



# Four-Year Strategic Plan

2023-24 through 2026-27

Approved Nov. 22, 2022

## About the Athabasca Watershed Council

Established in 2009, the Athabasca Watershed Council (AWC) is a not-for-profit society and charitable organization guided by its vision, mission, and values. Additionally, the AWC is recognized by the Government of Alberta as a Watershed Planning and Advisory Council that convenes collaborative partnerships in order to achieve the goals of Alberta's *Water for Life* strategy, in the Athabasca watershed (Figure 1).

### Water for Life Goals

- Safe, secure drinking water supplies
- Healthy aquatic ecosystems
- Reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy

### Vision

The Athabasca watershed is ecologically healthy, supporting social responsibility and economic sustainability.

### Mission

The Athabasca Watershed Council demonstrates leadership and facilitates informed decision-making in the Athabasca watershed by bringing stakeholders and indigenous peoples together to achieve our shared vision.

### Values

Integrity, trust, and transparency. Being purpose driven. Consensus decision-making. A high standard of achievement and conduct. Timely responses to the issues. Creativity, innovation, and organizational risk taking. Ecological health as foundational to all life. Water as a blessing and a gift, essential for the environment, economy, society and the spirit. Inclusivity. Respect for all points of view. The communities, cultures and knowledge of Indigenous peoples. Being responsible and accountable to all.



**Figure 1. Map showing the extent of the Athabasca watershed.**

The Athabasca River is the second largest river in Alberta, arising in the Rocky Mountains, and draining into Lake Athabasca, Alberta's largest lake. Combined, the lands within Alberta that drain into the river and lake makes up nearly a quarter of the province. This area includes all or part of forty-five urban, rural and Indigenous communities. Residents in this basin are employed by the numerous industries that operate here, including tourism and recreation, forestry, mining, agriculture and energy.

## AWC Strategic Planning

To achieve its vision and mission and the *Water for Life* goals in the Athabasca watershed, the AWC maintains a rolling four-year strategic plan. This plan includes five goals as follows:

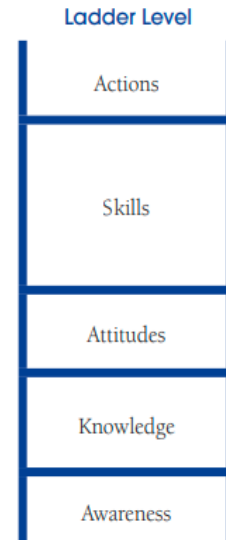
- **Goal #1:** The AWC provides easily accessible water-related information to stakeholders/sectors, the public and Indigenous peoples, leading to improved knowledge about the Athabasca watershed (Education & Literacy).
- **Goal #2:** The AWC is actively engaged and engages others in mobilizing resources and commitments to achieve shared outcomes (Convenor and Collaborator).
- **Goal #3:** The AWC is a credible, recognized authority on the condition of the Athabasca watershed; this information informs Athabasca River Integrated Watershed Management Plan implementation, whose goals are achieved via healthy and active relationships with Athabascans and others (Monitoring and Reporting).
- **Goal #4:** AWC promotes the alignment and integration of land and water statutory and non-statutory policies, plans and program across jurisdictions where needed to achieve 'Water for Life' goals and a healthy Athabasca River watershed (Policy and Planning).
- **Goal #5:** AWC has a reputation for organizational professionalism, balanced representation, sustainability and effective and efficient use of resources; is strategically wise; and makes evidence-based decisions.

The achievement of each goal is guided by a number of desired outcomes and key activities, as summarized below. The implementation of activities is dependent on AWC and partner capacity and resources. Some activities are currently being undertaken, some have been deferred until resources and capacity are available. Going forward, this plan includes what the AWC will focus on for the next four years, from 2023-24 through 2026-27. Additionally, to align with the GOA renewed 10-year *Water for Life* Action Plan (2023 -2033), this document provides a number of long term "stretch" goals, showing how we will strive to contribute to the WFL strategy over the same 10-year period.

