



Bringing New Issues to the Alberta Water Council

The Alberta Water Council's mission is to be a stakeholder partnership that provides leadership, expertise and advocacy, to engage and empower individuals, organizations, business and governments to achieve the outcomes of the *Water for Life* strategy. The Council advises the Alberta Government, stakeholders and the public on effective water management practices and solutions to water issues, as well as on priorities for water research.

The Council was initially established as an advisory body to the Government of Alberta, and, as a Ministerial Committee, was asked by the Minister of Environment to provide advice on several specific matters, which it did.

With the transition to an independent organization, the Council needed to develop a clear process to determine how it would set priorities for addressing important water issues. Priority issues are normally identified in one of two ways:

1. During its regular strategic planning cycle, the board identifies existing and emerging issues that fit within its mandate, or
2. The board accepts a statement of opportunity from a party that is affected by or has an interest in water issues.

A statement of opportunity has two functions:

1. It is a tool that enables interested parties, including Members of the Council, to bring forward issues between strategic planning cycles.
2. As part of its strategic planning activities, the board may ask that a statement of opportunity be developed to further clarify and define a priority issue.

Strategic Planning

During discussions about priorities, individual board members provide their own insights on important existing and emerging water issues, as well as issues that have been identified by their stakeholder groups. The result is a list of ideas that the board can then prioritize by assessing them and considering how to address them in light of the human and financial resources available. The board reviews and assesses its priorities on an ongoing basis, which enables the Water Council to anticipate issues and think about ways to deal with them in a proactive manner.

Many factors influence the board's strategic planning and prioritization work. If, as a result of its priority setting discussions, the board decides that the Council should become involved in an issue, it can form a working group to further clarify the issue and develop draft terms of reference for a project or it can invite a statement of opportunity from a stakeholder group(s). The first step following acceptance of a statement of opportunity is still the formation of a working group.

Statements of Opportunity

Statements of opportunity can also be presented to the board by stakeholders on their own initiative. Statements of opportunity are a way for parties affected by or interested in water issues to request the Water Council's involvement in resolving the issue. A statement of opportunity, which is first submitted to the executive director for initial screening, should clearly and concisely describe the issue, why it is a concern, and how it fits within the Council's mandate. Statements of opportunity from stakeholder groups can be submitted at any time; they should indicate who the client is for the outcome and should include the following sections:

- Background on the issue and why it is important
- Why it is appropriate for the Council to work on it
- How the issue aligns with the Council's core business, goals, and mission
- The expected benefits of the Council's involvement in the issue
- Potential stakeholders who would be involved in developing terms of reference for the project.
- How timeliness of response would affect the issue.

Initial Screening and Assessment of the Statement of Opportunity

(a) Conduct Initial Screening

After receiving a statement of opportunity, the executive director reviews the material and conducts an initial screening to ensure the statement of opportunity and the issue(s) it describes meet the basic requirements for Water Council involvement.

This step ensures that (a) the Council is the appropriate agency to deal with the issue, and (b) the statement addresses the criteria the board will use in deciding whether the topic should become a Council priority. During this step, the executive director may determine that the issue should be addressed in a different way; for example, it should be referred to an existing government department or agency with a mandate to address the issue, the issue requires enforcement of existing regulations or what is needed is research to gain a better understanding of the issue.

The executive director considers a number of factors in deciding if the Council is the most appropriate agency to address the issue, including whether the issue falls within the mandate of an existing agency; if it does, the party preparing the statement of opportunity will be directed to that agency. The executive director also considers the following:

1. It represents a strategic opportunity to advance the goals and directions of the *Water for Life* strategy.
2. Does the statement of opportunity call for a strategic approach to the issue?
3. Is the issue being raised a provincially significant one, or does it affect multiple major basins?
4. Do many stakeholders have an interest in resolving the issue?

If the answers to these questions are “yes”, then it is likely to be an appropriate issue for the board to consider. As part of the initial screening, the executive director may clarify any specific process matters or concerns, which will vary from case to case.

The outcome of this work is a report to the board from the executive director, which provides the results of the initial screening and advises the board on the “fit” of the issue with the Council’s mandate and if resources are available to pursue the issue.

(b) Board Assessment

If the issue appears to be suitable for further exploration by the Council, the statement of opportunity, along with the report from the executive director, is presented to the board. The board then makes a more substantive assessment by reviewing the information and assessing it against the criteria listed below to decide if an issue falls within its purview:

- There is a potential risk of damage to: the environment, human health, the economy or the resource base.
- The issue is province-wide, insofar as there are numerous occurrences over extended time and area, and it can be influenced and managed provincially.
- Members of the public, scientists or stakeholders are concerned about the issue and believe it is significant.

It is prudent for the party preparing the statement of opportunity to address these points in the material it submits.

Taking into account the above criteria, the board considers whether the issue can be addressed with existing Council resources and how it aligns with the current work plan. Often, the agency presenting the statement of opportunity will include a commitment to provide at least some of the funding for the project. If the board decides that the issue is an appropriate one for the Council to address, it accepts the statement of opportunity and establishes a multi-stakeholder working group. This working group will be charged with defining the issues and proposing terms of reference for a project team that will develop a plan or framework for responding to the issue.

