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Input sought for watershed management

Courtney Whalen

Posted 4 days ago

How do you form a management plan for an area of around 57,000 square kilometres that covers the province from east to west?

The North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance (NSWA) is working out the answer as it moves forward with drafting an integrated watershed management plan to guide practices in the future.

As one of 10 Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils in the province the alliance operates under Alberta's Water for Life Strategy and has been mandated to come up with an integrated watershed management plan.

NSWA executive director Dave Trew calls it a "broad scale water resources plan" that has to knit together not only the differing geographies covered by the watershed, but also the accompanying land uses, industry uses and layers of regulation including those from small municipalities, large cities, the provincial and federal government.

"We have to come up with an implementation model that will work," said Trew.

In order to do that the watershed alliance needs to consult with the stakeholders who would be part of that implementation.

That's why the watershed alliance has begun meeting with stakeholders from the three main regions in the watershed.

Last week the Brazeau County and the NSWA welcomed stakeholders from industry sectors like agriculture, oil and gas and forestry and municipal government, among others to a day-long regional forum in Drayton Valley.

"Our main focus is to hear what our stakeholders have to say," NSWA vice president Pat Alexander told forum participants last week.

Participants were asked to discuss approaches to addressing watershed issues, what watershed issues they have, and, after an overview of the integrated watershed management plan, were asked to give feedback on the principles the plan is being built on and the implications of those for the region.

"The North Saskatchewan [River] is a pretty complicated basin in all the things we need to look at," Trew told the participants.

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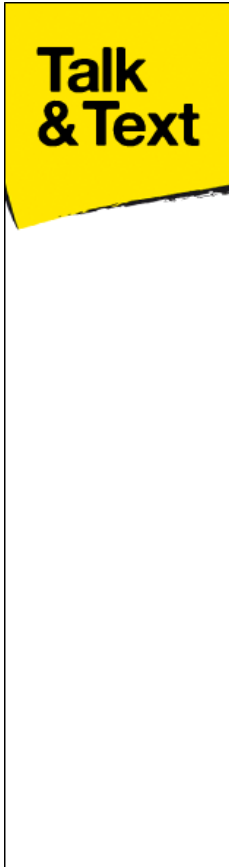
Watershed management isn't a new concept, said Trew. It's been in practice across Canada and other parts of the world for a long time. So when looking at creating the plan the challenge isn't in the management practices themselves.

"It's how are we going to do it and who's going to do it," said Trew.

That's why the input from different industry sectors and regulating bodies is integral to creating a plan that can then be forwarded to the province.

"The implementation of the plan requires many sectors," said Trew.

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Throughout the information forums that are scheduled the overall goals of the integrated plan will remain the same.

"How those goals are implemented will probably evolve over the next 12 months," he said.

The NSWA has previously met with rural municipalities, including Brazeau County, and similar forums will be held in the other two regions in the watershed.

As growth and industry use increases, the main goal of the watershed alliance is to see no further degradation of the North Saskatchewan River and its watershed.

"We're not making any more water," he said, noting the demands on what we do have will inevitably increase over time.

The discussion forums allow the watershed alliance an opportunity to hear what stakeholders are already doing, so those practices can be melded into the integrated plan if appropriate.

"In the forestry industry, oil and gas and agriculture, there's already a lot of good things happening," said Alexander.

A finalized plan with recommendations for implementation is expected to be prepared for next spring.

For more information on the NSWA and the integrated watershed management plan visit www.nswa.ab.ca.

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