This strategic plan has been developed, reviewed, and approved by the AWC's Board of Directors. It is an open-ended, 'rolling plan' and will be reviewed and reported on annually. The plan is also meant to be adaptive, in that the occurrence and timing of initiatives may vary to suit the needs and situations encountered by the organization and as opportunities arise in the watershed. The plan also incorporates goals of the *AWC Communications, Education and Community Engagement Strategy* and the *Athabasca Integrated Watershed Management Plan*.

Goal #1: The AWC provides easily accessible water-related information to stakeholders/sectors, the public and Indigenous peoples, leading to improved knowledge about the Athabasca watershed (Education & Literacy).

**Preamble:** In the past, the AWC, through the work of its Communications, Education and Community Engagement (CECE) Committee and the Education and Outreach Coordinator (EOC), has successfully used a variety of communication tools (e.g., website, newsletter, social media) to raise awareness about the Athabasca watershed and to share its own and other organizations' water-related information with those with an interest in the basin. However, such efforts are limited by 1) our own network and understanding of what is going on around the basin (how well we are connected), and 2) the size of our membership and viewership, which is small, but growing (how well we are connecting with others). It is also challenging to gauge how aware or knowledgeable different audiences are about the Athabasca watershed, or what information/knowledge needs they have. To address these limitations, 1) the AWC needs an active CECE Committee working with the Education and Outreach Coordinator to implement an effective CECE strategy with key messages and performance measures; 2) we need to continue to use a variety of communication tools to reach a variety of audiences; and 3) we need to ensure we are translating credible, balanced data and information into educational and outreach tools that lead to improved awareness and knowledge and ultimately, stewardship action.



**Desired Outcomes:**

- Effective CECE Committee Strategic Planning and Oversight
- Compelling Communications
- The AWC is an Effective Information Sharing Hub
- Targeted Education & Outreach leading to Improved Water Literacy

**Current Activities (2022-23):**

- The CECE Committee meets quarterly; maintains an up-to-date TOR & CECE Strategy and provides guidance to the EOC on how to achieve Goals 1 and 2.
- The EOC promotes the AWC brand (via the logo, tagline, promo materials, etc.), produces the Annual Report, monthly e-Newsletters and blogs and weekly social media postings, and add resources to the web as time allows.
- A travelling Watershed Display is available to various libraries and other public venues.
- The quarterly Athabasca Dispatch has been resurrected to delve into more in-depth topics; factsheets and reports are produced as time allows.
- Events like school presentations and Pond Day and programs such as Caring for Our Watershed and X-Stream Science are attended/implemented as capacity allows.

**Focus for the Next 4 Years (2023-4 – 2026-27):**

- Grow CECE capacity by recruiting more committee members and/or collaborations; refine AWC key messages and CECE performance indicators.
- Continue to make communications more compelling, reaching a larger audience(s), via a variety of communication tools.
- Conduct a website ‘audit’; create and implement a plan to make the website more effective, including developing meaningful content appropriate to various audiences.
- Continue to leverage resources by collaborating with the AB WPACs Education and Outreach Committee, neighboring WPACs, other educational programs (Inside Education) and AEP Education staff.

**In 10 years, we will have contributed to the WFL strategy by having:**

- A well-functioning AWC CECE Committee that undertakes projects (book, story map, videos, highway signage, etc.) that improves understanding of the geography, history, hydrology/water cycle, water issues and water management in the Athabasca watershed.
- A larger membership and social media presence, reaching a greater proportion of the watershed’s population. (We are well connected and are connecting with others.)
- A website that is better utilized as an information sharing hub (more visitors stay longer).
- Improved water literacy and awareness of water issues and water management among those that live, work or play in the Athabasca watershed.

