

The Alberta Environmental Farm Plan Company

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Water for Life: The coming challenge for agriculture

AEFP water seminar
tackles agriculture's
critical role in water
sustainability



Lorne Taylor

Water has rapidly moved to a frontline position in the eyes of the Canadian public and agriculture must be more proactive in defining sustainability of this critical issue. If it doesn't, others will on its behalf.

That was the simple take-home message from the *Water for Life* seminar in Red Deer recently, sponsored by the Alberta Environmental Farm Plan Company (AEFP).

The seminar brought together key people in agriculture directly affected by the issue. It featured as keynote speaker former Alberta Minister of the Environment, Lorne Taylor. A rancher, academic, now consultant, he was chief architect of the *Water for Life* strategy launched and developed under his watch as Minister.

His "state of the union" address on water strategy was complemented by grassroots perspectives from three producers representing all regions of the province. Then the panel faced challenging discussion from the audience.

The Alberta process

Taylor outlined the Alberta *Water for Life* process, saying it is critical that Alberta's agriculture and food industry understand the strategic water process is underway, what has been accomplished to date, how it is being implemented and the consequences.

The process started simply, he says. A small group of people drawn from several areas of society drafted a core policy. It went through several levels of refinement, including through a broad group of people with experience in water management. It was eventually

posted on the Internet for input by the public, and, Taylor says, received huge interest.

The resulting policy document will influence the way water is dealt with for years to come in Alberta.

Key results

Three main outcomes came out of the process, says Taylor.

Safe and secure drinking water. First was safe, secure drinking water for both rural and urban. "That's quite an issue," he says. "There are many private systems and what is the role of government in regulating them? Should urban and rural have the same quality of water? Can you afford that? How do you guarantee quality drinking water? All of those are questions that will have to be dealt with."

Healthy aquatic systems. People want healthy aquatic systems but there are no definitions about what those are, says Taylor. The challenge for agriculture is whether it is going to let organizations like Greenpeace or the Sierra Club set those definitions.

Reliable water supplies for a sustainable economy. "This is a significant issue," says Taylor. "We need a sustainable economy. Should the oil industry be allowed to pump potable water down holes to recover oil? What is sustainable? To me that's not sustainable. How do we define a sustainable economy and how do we get people to buy into that definition? Do we want agriculture in this province or not? What happens when the natural gas is gone?" >>

Continued...

Implementing *Water for Life*

How does this policy get implemented? The *Water for Life* strategy is quite clear, says Taylor.

Research. First is development of a research model. “We don’t have good research on water in Alberta. We know the Milk River Basin, we know the Hinton Basin. Other than that we have very little knowledge of groundwater resources or quality.

“The question is how much water do we allow to be drawn out of the system? Do we allow big farms to go in and sink wells? When do we say enough is enough? We have to ensure we have the knowledge and until we have the research base you can’t say enough is enough. You have to do the research.”

While research will solve the problem, there has to be incentive for companies and government to put money into research, he says. “If oil companies can’t use potable water to pump down a hole to get more oil or natural gas out, they’ll figure a way to get \$12 per gigajoule of gas or \$60 per barrel oil.”

Partnerships. The second key part of implementation is partnerships. “The Bow River Basin Council is recognized around the world as one of the best models of water management because they’ve got agriculture representatives, city councillors, environmental groups, all sitting around the table managing the Bow River. And the Bow River is recognized as one of the best trout fishing areas in the world. That’s a direct result of the Bow River Basin Council.”



Conservation. Third part of implementation is conservation. The provincial water council will set the conservation target and Taylor’s guess is that it will be between 30 and 35 percent. “That will affect everybody,” says Taylor.

Impact for agriculture

What does all this mean for agriculture? Taylor cites four specifics.

Cost of water. By 2007 Alberta Environment will have a study done that will indicate the cost of water - on the farm, in the irrigation district. “I don’t think anyone knows or realizes the cost of water and cost drives conservation,” he says. “In 2007 or 2008 Albertans are going to have to make a decision because the numbers will be out there. Are we prepared to start paying the cost of water?”

“If I look at irrigated crop mixes in Alberta, we grew cereals and forages at 25 and 45 percent. Is that proper use of irrigated water? Only 12 and 18 percent speciality crops and oilseed

crops? You may not be growing forages and grass on irrigated land.”

Cost will drive a whole lot of issues, says Taylor. Current methods of irrigation are not efficient and the industry has to show leadership to use water in the most efficient way.

Surface water quality. The quality of surface water is going down, says Taylor and part of that is due to agriculture. There’s fertilizer residue in water. Cattle walk and wade in streambeds, even though Alberta Agriculture research shows that if cattle are fenced out and water pumped to a trough, cattle put on enough extra weight to pay the cost of the pumping system within two years, he says.

Basin management. This will affect agriculture because no longer will people be able to manage it by themselves. There will be a broader constituency and broader input to management of river basins because it affects urban Alberta, the aquatic system and the entire spectrum of environmental issues.

