

**Water North Coalition
Strategic Plan 2016–2018**

Introduction

As northern Alberta's water and wastewater labour force ages, and its infrastructure does the same, northern municipalities are increasingly challenged to deliver reliable water and wastewater services.

The Water North Coalition (WNC) was formed in 2014 to build upon work completed through the Closer to Home (C2H) initiative¹ and to create a forum to address the water and wastewater challenges facing northern communities.

Voting membership is open to all northern municipalities, First Nations and Métis Settlements. Non-voting membership is open to water and wastewater commissions and professionals, provincial and federal governments, rural water and wastewater co-operatives, and owners and operators. Strategic advice and administrative support are provided by the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC).²

The *Water North Coalition Strategic Plan 2016–2018* was developed by both voting and non-voting members. It builds on the findings of a 2015 WNC Needs Assessment Survey³, and focuses on four priorities: advocacy; public education; recruitment and retention; and training.

SWOT Analysis

The following are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats identified by WNC members in developing the strategic plan.

Strengths

- An open and diverse membership from all of northern Alberta provides WNC with wisdom and experience.
- The goals of WNC, as set forth in its mission, vision and principles (listed below), are held in common by its members, and this makes the WNC a strong voice for the north when raising issues, networking or lobbying on specific issues.
- Sponsorship from the NADC benefits the WNC through the provision of administrative services and a well-developed approach to northern issues.

1 <http://aamdc.com/advocacy/member-bulletins/member-bulletin-archive/663-closer-to-home-initiative-new-water-and-wastewater-toolkit-now-available>

2 Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC), a provincial advisory body mandated to advance the development of the north. www.nadc.ca

3 <http://www.nadc.ca/water-coaliton.asp>

Weaknesses

- The priorities of the coalition's members vary and are often split between access to a water source and quality of a water source. These differences can appear between regions, the largest being the Peace/Slave River and the Athabasca River Basin regions.
- WNC lacks consistent participation from its members; the First Nations and Métis Settlements, in particular, are under-represented. Support from the NADC could also be perceived as a weakness, if it is not a certainty for the future.
- WNC can be slow to respond to challenges that arise because of its relatively large size and the diverse interests of its membership.

Opportunities

- The potential in partnerships, particularly with post-secondary institutions, training providers, and private industry, all of which can expand their services for water and wastewater management, as well as partnership with other organizations like the Alberta Rural Development Network.
- Other possible collaborations include sharing of operators, contacts, agreements for service, and other resources.
- Growing public realization that there is a finite amount of potable water means there is growing public support for better stewardship.
- Align opportunities for advocacy with changes at the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government. For example, a particular position to advocate could be reduced privatization.

Threats

- Viable water and wastewater systems are vulnerable to an aging workforce, increased levels of certification and regulation, and remoteness of locations.
- WNC is vulnerable to a divided response to those issues, and a subsequent lack of participation and commitment.
- Loss of funding and support from NADC, government and stakeholders, most probably in conjunction with a continued or prolonged economic downturn.

The Plan

The mission, vision and guiding principles were developed by members when the WNC was first formed.

Mission

To find and implement northern solutions to water sourcing and water challenges through the following priorities:

- Advocacy
- Public education
- Recruitment and retention
- Training

Some of these priorities are within the sole jurisdiction of municipalities, while others require collaboration with other levels of government. For example, the day-to-day operations of water and wastewater facilities are the responsibility of municipalities, while public education about our water resources is often shared by all three levels of government.

Vision

The WNC seeks to ensure, through collaboration, that sustainable water systems are available to every northern community.

Guiding Principles

The WNC will:

- Share information on water and wastewater regulations and responsibilities.
- Work collaboratively with members and partners.
- Identify emergent workforce needs.
- Advocate for “made in the north” solutions and funding for training, education, recruitment and retention, and succession planning for municipal water/wastewater personnel.

Priorities

The WNC will focus its attention on the following four organizational priorities over the next three years.

Priority #1: Advocacy

As summarized in its guiding principles, the WNC will advocate for “made in the north” solutions to water and wastewater problems.

How will we advocate?³

1.1 Clarify the WNCs definition of advocacy

Actions:

- Ensure all WNC members clearly understand what we mean by advocacy and how we intend to influence decisions related to water and wastewater issues.
- Determine whether members are fully supportive of an “advocacy” role.
- Select a spokesperson for the group.
- Clarify messages (see 1.2.2. on Page 6).