**Goal #2: The AWC is actively engaged and engages others in mobilizing resources and commitments to achieve shared outcomes (Convenor and Collaborator).**

**Preamble:** In the past, the AWC, through the work of its Board and committees, Executive Director, and other staff, has been engaged and has engaged a variety of individuals and different sectors of society (e.g., municipalities, stewardship groups, Indigenous communities, etc.), with varying results, depending on the efforts of the day. Going forward, we need to think more strategically about what ‘sectors’ of society we need to engage in order to be successful at achieving our goals in the Athabasca watershed. Additionally, to engage others, we must build our own credibility and relevance. The board has a strong role to play in building credibility, educating itself about water issues throughout the basin, and providing balanced input to federal, provincial, municipal and resource policy and planning engagement processes.

**Desired Outcomes:**

- A Strong and Diverse Membership
- A Knowledgeable Board
- Basin-wide Community, Indigenous and Sector Engagement
- The AWC is a Strong Contributor to other Water for Life Partnerships

**Current Activities (2022-23):**

- Membership is not actively recruited but occurs casually through the website.
- The board hears presentations at its meetings, is invited to technical webinars and policy and plan engagements, or receives relevant reports and other resources via email.
- Community, Indigenous and Sector outreach occurs on an ad hoc basis via invitations to make presentations or man an information booth at an event, as opportunities arise. A more focused effort is made to recruit Indigenous and sector representatives on working groups (e.g., Berland, Pembina) or particular events (WPAC Summit, World Water Day).
- The AWC participates in the AB WPAC collaborative, provides input into the Alberta Water Council and its projects, and supports watershed stewardship groups, as capacity allows.

**Focus for the Next 4 Years (2023-4 – 2026-27):**

- Update lists (build a contact management system) of sectors/ communities/ organizations/ etc. in the Athabasca watershed and develop a strategy to increase membership.
- Include learning in every board meeting via presentations, fieldtrips, etc. Between board meetings, keep board members up to date on relevant initiatives via emails. Work with board members to identify opportunities to engage their sectors.
- Where opportunities arise, connect with rural and Indigenous communities and sectors via presentations, organizing forums/caucuses, participating in other collaborations, etc.
- Continue to collaborate with GOA and other WFL partners. Lead initiation of an AB WPAC Technical Committee; continue to represent the AB WPACs on the AER MSEAC (Multi Stakeholder Engagement Advisory Committee); and grow more stewardship groups.

**In 10 years, we will have contributed to the WFL strategy by having:**

- At least 500 members representing all sectors of society in the Athabasca watershed.
- Knowledgeable board members actively working with the Executive Director to ensure their sectors are supporting and participating in the work of the AWC and are engaged in providing provincial policy advice via GOA and Alberta Water Council processes.
- All sectors and communities in the Athabasca watershed engaged in AWC activities.
- Actively supported the work of the AB WPAC collaborative, Alberta Water Council, and local watershed stewardship groups such that watershed management improves across Alberta.

Goal #3: The AWC is a credible, recognized authority on the condition of the Athabasca watershed; this information informs Athabasca River Integrated Watershed Management Plan implementation, whose goals are achieved via healthy and active relationships with Athabascans and others (Monitoring and Reporting).

**Preamble:** Over the past decade, the AWC, through the work of its Technical Committee (TC) and Watershed Science Coordinator (WSC), has built credibility as an authority on the Athabasca watershed by developing basin-wide ‘state of the watershed (SOW)’, an Integrated Watershed Management Plan (IWMP) and other technical reports via a multi-sector, consensus-based approach. This work continues today, but with a greater focus on supporting partnership initiatives at the sub-basin level such as the East Slopes (McLeod and Pembina) benthic sampling, Upper Athabasca connectivity planning, Pembina and Tawatinaw riparian projects, lake management initiatives, etc. Although ‘recognition’ is a hard measure to gauge, the AWC is recognized by the GOA as the WPAC for the Athabasca watershed. In 2021, the AWC was asked to provide a comment on the Minister’s release of the Upper Athabasca surface water quality management framework - a good example of being recognized as a credible authority. Being asked to participate in regional and national initiatives by the University of Alberta (NSERC Under Ice Water Quality Model), Living Lakes Canada (East Slopes Biomonitoring Project) and Canadian Wildlife Federation (Wildhay-Berland Connectivity Plan) are also good examples of being recognized as a valued authority operating in the Athabasca watershed. Going forward, the AWC needs to 1) increase efforts to be an unbiased source of credible information about the condition of the watershed, and the issues affecting it; 2) incorporate IWMP goals into workplans that get implemented; 3) and continue to seek collaborations that will help us achieve WFL, IWMP and other strategic goals.