Restricted water use. There will be restricted water use because there is not enough water to meet demands, says Taylor. It’s a huge issue and it’s time the government stepped up and did something.

Alberta needs more storage, he says. “When water comes to us in the spring runoff we have to figure out a way to keep more of it. Otherwise 20 or 30 years from now, Calgary won’t have enough drinking water.”



Course of action

What should agriculture do about all of this?

Be directly involved in the process through knowledge and research, says Taylor. An example is coal bed methane. There is a lot of water in coal bed methane and the challenge is how to access coal bed methane without destroying the aquifers.




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– Lorne Taylor

“Is agriculture taking a position on this? We will have a well every 10 acres because they are so shallow. If you don't have a policy you won't have water,” he says. “Go down to Montana or to Wyoming and see what they did in the Wyoming Basin. They completely dewatered the whole basin. When those wells are gone, agriculture can't go back there. Is that what we want for Alberta? I think not.”

There needs to be a research and knowledge base on coal bed methane, he says. “Agriculture needs to be involved. It's hard to take time to go to meetings, but guess what? Environmental groups always have time to go to meetings. Greenpeace has time to go to meetings. The Paralegal Defence Fund has time to go to meetings. Agriculture has to be involved.”

Rural Alberta doesn't have the votes anymore and agriculture has to be proactive. It needs to develop a response to this water strategy, then go to government and show how it will participate, how agriculture can help government drive water policy. 

Producers tackle water sustainability

Different regions, different perspectives, but similar goals.

Highlight comments from three producers.

Peace Country challenges. Mills Anderson, Rycroft

“It's just as important for Peace Country farmers to get water off the land as it is for irrigation farmers to get water onto the land. I'm not talking about wetland drainage here. This is a significant gap in the water management plan set out under the *Water for Life* strategy.”

“Agricultural producers manage, maintain and improve rural and natural land for the benefit of society as a whole, at their expense. Other countries and jurisdictions have had economic recognition for such stewardship for years. Economic instruments would be more effective than regulation.”



The irrigation perspective. Keith Francis, Taber

“What does a 30 percent increase in efficiency and productivity really mean? At the start of the *Water for Life* policy we had already achieved 30 percent improvement. Irrigators today use a third less water than they did 10 years ago. Finding another 30 percent is not likely possible from a straight efficiency point of view.”

“Economic solutions have to be more than water pricing. Simplistic solutions can produce unintended results. The irrigation sector supports more than 80,000 acres of critical wetland habitat and important recreational areas. Do we understand the difference between cost, price and value? Do we know how to weight non-economic values?”



Battling urban sprawl. Joe Zink, Calgary

“The *Water for Life* strategy is light on monitoring. I'm big on monitoring and I think that funding by the government of Alberta is quite inadequate. On the Elbow we start monitoring the end of April. But runoff starts the beginning of April. There's no reason we can't monitor all the little streams year-round to get a baseline. And there's no reason we can't get this data online within a week or two. We have to wait for two or three years to get it and by then you can't correlate it to the rainfall or local events that could make sense of it.”

“There's a huge difference in water users and it's not just a matter of money. It's time and availability to go to meetings. Farmers are working every day, but others have time and they love to go to meetings and they are well positioned to get exactly what they want...In many watersheds we're going to see water move into the hands of those who can afford to pay more.”

“The City of Calgary can't get water use down to an inch a week. Any farmer would tell you they'd be happy to get an inch a week.”



Highlights, AEFP's first annual general meeting

AEFP's first annual general meeting drew strong attendance from corporate partners, industry, government, media and others interested in agriculture and food sustainability.

■ **John Kolk**, Board Chairman and Picture Butte area producer: "The annual general meeting was an important milestone for the company. It was an open meeting with industry, government, media and others in attendance. That public discussion of our progress reinforces that we will operate in an open business environment"

■ **Mike Slomp**, Executive Director, AEFP says more than 3,500 producers have now completed Environmental Farm Plans. More complete details of AEFP's business progress is available in the 2004/2005 Annual Report, which is on the company Web site at www.albertaEFP.com.

■ New directors elected to the AEFP board include **Somerlee Bennett**, Assistant Fieldman for the County of Wainright and **Dennis McKerracher**, pork producer and a veteran industry player at the local, provincial and national level in his industry.

■ Retiring directors, **Paul Hodgman**, Assistant General Manager of Alberta Pork and **Tim Dietzler**, Agriculture Fieldman for the Municipal District of Rock View, were thanked for their support and direction.



John Kolk



Mike Slomp



Somerlee Bennett



Dennis McKerracher



Tim Dietzler



Paul Hodgman



Audience Member

For more information

If you would like more information on any aspect of the Alberta Environmental Farm Plan Company, check the AEFP Web site at www.albertaEFP.com or contact the AEFP office. We welcome your comments, questions and suggestions.

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