

# *Water for Life* Implementation Reviews: a Brief “How-To” Guide

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## **Introduction**

One of the Alberta Water Council’s most important tasks is to regularly review the *Water for Life* strategy’s implementation progress. The review is done in a spirit of adaptive management, where the regular evaluation of progress serves to highlight strengths, identify weaknesses and recommend areas where additional focus would allow the strategy to advance more effectively. The review is completed at a strategic level, focusing on changing water issues and concerns in the province and the effectiveness of the *Water for Life* strategy in meeting them. Completing this strategic review is one of the Council’s most important tasks because it helps set the priorities and future direction of the *Water for Life* strategy and ensures the strategy remains ‘on track’ and relevant. It is part of the Council’s key role of providing stewardship to the provincial water strategy.

The Alberta Water Council has now completed a number of implementation reviews. Along the way, the committees have found that some tools and processes are more effective than others in determining the strengths, issues and future opportunities for water management in Alberta. Therefore, the purpose of this short “How-To Guide” is to provide information and support to subsequent Implementation Review Committees, so they can build on what others have learned before them. The task of documenting the process of completing an implementation review becomes increasingly important when considering the likely staff and committee member turn-over in the near future.

The information provided in this guide is for consideration only. If a subsequent Implementation Review Committee feels the need to stray from this guide, they should not be limited by the suggestions provided here. The sections below provide some guidance regarding the timing of reviews, the information required to complete the review, organizing and analyzing the collected information, and the structure of the final report.

## **Timing of Reviews**

The decision to begin a new *Water for Life* Implementation Review cycle should be carefully considered. If the review begins too soon after the previous review, little will have changed and the report will sound much like the previous one. Conversely, conducting the reviews too far apart may allow the strategy to become unfocused and result in slower-than-optimal progress. Therefore, review cycles need to be far enough apart to allow for goal-setting and implementation based on previous recommendations, while not allowing great lengths of time between reviews. The length of time required to complete the review must also be considered in this decision – approximately nine to twelve months. Finally, in conducting the review it is important to set a “snapshot” date; that is, the date at which progress will be evaluated. Therefore, a review cycle commenced approximately every two years should meet this timeframe, with the “snapshot” date taking place on December 31 of even-numbered

years (2008, 2010, 2012, *etc.*) Some flexibility must also be included in this schedule. Sometimes it is worth waiting for a key milestone to be met, or a new program to begin operation before conducting an implementation review. Implementation reviews should therefore be regular in their occurrence, with some flexibility around the date to accommodate the circumstances of the time.

## Information Gathering

In completing a review, it is important that accurate information be collected and summarized to inform the committee. In conducting previous reviews, the Implementation Review Committee has found the following sources of information to be helpful:

### Document Review

Previous Implementation Review Committees have conducted a brief survey of literature available to them. This set of information includes the *Water for Life* strategy itself and previous Council review reports, as well as other information that the Committee feels is relevant to the discussion. This should include Alberta Water Council reports (and their resulting actions), information from the Alberta Water Research Institute, and reports from the Government of Alberta and other organizations. The Implementation Review Committee should take some time to clearly identify relevant information, thoroughly review it, and have summary notes of key points from those documents. Committee members should also try to understand what has occurred as a result of the reports they review, and not just simply examine their contents.

### Stakeholder Survey

As part of the review process, it is likely the committee will desire broad input from the sectors represented on the Council and perhaps others. One way a previous committee has gathered this information is via a stakeholder survey, which worked relatively well and is recommended for the next review process. A few tips to help make the next survey process easier:

1. The survey will take longer than planned. Be prepared for 4-5 months, from start to finish, and begin the survey as early in the review process as possible. Allow at least two, and preferably three, months for sectors to complete the survey, especially if sectors are submitting a single, coordinated response.
2. Take the time to properly introduce the survey and frame the *Water for Life* strategy. The introduction should explain the 6 elements, remind readers why they are completing the survey, and state that they likely will not be involved with all 6 elements of the strategy, so to please focus their responses in the relevant areas. Committee members should also request some time on the Council's agenda to remind board members about the survey and prepare them for the information-gathering process.
3. Limit the number of questions being asked. The 2006-08 review survey asked about each element of the strategy individually, but received very repetitive responses to those questions. Sectors know what their most pressing issues are and what changes they would like to see. Asking three or four open-ended questions will be more effective than asking