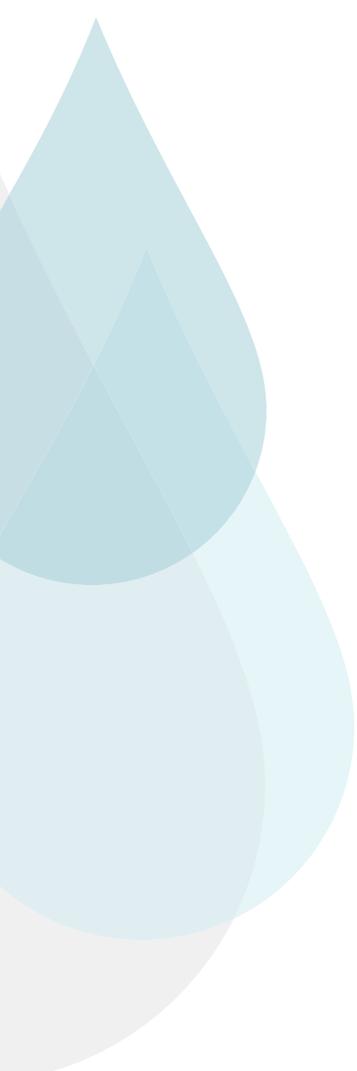
1.2 Funding

1.2.1 Pursue more funding for northern water and wastewater systems, including those found in hamlets, towns and rural northern communities.

Actions:

- Research potential funders and their priorities, including those of governments and industry groups.
- Develop a communication package about the WNC to educate and inform potential funders.
- Raise the profile of the WNC at events like those held by the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties (AAMDC), the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA), and industry forums.
- Submit government funding requests and follow up accordingly.

³ The strategies under the four priorities are ranked in order of priority.

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- 1.2.2 Develop a funding model; a strategy to obtain reliable funding that can be used when submitting funding requests to the provincial and federal governments. It will: describe the need for stable funding for infrastructure and treatment upgrades; and reflect the real costs of operating water and wastewater systems.

Actions:

- Create an advocacy subcommittee of the WNC.
 - Develop a strategy and messages that define needs, priorities, and solutions; and emphasize regional collaboration.
 - Ensure strategy/messages are completed by March 2016 to support funding requests in the 2017 fiscal year.
 - Provide cost sharing information.
 - Determine availability of administrative support from the NADC and whether an external consultant is required to support the process.
- 1.2.3 Continue to advocate for predictable and sustainable funding for water and wastewater systems (e.g., Water for Life and the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP)).

1.3 Governance

- 1.3.1 Advocate for more municipal participation in federal and provincial reviews of legislation, regulations, and standards related to water and wastewater policies.

Actions:

- Engage with AUMA, AAMDC, and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) on lobbying activities.
 - Keep updated about developments at other levels of government and, in turn, keep other levels of government updated about issues and priorities related to northern water and wastewater.
 - Advocate for revisiting and updating of the Water for Life strategy on a regular basis.
- 1.3.2 Advocate for better communications between government departments to reduce the instances of new regulations without commensurate funding.
- 1.3.3 Advocate for less downloading of water and wastewater responsibilities to municipal governments, and promote more inspections and support to ensure regulations are closely adhered to.

1.4 Aboriginal Communities

Ensure First Nations and Métis Settlements have the information they need to fully engage in WNC activities, if and when they so choose.

1.5 Collaboration

Take steps to increase regional and municipal participation in the WNC, and to engage with utilities.

Priority #2: Public Education

Those participating in the WNC survey viewed the general public to have lower levels of water literacy than leadership in their communities. They also believed their own communities did not do a good job of facilitating water literacy.

How will we educate the public?

2.1 Outreach and Programming

Use the expertise of WNC members and stakeholders to develop a public education strategy and related materials. Public information will focus on: the cost of operating water and wastewater systems, with safety being the primary focus; and conservation and the need to protect the primary source of Alberta's water (80 per cent of the province's water comes from the north).

Actions:

- Use visual aids as a quick reference for schools and career fairs.
- Use print materials – county newsletters, door knockers, pamphlets, brochures, utility bills – as well as social media tools to promote cost and conservation.
- Host town hall meetings.
- Provide communication materials that explain the process of source to tap, i.e., where does your water come from?
- Encourage the provincial government to develop and air public service announcements related to the importance of water to communities.
- Underscore the relative value and cost of water and wastewater systems as compared to other services like telephone services.
- Provide information on alternative forms of delivery and payment like private vs public, and meter pay.
- Promote conservation methods like low-flow fixtures.

2.2 Leadership Training

In addition to educating the general public, municipal councils will be educated about the importance of sustainable water and wastewater systems.

