

Provincial Ecological Aquatic Criteria for Health Project Team Terms of Reference

Approved by the Alberta Water Council on: August 24, 2009

CONTEXT:

In December 2008, the Alberta Water Council defined *healthy aquatic ecosystems (HAE)* as: “[a]n aquatic environment that sustains its ecological structure, processes, functions and resilience within its range of natural variability.” This consensus definition and supporting document were intended to guide work under the HAE goal of the *Water for Life* strategy.

In June 2009, the Council agreed to undertake a project that would result in recommendations on a set of criteria to identify significant aquatic ecosystem areas within Alberta’s watersheds. This project would be a first step toward advancing efforts to identify significant or important areas for maintaining aquatic ecosystem health; a goal that has been previously identified as of critical importance in several Alberta Water Council reports.

In part, the impetus for this project and its very tight timelines is the regional planning occurring under the Land Use Framework. The potential contribution of the Alberta Water Council to regional planning, as well as watershed planning, is a tangible step toward integrating major land and water initiatives in Alberta. For this project to effectively link to regional planning, the Alberta Water Council sectors will be challenged to effectively engage and participate in the project while maintaining the Council’s multi-sector, consensus model.

The Government of Alberta (GoA) has identified the updated Environmentally Significant Areas (ESA) project as an appropriate starting point from which the Council could commence its project work. The ESA project is system of three elements that are used to produce a map of environmentally significant areas. The three elements are:

- criteria that broadly describe key elements of an environmentally significant area,
- “rules” to describe how each criteria is applied to the available data, and
- geospatial resource data.

The ESA project, while largely terrestrial in scope, does incorporate some elements of aquatic ecosystems.

The project team will operate in a manner that is consistent with the rules, policies and procedures adopted by the Alberta Water Council, including the use of consensus to make decisions in a multi-stakeholder process.

STRATEGIC INTENT:

- Provide a criteria tool set that can be used to identify areas within a watershed that substantially contribute to the health of aquatic ecosystems for planning efforts under *Water for Life* and the Land Use Framework.

OBJECTIVE:

- Select, modify or develop up to ten provincial ecological criteria to aid and guide the identification of areas within Alberta’s watersheds that substantially contribute to aquatic ecosystem health.

The Government of Alberta is supportive of the project team's work on aquatic ecological criteria. These criteria will guide subsequent GoA work (e.g., gathering the data, developing the rules, running the preliminary criteria through the system to test them, etc.) required to produce a map for use in regional or watershed planning.

APPROACH AND KEY TASKS:

With the timelines and resources available, the project will begin from the foundation provided by the ESA project and focus on adjusting or adding to the existing ESA criteria so they can be used to identify areas that contribute to aquatic ecosystem health. The project scope is intentionally focused on the criteria used to identify significant areas and does not include the data, “rules”, or mapping elements of the existing ESA work. The development of the criteria is, in itself, an important aspect of the Healthy Aquatic Ecosystems element of the renewed Water for Life strategy.

Key tasks include:

Task	Timeframe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Establish project team ○ Define key terms used by the project team ○ Select, modify or develop criteria for the identification of areas that contribute to aquatic ecosystem health. These criteria will be used to address gaps relating to aquatic ecosystems in the Government of Alberta’s Environmentally Significant Areas (ESA) project. The synthesis of scientific information on ecological criteria completed by Alberta Environment will be used in and enable the accomplishment of this task. 	early September 2 - 3 days
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ EMAIL update to AWC 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Develop a short report (e.g. 10 pages) containing the recommended criteria, the rationale for selecting them, and future considerations 	mid to late September (1 - 2 day and/or conf call)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ EMAIL update to AWC 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sector review and approval 	October
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Council review and approval 	November

To facilitate the requirement for project deliverables by November 2009, the project team activities will be compressed into September 2009, which will allow October for sector review and feedback. To support this approach, the GoA will arrange for a synthesis of relevant, scientific information on criteria for aquatic ecosystem health. The synthesis will be prepared for the consideration and use of the project team. In addition, the Working Group and other interested parties from the Alberta Water Council will undertake a one-day “Lunch & Learn” session on the Environmentally Significant Areas project. The session is intended to provide a solid foundation of understanding from which to launch the project team work plan.

TIMELINES AND DELIVERABLES:

The Project Team will meet the following:

- Terms of Reference Approval August 2009
- Email update to Council mid-September 2009
- Email update to Council late September 2009
- Final report and recommendations November 2009

Team deliverables are required no later than November 2009.

In order to meet the aggressive timelines, the Council must approve the final report from this project team via a “live meeting” presentation and conference call as no board meetings are currently scheduled that accommodate this project’s timelines.

MEMBERSHIP:

The multi-stakeholder team contains a representative from the following sectors:

- **NGO Broad Category:** Fish Habitat Conservation, Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils, Lake Habitat Conservation, and Environmental NGOs.
- **Industry Broad Category:** Oil & Gas, Forestry, Power Generation, Mining, Livestock, and Irrigation.
- **Government of Alberta:** Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Alberta Environment
- **Government:** Small Urban, Métis Settlements, Rural and First Nations.

BUDGET:

The Working Group estimates a total budget of \$60,000 to complete the project, broken down as follows:

Core Funding Costs (covered by Alberta Water Council):

Stakeholder support	\$ 40,000
Hosting	\$ 5,000
Communications support	\$ 5,000

Project Funding Costs (covered by stakeholders):

Writing support – assistance with minutes & report writing	\$ 10,000
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