- about each element directly. Suggested topics for the questions include: (1) how the sector is involved with *Water for Life*, (2) what they feel the strengths of the current strategy are, (3) what their barriers to participating in *Water for Life* are, and (4) what challenges they see the strategy having to deal with in the future. Committee members should be prepared to organize diverse responses into meaningful categories or themes.
4. Carefully consider whether or not sectors should submit a single ‘unified’ response per sector versus requesting multiple individual responses from within a sector. Benefits of requiring a coordinated sector response include reducing the number of responses the team needs to review, forcing sectors to discuss the issues internally and provide thoughtful feedback, and having a ‘point person’ in each sector to contact for additional context or information. The drawbacks include the additional work required by each sector to collect and summarize their input, the additional time required by sectors to coordinate their responses, and a reduced diversity of responses from within a sector. Both methods are valuable; however, a choice will need to be made by the next committee based on their timelines and circumstances.
  5. Be explicit when conducting the survey about how the collected information will be used. Specifically indicate whether or not a summary of survey responses will be made public.

### Element Coordinator Interviews

One of the best sources of information for previous review reports were interviews with GoA Element Coordinators. Within the Provincial Government, each element of the *Water for Life* strategy has a person or small group of people responsible for monitoring and advancing that element. A series of interviews were then conducted with these provincial element coordinators to inform the review report. Currently, the Provincial Government is moving away from having ‘Element Coordinators’ and toward having a *Water for Life* steering committee, with members of the committee responsible for particular elements. However this is organized in the future, the Water for Life Office within the Provincial Government should identify the appropriate people for the Committee to speak with.

In order to make the interview process as productive as possible, previous Review Committees asked each element coordinator to prepare a short summary of their activities well before their interview. A suggested template for this written summary is included in Appendix A. This summary of information then guides the subsequent interview, along with a handful of common questions asked of all element coordinators. Detailed notes from the interviews should be completed and summarized, then referred back to the element coordinator for review before being considered ‘final’ by the committee. The results of the interviews have always been kept confidential in order to solicit the most candid responses. Finally, interviews with other key members of provincial government staff may also help inform the review. For example, members of the provincial government’s education staff have been interviewed as part of previous review reports. In conducting the interviews, each committee member usually participates in one or two sessions

based on their knowledge and interests. A project manager is also present to take notes, summarize responses, etc.

In the future, it is recommended that previous interview notes and pre-interview questionnaires be shared with Review Committee members and the appropriate current 'Element Coordinator.' Doing so would help ensure continuity and remind both Committee members and 'Element Coordinators' where they were two years ago and provide a valuable starting point for their conversation.

## Other Sources

The three sources listed above have provided the foundation for previous review reports. However, this does not mean that the list is exhaustive or should not be expanded. For example, the Government of Alberta is currently working towards an annual reporting system for *Water for Life* actions. This may be a new and valuable source of information for future reviews. Access to the data and information that support the new reporting system would also be of benefit to the Committee. Access to specific information such as performance measures, data and other key measures is often difficult to obtain and would be helpful for the Committee, if it can be shared.

Interviews with other key stakeholders or surveys of sectors not represented on the Council could also be appropriate and valuable for future Implementation Review Committees. Additionally, reviewing the reports and actions being completed under complementary strategies, such as the *Land Use Framework*, and *Cumulative Effects* projects may provide some valuable insights into the water strategy's progress. A review of WPAC progress toward their State of the Watershed reports and Watershed Management Plans should also be included in the final report, along with a brief analysis of barriers and opportunities for these groups.

Taking some time to consider what additional information to gather may provide additional guidance and perspective for subsequent Implementation Review Committees.