Action:

- Ensure funding for mandatory training is available.

Priority #3: Recruitment and Retention

Along with the general workforce, Alberta's water and wastewater operators are aging. The WNC survey found that the greatest barriers to recruiting and retaining qualified operators were pay grade and work location, followed by education and training.

How will we recruit and retain water and wastewater operators?

3.1 Share Resources

Small communities may only need part-time water and wastewater operators; agreements could be reached to share staff across communities.

Actions:

- Keep a log of each community's infrastructure and staff capabilities.
- Develop a shared service agreement for members to use and help protect against liability.
- Set training and orientation guidelines to promote smooth crossover of shared staff from one location to another.
- Develop an incentive program to encourage and reward municipalities that participate and promote shared service.
- Coordinate training to allow smaller communities to have easier more cost-effective access to training.
- Conduct a wage survey of members and make comparatives available to WNC members.

3.2 Compensation and Incentives

Because smaller communities have to compete with larger communities and the private sector for water and wastewater operators, consideration will be given to establishing more competitive pay scales, enhancing benefit packages, and providing bonuses to retain staff.

3.3 Marketing and Communication

Increase awareness of career opportunities and market the position of water and wastewater operator as a viable and stable career path.

Actions:

- Take advantage of the current availability of labour (due to low oil prices) to recruit and retain more water and wastewater operators.
- Offer more flexible work arrangements; possibly using retirees to provide staff relief.
- Participate in trade shows, career fairs, facility tours, and competitions aimed at encouraging students to consider careers as water and wastewater operators.
- Offer summer employment opportunities to students interested in becoming water and wastewater operators.
- Encourage more women to become water and wastewater operators.

3.4 Attract Local Operators

Take steps to attract local residents – those with roots in the community – to become water and wastewater operators.

Actions:

- Promote water and wastewater operator as a career at local trade shows, career fairs and during facility tours.
- Train interested local residents to maintain water and wastewater systems within the community.

3.5 Career Advancement

Provide higher level training opportunities to those interested in becoming water and wastewater operators.

Actions:

- Hold training sessions in established northern facilities.
- Expand the scope of recruitment by establishing standards and certification.
- Use distance learning to help train and recruit. Support the assignment of Continuing Education Units (CEUs) to reflect this learning experience.

Priority #4: Training

Ongoing training is critical to the work of water and wastewater operators. However, the number of hours worked and access to training in rural and remote locations may hinder operators from upgrading or continuing their education.

How will we ensure water and wastewater operators have the proper training?

4.1 Increase Accessibility to Training

4.1.1 Ensure there are a variety of venues for training including: conference; classroom; mobile; and online and home study opportunities.

4.1.2 Encourage the formation of training partnerships.

Action:

- Get stakeholders together to consider the creation of a certified regional training centre staffed by certified instructors.

4.1.3 Encourage the recruitment and development of relief workers so water and wastewater operators can take additional training when needed.

Actions:

- Train water and wastewater operators to operate plants in other communities; both the trainer and trainee could earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for their participation.
- Engage Alberta Environment and Parks in this process.
- Use a coaching and mentoring course for certification of trainers.
- Provide a listing of certified support workers to neighbouring communities.
- Apply for a Alberta Community Partnership grant to develop a governing and operating model for training purposes.

4.2 Awareness

4.2.1 Promote training opportunities.

Action:

- Develop an electronic and hardcopy training manual for the north, using existing training materials as a foundation.

4.2.2 Encourage training of municipal councils on the strategic importance of the Water for Life strategy.

Actions:

- Provide training through AAMDC and AUMA.
- Add a module to the Elected Officials Education Program; recruit technical experts to assist in development as necessary.

4.3 National Certification

- Engage Alberta Environment and Parks regarding national certification to standardize training to enhance the status of the profession, and to enable more interprovincial recruitment.
- Review and make recommendations regarding the certification process for water and wastewater operators in the north to ensure it is not unnecessarily lengthy (i.e., the length of time to achieve Level Three/Four certification).

4.4 Improve Training

Encourage more practical training for water and wastewater operators; ensure training better reflects the demands of the job as well as technological advances in water and wastewater management.

4.5 Career Development

- Seek expansion of CAREERS Next Generation training to all high schools to qualify individuals to perform as Level One water and wastewater operators when graduating from high school.
- Encourage more internships (that offer dual credit for experience gained) and co-op learning opportunities.

Next Steps

The WNC membership will form sub-committees to address key priority areas and support the WNC's vision of ensuring that through collaboration, sustainable water and wastewater systems are available to every northern community.