from the responses are as follows:

- Organizations need the capacity to collaborate (i.e., funding for operation and travel to meetings and workshops, staff, etc.).
- Collaboratives should have a name, a budget for a secretariat and a volunteer coordinator who can be devoted to fundraising and administering the grants. Organizations need to include collaborative initiatives in their workplans, budgets, and funding grant applications.
- Mechanisms are needed to mentor and pass on institutional memory of those long involved in the environmental movement in Alberta and Canada.
- Volunteer-based organizations need increased discipline and tenacity.
- Stakeholders should be brought together in positive ways rather than fighting among themselves.
- Water Matters could provide direction to groups on priority areas/issues where effort is most needed to reduce redundancy among work in the province.
- Coalition sign-on letters and reports allow these letters and reports to have a stronger effect, and they inform people/groups about the issues.
- Shared goals, common ground and understanding, synergies, and shared expertise provide reason to collaborate. Define goals and timelines with regular check-ins.

- Education of the unconverted through media, public service announcements, documentaries, and organized communication for specific audiences make environmental services relevant to people. Communicate to kids because kids have great impact on their parents.
- Shared information allows watershed leaders to capitalize on successes in other parts of the province and for others to move forward more quickly by not reinventing the wheel (e.g., electronic newsletter, an information clearing house online or in office, publicly managed database for water wells, a water network of watershed practitioners, science community, consultants and others, more use of the Alberta Environmental Network Water Caucus, more face-to-face opportunities)
- Improved coordination within *Water for Life* partnership network could help all parties share perspectives and help direct the watershed and land-use agenda of the province. Water Matters could organize a series of summits where organizations could meet to look at the issues and set priorities.
- Creating space for discussion builds cohesion through field trips to talk in tangible surroundings, regular working conferences with citizens and NGOs, face-to-face meetings regionally then more broadly to learn about each other; annual week-long issue-focussed retreats to update and brainstorm, and general forums where coordinated advocacy is possible. Bring groups together on an ongoing basis, rather than in response to crises, including social events.
- Inclusion of Aboriginal peoples and values in collaboratives and deliberations to share perspectives and include traditional values.
- A single group with an interactive website could encompass all organizations concerned about water in the province. Keep website current and easy to read and negotiate including: membership list, government papers and policies, scientific papers, current events calendar, current action, and media articles. Help smaller groups in day-to-day operations, legal matters, and raise money so they can find time working rather than doing administrative tasks.
- Having government pay for advice (fee for service) that is often given freely so as to make the information more highly valued.



Photo: Dave Kalbfleisch

Shared information allows watershed leaders to capitalize on successes in other parts of the province and for others to move forward more quickly by not reinventing the wheel.

What Water Matters activities would watershed leaders value most in their efforts for watershed protection?

Of activities we identified, the percentage of respondents who thought each activity was very important is as follows:

- Create stronger political will for watershed protection – 90.2% (46 respondents)
- Improve government policies on watershed protection – 86.3% (44)
- Build more public awareness for watershed protection – 72.5% (37)
- Engage local government in action-based watershed protection – 68.6% (35)
- Engage citizens in action-based commitments for change – 62.7% (32)
- Improve knowledge transfer among citizen organizations – 56.9% (29)
- Provide research and coordination for multiple organizations – 49% (25)
- Build stronger coalitions among citizen organizations – 49% (25)

What overall direction on Water Matters activities did respondents suggest?

As a final survey question to determine the respondents' overall direction for Water Matters, we asked respondents to provide their thoughts on how Water Matters can help advance watershed protection in Alberta.

The key messages for Water Matters to advance watershed protection were as follows:

- Collaborate and coordinate with other groups, locally and provincially, to exchange information, be allies, build capacity, and so on (28 respondents).
- Raise public and decision makers' awareness through media, working with children, developing education and online tools for teachers with an interactive website, and informing politicians (24).
- Advocate for change and better policy at all levels of government (federal, provincial, municipal) (24)
- Focus on substantive topics such as industrial water use, source water protection, groundwater, water and land integration, and aquatic ecosystem protection (11).
- Facilitate resources (financial, equipment, information, expertise) for groups, including tools and understanding of how to effect change and build capacity for groups to engage (6).
- Be authentic—be truthful, act in the interests of people and environment not self-interest. Walk the talk (4).
- Help integrate economics and environmental decision making (3).
- Act on the survey results (3).
- Include traditional knowledge into our work by including First Nations in our partnerships and on our Board (2).
- Conduct fee-for-service work for government (1).