## Success Stories

Previous review reports have included short sidebars to accompany the main text that highlight the work of stakeholders in advancing the *Water for Life* strategy. These stories serve several purposes. They allow readers to see themselves in the review, they provide a positive tone to the report, and they create reader interest throughout the document. This information may be available through the results of the stakeholder survey plus some follow-up conversations to get more detail. It is also possible for committee members to "track down" a story from within their own sector for inclusion in the report. Whichever way the committee agrees to move forward, they should allow ample time for stakeholder review and feedback on the sidebars. This process should also be started as early as possible – likely immediately after the survey results are received.

## Information Organization

One of the most challenging aspects of reviewing the *Water for Life* strategy is organizing the collected information. Being able to conduct a clear analysis, while maintaining a view of the interconnectedness of strategy's three goals and three key directions is a critical challenge for this committee. Each element is truly dependent on the others and progress must be made in all areas in order for the strategy to advance. The number of information sources and their level of detail also contribute to making information organization an important task.

Previous Implementation Review Committees have found it helpful to break out *Water for Life* strategy actions so they exist only under a single element, rather than trying to list actions simultaneously under several elements (*i.e.* in the current matrix). Breaking out the actions limits the complexity of the strategy while the analysis is being completed and allows for easier recognition of concrete progress. However, this suggested format for organizing the information will likely be out-of-date before the next review takes place because of the anticipated release of a renewed *Water for Life* action plan.

Each Committee will need to carefully consider how they would like to organize their information. In the future, there will be an increased reliance on other, complementary, strategies in advancing the *Water for Life* strategy, such as the *Land Use Framework* and *Cumulative Effects*. A structured format for organizing and analyzing the information will need to be in place or else the interconnectedness of the strategy will make the picture too cloudy to understand and analyze. Generally, considering the individual elements first, followed by the themes and general trends, is more effective than working in the opposite direction.

In writing the final review report, much of the complexity of the strategy and the interconnectedness of its elements can be easily re-introduced, provided the writer has a solid understanding of how all of the 'pieces' of *Water for Life* fit together. In the experience of the Committee, a knowledgeable writer is absolutely necessary for drafting the final report. Consultants have previously been effective at information-gathering and research, but have been less successful at putting the words on the page with appropriate tone and clarity. Their lack of contextual knowledge puts them at a significant disadvantage to those who have a direct and intimate knowledge of *Water for Life*. New review committees should carefully consider who is appropriate to draft the final report. A strong possibility is the Committee's Project Manager, if they are able to do so.

A suggested report format is included in Appendix B. A general timeline for completing a review report is included in Appendix C.

## Sharing Results

Alberta Water Council staff and Implementation Review Committee members should be prepared, upon completion of the review report, to spend a portion of time communicating the results and findings to interested audiences. New priorities and key directions will need to be incorporated into partners' operational plans and acted-upon by more than only the Provincial Government. A concerted and coordinated effort should be made to effectively communicate the results of the review to stakeholders.

## Appendix A: Element Coordinator Pre-Interview Question Template

### Water for Life – Element

Month Day, Year

Element Coordinator Title, Section, Department, Phone, Email

### Overview

- Strategic purpose of the element, very briefly
- List element outcomes

### Progress Since the Last Review

- Brief description of progress under this element
- Include key actions to achieve the outcomes, with a focus on actions in the current timeframe (short-, medium-, or long-term)
- Focus should be on specific actions and/or projects completed or initiated since the previous review report

### Overall Assessment

- Coordinator's thoughts about the element's progress, as a whole, including:
  - o Are the outcomes the "right" ones?
  - o Do the actions achieve the outcomes?
  - o Are there additional actions that would help advance this element?
  - o Are some actions ineffective in achieving the outcomes?
  - o What (if any) barriers are there to progress toward this element?

### Integration

- A brief description of integration between this element and others
- Very brief assessment of how well integration is functioning, including challenges and strengths
- Any comments on the *Water for Life* strategy, overall

### Future Challenges

- Thoughts about challenges this element will face in the immediate and longer-term future
- What "pinch points" are likely to emerge under this element in the future?

### Sources

- A list of relevant references, documents, reports, etc.

*Total length of response should be approximately 2-3 pages. Responses should be the opinions of the element coordinators. The committee should be clear that the information received will remain confidential and will form the basis of their interview with the coordinator.*

*Approved by AWC November 19 2009*

## Appendix B: Suggested Review Report Format

Section	Description
<b>About the Alberta Water Council</b>	Standard text on the inside cover of all Council reports.
<b>Table of Contents</b>	Table of contents.
<b>Executive Summary</b>	A condensed version of the “meat and potatoes” of the report for those without the time to read the entire document.
<b>Background</b>	A summary of <i>Water for Life</i> and the content of previous reviews. A description of where <i>Water for Life</i> is today.
<b>Introduction</b>	An explanation of why the review is being completed and how the Council has gone about doing it.
<b>General Assessment &amp; Recommendations</b>	An overview of themes found during the review. Themes shouldn't be focused on any one element, but should impact the strategy broadly. Be careful to ensure that any recommendations made in this section are discrete, achievable actions. Other types of statements the committee feels need to be highlighted should be given a different title ( <i>i.e.</i> challenge, strength, focus, opportunity, <i>etc.</i> ). This section will become of increasing importance as more reviews are completed and great care should be taken on the recommendations and analysis in this section.
<b>Element Reviews</b> <b>Drinking Water</b> <b>Healthy Aquatic Ecosystems</b> <b>Reliable, Quality Water Supplies</b> <b>Knowledge and Research</b> <b>Partnerships</b> <b>Water Conservation</b>	Element reviews should focus on each piece discretely. They should all follow (more or less) the same format: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review of the element's outcomes</li> <li>- Completed actions should be listed; followed by in-progress actions.</li> <li>- Analysis of specific progress toward the outcomes, with an emphasis on progress since the last review report.</li> <li>- Provide an “Area of Focus” with specific, actionable recommendation(s) that will address future challenges to the element. An explanation of why the “Area of Focus” was selected should be included.</li> <li>- Provide further guidance on the recommendation(s) as required.</li> </ul>
<b>Conclusion</b>	A re-emphasis of the key points and findings of the review.
<b>Appendix A: Committee Members</b>	A list of the committee members and the sector to which they belong.
<b>Appendix B: Recommendations</b>	A list of the committee's recommendations.

## Appendix C: General Timeline Completing a Review Report

The timeline below has used 2010 as the year, however any year ending in an even-number could be substituted in its place.

Date	Location	Action
June 2010	Board meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Call for Committee Members</li> <li>• Reminder to Board of upcoming Survey</li> </ul>
July - September 2010	Committee Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete administration: budget, work plan, process, <i>etc.</i></li> <li>• Begin document review</li> <li>• Begin engaging sectors about review report (GoA Element Coordinators, survey participants, <i>etc.</i>)</li> <li>• Consider what information needs to be collected</li> <li>• Establish survey process &amp; questions</li> </ul>
October 2010	Board meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce sector survey to Board members in more detail</li> <li>• Launch survey</li> </ul>
November - December 2010	Committee Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set dates for Element Coordinator Interviews</li> <li>• Begin Element Coordinator Interviews</li> <li>• Close survey</li> <li>• Begin gathering success stories</li> </ul>
December 31, 2010		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Snap-shot” date. Progress is only measured up to this date.</li> </ul>
January - February 2011	Committee Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin analysis and drafting</li> <li>• Receive draft copy of GoA’s WFL Status Report and, potentially, its supporting information</li> </ul>
March 2011		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approximate timing of GoA’s public release of WFL Status Report</li> </ul>
April – May 2011	Committee Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finish drafting report</li> <li>• Seek sector feedback</li> </ul>
June 2011	Committee Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board approval of Committee’s WFL Implementation Review Report</li> </ul>
July – September 2011		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication and sharing of Review report’s findings with stakeholders and interested parties.</li> </ul>