

Provincial Support for Watershed Management

Moved by: City of St. Albert

Seconded by: TBD

WHEREAS the goals and objectives of watershed management plans under the Water for Life Strategy include a safe, secure drinking water supply, healthy aquatic ecosystems, reliable quality water supplies for a sustainable economy, flood and drought preparation, and overall watershed ecological health;

WHEREAS the Government of Alberta promotes the management of water to achieve these goals through the Wetland Policy, the *Water Act* and the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act*;

WHEREAS achieving these goals requires an understanding of, and responses to, diverse impacts from agriculture and livestock, road salt usage, vegetation clearing, development pressures, irrigation, septic concerns, and shoreline modifications;

WHEREAS municipalities develop and apply watershed management recommendations into their municipal planning documents and operations to achieve these goals, partially to address provincial regulatory, planning, enforcement, monitoring, and reporting gaps, especially for municipalities not directly situated on major rivers such as the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers;

WHEREAS there is a lack of provincial resources for municipalities to achieve the goals of the Water for Life Strategy without municipally-funded services and operations such as water quality monitoring, watershed ecological health assessments, and biodiversity assessments;

WHEREAS Alberta is currently experiencing drought conditions, with the Province initiating water-sharing negotiations and establishing a new drought advisory committee, necessitating increased attention to watershed and cumulative effects management;

IT IS THEREFORE RESOLVED THAT Alberta Municipalities advocate to the Government of Alberta to direct resources to bolster the application of the *Water Act* and the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* through increased enforcement, data collection and information sharing with municipalities, and biodiversity assessments for municipalities located on smaller rivers and subwatersheds – including but not limited to engagement with municipalities on *Water Act* permit approvals to enable alignment with municipal statutory plans – to achieve the goals of the Water for Life Strategy;

BACKGROUND:

The City of St. Albert, along with over a dozen other municipalities and First Nations, are all members of the Sturgeon River Watershed Alliance (SRWA) – a municipally-supported watershed stewardship group established for the Sturgeon River Watershed, which works in partnership with the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance (NSWA). The SRWA focuses on watershed planning to inform and align municipal policies and planning, ensure access to safe drinking water, promote healthy aquatic ecosystems, and enable a reliable, quality water supply for the economy – objectives that align directly with the Provincial Water for Life Strategy.

As the Sturgeon River is a precipitation-fed river, the use of the surrounding land has an increased impact on the quality and quantity of water in the watershed when compared to glacier-fed rivers like the North Saskatchewan and Bow Rivers. Whereas greater resources such as access to data on water quality, impact assessments, and enforcement of *Water Act* regulations is available to municipalities situated on major glacier-fed rivers, municipalities situated on smaller tributary rivers often do not have access to the same resources.

The priority issues in the Sturgeon River Watershed are:

- Poor water quality due to excess nutrient and sediment inputs;
- Low water levels in late Summer and Fall in rivers, creeks and lakes;
- Impacts from extensive agriculture and rapid urbanization;
- Loss of wetlands, riparian areas and other environmentally sensitive areas.

Precipitation-fed rivers have increased risk of being affected by extreme weather events and climate change, due to the lack of glacial fed headwaters; they have lower resiliency to drought and are prone to flooding in high precipitation weather events. While they are often not a source of drinking water, they can be used to attenuate waste, support a healthy aquatic ecosystem, and are tributaries to larger glacier-fed rivers like the North Saskatchewan River – the health of such tributary rivers directly impacts the state of the major rivers into which they eventually discharge.

Furthermore, the permitted and unpermitted loss of wetlands has resulted in low ecological resiliency, with major impacts to ecosystems and economies related to highly fluctuating water levels. Oftentimes, *Water Act* approvals that affect wetlands are granted without significant municipal consultations, resulting in conflicts with municipal statutory plans that guide the management of wetlands and watersheds within their boundaries.

These issues are not being adequately addressed through provincial resources and oversight. Municipalities situated on smaller rivers must make decisions based on incomplete or missing data critical to making informed decisions – data that may otherwise be available to municipalities situated on larger, glacier-fed rivers. As a result of this gap, sources of pollution are often not quantified or monitored, and can impact surface and groundwater quality of subwatersheds, and by extension, major glacier-fed rivers to which they are tributaries.

Assuming the work of ecological monitoring to address the gap in provincial resources, oversight and enforcement is expensive and requires specialized knowledge and expertise to complete tasks such as water quality testing and biodiversity assessments – such costs can be prohibitive for smaller municipalities. Furthermore, *Water Act* approvals are often granted to private landowners without determining the impacts of such decisions on the municipality, their statutory plans, or their water management issues and priorities.

Through allocating more resources to the application and enforcement of provincial water policies and legislation for tributary rivers and subwatersheds, and through engagement with municipalities on *Water Act* approvals, the Government of Alberta can provide the tools required to ensure the objectives of the Water for Life Strategy can be adequately met at every source and tributary of Alberta's water supply.

ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES COMMENTS: