



DEFINING CONSENSUS

Adopted by Council: February 10, 2005

The Alberta Water Council (AWC) uses a consensus decision-making process whereby members work collaboratively to craft decisions *that best satisfy their respective interests*. Consensus building is the shared responsibility of all AWC members.

To Achieve Consensus, the AWC will:

1. Encourage

- Searching for the best solution that meets the interest of all members
- Seeking a creative solution
- Moving from debating positions to creating solutions (it is each member's obligation to state why they disagree and to present alternatives)
- Team work

2. Reinforce the Consensus Process by

- Focusing on definable issues
- Involving affected members from the onset
- Seeking out interests (underlying needs) not positions (a party's perceived solution to meet their needs). Interests are often more compatible than positions
- Involving all participants
- Flagging potential concerns and generating options for possible solutions
- Looking for creative solutions, not compromise
- Advancing creative solutions
- Ensuring all members have adequate opportunity to review proposals before decisions are made

3. Use Tools Such as

- Clarifying; Asking questions to seek out interests
- Short breaks, opportunity for caucus
- Brainstorming; develop options
- Humour
- Deferring topic until later in meeting, or another meeting (when the discussion becomes adversarial or when more information is required)
- Striking a working group or Project Team to do analysis or follow-up on specific questions

4. Avoid

- Seeking compromise
- Finding the lowest common denominator
- Opting for the will of the majority
- Accepting might as right
- Debating positions



5. When Consensus is Reached, it is the Duty of the Executive to Ensure

- Everyone was heard and there is unanimous support
- All reasonable alternatives were considered
- The recommendation addresses the issue and can work
- Potential impediments have been noted
- Silence has not been taken as agreement, no sector has been unfairly affected
- Summary Report is circulated with the decision clearly identified to members

6. Where Consensus Cannot be Reached

- All conditions, concerns, dissension will be recorded
- As a last resort, an issue may be outlined and forwarded to the Minister with several alternative courses of action presented.

Consensus Tool Box - Problems and Solutions

Four Steps to Consensus

- Look beyond people's positions to understand their interests
- Invent options for mutual gain: what is fair vs. what is best for each, or for all
- Use objective criteria to assess options
- Build sound solutions

A Back-up Process to Achieve Consensus; When Other Processes Have Failed

- Identify the problem causing the blockage
- Identify areas of agreement and those of disagreement
- Self-evaluation will determine if process so far is leading toward original goals
- Look for exaggeration, hyperbole, distortion and separate facts from fiction
- Switch roles: have participants argue from another person's standpoint
- Modify the best solution so far
- Develop two lists: one "agreed upon", the other "not agreed upon"

If the Issue Appears too Complex

- Clarify the issue, or ask someone else to do so
- Break issue into logical parts and proceed
- Suggest a short break
- Assign issue (or parts) to a working group for analysis and recommendations

Parties Tabling or Arguing *Positions*

- Note that discussion should focus on *interests*
- Identify *interests*, or re-state what you believe the *interests* to be
- Explore options to satisfy *interests*
- Discuss the evidence or facts supporting the *interests*
- Move from *positions* to *interests* by asking "Why is this *position* important to you?" or "What is the underlying *interest*?"

Disagreement on Facts

- Clarify the disagreement – What facts are in question?
- Call on member present or expertise to help clarify
- Defer discussion and assign responsibility to resolve factual disagreement

No Solutions are Emerging

- Discuss components / elements / criteria for a solution
- Brainstorm suggestions
- Generate options or suggest a solution
- Suggest a short break
- Assign the issue or parts of it to a working group for further work and recommendations

If Consensus is Elusive:

- Identify where consensus has been reached on components of the issue
- Agree to as much as possible – principles / priorities / policies
- Agree that each jurisdiction will operate within the context of what has been agreed to
- Assign outstanding issues to a working group for further work and recommendations

AWC and Consensus Decision-Making¹

The AWC chose consensus decision-making (CDM) as the model for negotiation. It is a core value of the organization and foundational to its effective functioning. An institutional framework supports this innovative decision-making model with each member holding equal weight. This is particularly important in the AWC context where 25 sectors representing all Albertans gather to analyze issues and decide on appropriate approaches to ensure their resolution. Each sector brings a unique perspective that requires respect and consideration. Consensus decision-making fosters a process where the resolution of issues is most likely to satisfy the social, economic, and environmental priorities of its members. Each participant has an equal opportunity, and responsibility, to speak to an issue and to influence the results of the discussion and the shape of the solution.

What is Consensus Decision-Making?

AWC utilizes a consensus decision-making process whereby members work collaboratively to craft decisions or recommendations that best satisfy their respective interests. CDM strives for unanimity; it is a process that maximizes opportunities to resolve differences and reach agreement. Clearly, for effective consensus decision-making to work, all parties must take the opportunity to make their interests known and to participate in the search for a creative solution. CDM reaches below the positions of the participants to the underlying interests. It reaches beyond a preconceived solution to the problem to the needs that underlie, or give rise to these positions. Giving value to these interests, efforts are made to create a solution that will satisfy all or most of them. The focus of the participants turns from defending positions to addressing interests. Every consensus decision has buy-in, or at least, no outright rejection by the participants, thereby inspiring commitment because it is jointly achieved. Although some participants may not agree with all aspects of the agreement, consensus is achieved when they are willing to support the overall package. Collaterally, the process strengthens relationships between the participants because it fosters understanding, respect, trust, and creativity. The result is often innovative, and *“it generates solutions that are fairer, more efficient, better informed, and more stable than those arrived at by conventional means.”*

What Consensus Decision-Making is Not

Critics of the process charge that it leads to lowest common denominator decisions, that it encourages the path of least resistance, that it fosters trade-offs, or the type of compromises that may not be in the organization's best interests. If the consensus process is flawed or poorly used or if time pressures are too great, these criticisms may apply. Where the process is properly run, these criticisms are not applicable. CDM is a dynamic process requiring more time to produce quality decisions. When a decision or conclusion is reached, all parties have a better understanding of each other's interests and a stronger commitment to implementing the decision.

The greatest threat to CDM emerges when participants do not engage, or settle for the lowest common denominator rather than exerting their talents to achieve the highest common factor. Just as it is not 'rule by the majority', CDM cannot be reduced to the tyranny of one or a few. The process should strive for unanimity.

Consensus Building: An AWC Reality

AWC has a hierarchy of consensus based discussions on any given issue. Having received their priorities from the Council, Work Teams deal with the specific issues, working towards consensus on defining the problem, understanding its consequences, and the interventions required if any. Council adds the policy and strategic analysis to the mix, and seeks consensus on priorities and the most appropriate options. Consensus in this context must be achieved as a part of a broader agenda. The Minister reviews the consensus recommendations and endeavours to reinforce the consensus reached and resolve any outstanding issues. Fundamental then, is the use of CDM at all levels in order to build and maintain a high degree of confidence and certainty in the quality of decisions reached. It is also critical to commit and engage early at the interests / needs stage before positions are reached and become entrenched.

¹ Adapted from the CCME documents *Strengthening Consensus* and *Consensus: Building A Table guide and Toolkit* available online at <http://www.ccme.ca/about/consensus.html> .