A key message from respondents was that Water Matters should collaborate and coordinate with other groups, locally and provincially, to exchange information, be allies, build capacity.



Photo: Moose Lake West, Susan Webb

There are clearly many opportunities to collaborate for change, including sharing information and defining shared goals, and raising public and decision maker awareness around watersheds and their protection. We have an exciting future.

Appendix – Survey Questions

1. Are you responding to this survey as an individual citizen or on behalf of an organization?
2. What is the scope of your/your organization's focus? Local, regional, province-wide, or national?
3. Which Alberta watershed(s) is/are the focus of your/your organization's work?
4. Rate the relative importance of the following issues to you/your organization as high, medium, or low.
 - a) Domestic/industry water consumption
 - b) Groundwater
 - c) Aquatic ecosystem health
 - d) Land-use planning
 - e) Riparian protection
 - f) Source water protection
 - g) Water allocation
 - h) Water pollution and water quality
 - i) Watershed planning
 - j) Wetlands
5. What key issues of concern does your organization address?
6. What are the major gaps in watershed protection and programming that you see in Alberta?
7. In your opinion, how does your community or the Alberta public perceive issues of watershed protection?
8. To help us get a sense of how you/your organization actually spends your time, please indicate how much time (approximately) you/your organization spend on the following activities. 0-25%, 25-50%, 50-75%, or 75-100%?
 - a) On-the-ground demonstration projects such as best management practices
 - b) Advocacy action
 - c) Collaborative action
 - d) Litigation
 - e) Capacity building
 - f) Coordinating issue-based campaigns and/or collaborative efforts
 - g) Policy work
 - h) Research
 - i) Outreach, public education, awareness-building

9. Would you like to participate more actively in any of the following areas? YES or NO.

- a) Land use framework
- b) Water policy
- c) *Water for Life*
- d) Watershed planning
- e) Public outreach and/or citizen engagement
- f) Acting as a “watch dog” for threats to watersheds
- g) Capacity building

10. What do you feel are your/your organization’s top three areas of expertise?

11. Water Matters is considering working on the following areas. Please prioritize and state whether the following areas are very important, somewhat important, or not important to you or your organization’s work.

- a) Improve government policies on watershed protection
- b) Create stronger political climate for watershed protection
- c) Build more public awareness for watershed protection
- d) Engage citizens in action-based commitments for change
- e) Engage local government in action-based watershed protection
- f) Providing research and coordination for multiple organizations
- g) Building stronger coalitions among citizen organizations
- h) Improve knowledge transfer among citizens organizations

12. Who are the key partners that work with you to help your/your organization’s activities succeed? Please list.

13. Who are the target audiences of your/your organization’s activities?

- a) Alberta citizens
- b) Federal government
- c) Provincial government
- d) Municipal government
- e) Industry representatives
- f) Media
- g) Other non-governmental organizations

14. What are your suggestions for improving collaboration among citizen-based organizations on watershed issues in Alberta?

15. Please indicate which of the following would be most useful to you/your organization, as very helpful, somewhat helpful, or not helpful:

- a) Networking opportunities
- b) Investigation into issues facing your watershed
- c) Capacity building
- d) Policy or legal advice for your organization
- e) Information on your watershed (e.g., guides/primers)
- f) Communications (e.g. media) assistance
- g) Water policy analysis
- h) Online seminars
- i) Other

16. Please provide us with your thoughts on how Water Matters can help advance the protection of watersheds in Alberta.



Water Matters

As Alberta continues to chart its water management path, strong leadership from an independent non-governmental organization with expertise and resources dedicated to province-wide watershed protection is vital. Established in October 2007, Water Matters is a champion for watershed protection in Alberta.

Visit us online at www.water-matters.org