

Water strategy promoted for province

BY JEREMY WARREN, THE STARPHOENIX MAY 28, 2012

Saskatchewan should look to its northern neighbour for inspiration when the provincial government develops its own comprehensive water stewardship plan, says the co-author of a new report on Canadian water resources.

The Northwest Territories recently established a water strategy that consolidated government, industry, First Nation and public interests into a plan that will guide water policy not just in hydrology but throughout government departments and in provincial-territorial negotiations. Saskatchewan would be wise to follow a similar path as it develops its own strategy, said Bob Sandford, co-chair of the Forum for Leadership on Water and a fellow at the University of Saskatchewan Centre for Hydrology.

"It's become a foundational document around which much else is beginning to revolve," he said, adding that Saskatchewan, if there is the political will, can do the same.

"I am optimistic that Saskatchewan will take full advantage of the world-class scientific capacity that exists at its two universities to craft a water strategy for the province that will address existing problems and position it to manage its water resources in service of the economy and the environment well into the future."

As water resources are stressed by environmental changes and industrial use, water strategies are important for governments that want to balance growing populations and economies with stagnant or decreasing access to usable water, Sandford said.

But, as Sandford found out during a 16-city tour examining Canadian water issues, that understanding is hard to come by.

"I haven't seen a significant shift in attitudes of government or other sectors in Saskatchewan in terms of their understanding of the importance of water security," he said.

"But that understanding is coming, and it will come a great deal faster as a result of having a great deal of expertise in the province."

Sandford's tour last fall stopped in Saskatoon and Regina and featured local experts, including several prominent U of S researchers, talking about regional water security issues. The tour culminated in a 42-page report released last week that compiles the local issues. Cross-Canada Checkup: A Canadian Perspective on Our Water Future was written with help from researchers from the University of Victoria POLIS project and Simon Fraser University.

In Saskatchewan, flooding and droughts - sometimes in the same year, Sandford noted - have

caused millions of dollars in damage and economic losses. Expanding agricultural and mining industries are thirsty for water, as is the natural resource development in Alberta in a water basin that feeds Saskatchewan. That all causes several problems, Sandford said. Groundwater contamination is a growing concern, and access to clean water is threatened by early effects of climate change and a changing physical landscape, he said.

"We are continuing to manage our water resources as if the hydrological patterns are the same as they were 50 years ago and we're beginning to understand, and you saw this in Saskatchewan and Manitoba with the flooding last year, that the old methods are no longer valid," Sandford said.

A provincial water strategy should take into account the changes in hydrology in a way that accommodates environmental concerns and economic growth, he added.

"We have to start managing better to ensure our standard of living now is available to us in the future," said Sandford, who serves as Canadian chair of the United Nations International Water for Life Decade.

Enhanced water conservation policies, including incentives for private industry, are an important part of a new water strategy as is improved hydrology monitoring, Sandford said. Governments should also be encouraging technological advances in agriculture and resource extraction that promote efficiency and reduce dependence on water use and chemicals, he added.

"This takes time and we need to get ahead of the problem before it gets ahead of us," Sandford said.

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