**Desired Outcomes:**

- Effective Technical Committee Planning and Oversight
- Credible State of the Watershed/ Condition Information
- An Approved IWMP Being Implemented through Collaborations

**Current Activities (2022-23):**

- The Technical Committee meets quarterly, maintains an up-to-date TOR, and guides the work of the Watershed Science Coordinator.
- YR 1 of IWMP implementation (approved Feb. 2022) included continuing to build on a number of existing projects and looking for suitable new projects and collaborations to support the achievement of plan goals.
- Implementing a schedule of IWMP and SOW activities and review (see chart below) .

ACTIVITY	2012	2017	2022	2027	2032	2037	2042	2047
SOW assessment (every 10 yrs)	Approved		Initiate 2 <sup>nd</sup> assessment		3 <sup>rd</sup> assessment		4 <sup>th</sup> assessment	
IWMP Review (at 5 yrs; then every 10)			Approved	1 <sup>st</sup> Review		2nd Review		3 <sup>rd</sup> review

### **Focus for the Next 4 Years (2023-4 – 2026-27):**

- Ensuring the Technical Committee is actively engaged, guiding the Watershed Science Coordinator on the implementation of adaptive management in the Athabasca watershed.
- Undertaking projects to support the achievement of IWMP goals and reporting on activities annually via the AWC Annual Report:
  - Drinking Water: learn more about the state of drinking water in the Athabasca as a member of the Water North Coalition and via the Resilient Communities and Drinking Water project.
  - Water Quality: promote projects that reduce nutrient and other parameter loading, that monitor or model water quality (e.g., SWQMF, benthic sampling on the McLeod; UofA NSERC under ice water quality model), and that improves the state of water quality knowledge in the Athabasca.
  - Riparian and wetland health: continue to grow the riparian conservation and restoration project and working groups in the Pembina and Tawatinaw sub-basins. Support Healthy Waters Lac La Biche, Alberta Newsprint Company and other wetland initiatives.
  - Biodiversity: encourage citizen science and Species at Risk awareness. Collaborate with East Slopes native trout initiatives (benthic and stream temperature monitoring, watercourse crossing mitigation).
  - Water Quantity/Flow: Build awareness of tools like the Alberta Water Tool, Alberta Flow Estimation in Ungauged Streams and water quantity management frameworks. Explore a Northern Rivers issues forum and modeling project with AB WaterSmart (ARB Phase II).
  - Land Cover/ use: Participate in the review of LARP. Provide more best practices and information relevant to the sectors working in the Athabasca watershed. Provide policy tools to municipalities. Resurrect the Interactive Atlas and explore the cost to update land use layers.
  - Climate Change: Share tools and resources on climate change, community resilience.
  - Stewardship: Explore ways to support existing and form new lake groups (BAILS, LEPA, HWLLB, etc.) and sub-basin (McLeod, Mayerthorpe, Clearwater) groups.
- Develop a SOW project TOR for approval by the Tech Committee and AWC Board. Develop metrics, undertake an Athabasca state of the watershed assessment (whole basin and sub-basin) and develop an appropriate mechanism (dashboard) to communicate results.

### **In 10 years, we will have contributed to the WFL strategy by having:**

- Implemented a cycle of iterative and adaptive watershed management including in 2027, undertaking an IWMP review, and in 2032, starting another state of the watershed assessment.



- A better understanding of the state of drinking water, source protection and drought planning needs of rural and Indigenous communities.
- Undertaken activities that measure aquatic ecosystem health, reduce nutrient and other contaminant loading, and where needed, restores aquatic ecosystems.
- A better understanding of current and future water supply and demand issues, and how they impact water quality and IFN, given growth and development, climate change, etc.
- Become a stronger hub of information on how land and water managers can reduce land use impacts to waterbodies.
- Provided sectors and communities with the knowledge they need to understand climate change and to be resilient to climatic events.
- More lake and sub-basin groups doing more things in each sub-basin.

**Goal #4: AWC promotes the alignment and integration of land and water statutory and non-statutory policies, plans and program across jurisdictions where needed to achieve 'Water for Life' goals and a healthy Athabasca River watershed (Policy and Planning).**

**Preamble:** WPACs, using a multi-sector, consensus lens, are uniquely situated to review federal, provincial, municipal, and resource land use policies and plans and provide input on how they may affect watershed health and the achievement of Water for Life goals. WPACs can also provide land managers with information and resources to lessen the impacts of land development on waterbodies and watersheds. To date, the AWC Executive Director as well as several AWC board members have provided such input to some municipal planning documents (e.g., county and summer village Intermunicipal Development Plans) and some provincial engagement processes (e.g., Upper and Lower Athabasca regional and sub-basin plans and water management frameworks). However, the AWC board itself rarely provides a consensus viewpoint to such engagement processes. Going forward, the AWC board needs to explore this area in more depth, to gain better understanding of when it may be beneficial to use its collective consensus voice, when to add its voice to other WFL partnerships and water voices, in order to better achieve its mandate and goals in the Athabasca watershed.

**Desired Outcomes:**

- Policies, Plans and Practices are aligned across Jurisdictions

**Current Activities (2022-23):**

- Respond to requests to review municipal and resource plans as received.
- Circulate notices of and participate in policy and plan engagements as they occur.

**Focus for the Next 4 Years (2023-4 – 2026-27):**

- Continue to provide input on federal, provincial, municipal and resource policy and planning initiatives, in particular the upcoming review of the Lower Athabasca Regional plan and its associated management frameworks.
- Continue to raise awareness of the AWC-IWMP and look for opportunities to embed water management goals and best practices into land and resource management policies and plans.

**In 10 years, we will have contributed to the WFL strategy by having:**

- Athabascans knowledgeable about land and water policies and plans that affect watershed health.
- Water and watershed management embedded in all land and resource policies, plans and practices.

Goal #5: AWC has a reputation for organizational professionalism, balanced representation, sustainability and effective and efficient use of resources; is strategically wise; and makes evidence-based decisions.

**Preamble:** Although the AWC is a small organization with limited capacity, it still must meet all the administrative, financial, human resource and governance requirements of a larger organization. In order to keep this portion of its business from consuming too much time (time better spent on science and outreach), we need to improve and streamline AWC policies, processes and practices, such that the AWC is an efficient, effective and transparent organization. This will help improve our reputation, which in turn will improve our sustainability as an organization worth investing in.

**Desired Outcomes:**

- Streamlined Administration
- Financial Capacity and Oversight
- Robust Human Resources
- Strategic and Effective Governance

**Current Activities (2022-23):**

- File all society, charity and funding reports on time to meet all legal requirements.
- Maintain an office, files and accounting records at the Athabasca Train Station.
- Solicit funds and in-kind support.
- Recruit, retain and grow staff capacity.
- Support board and committee activities.

**Focus for the Next 4 Years (2023-4 – 2026-27) Years:**

- Investigate other office options, invest in IT, and continue to document and streamline administrative and governance processes.
- Recruit members to the Finance and Fundraising Committee and ensure it meets regularly and implements a fundraising plan.
- Find the resources to retain existing staff and to create and fill 2 new positions to support science and outreach projects.
- Recruit knowledgeable board members willing to network, fundraise, etc. Ensure Board and Executive Committee meets regularly. Continue policy and process review until all documents are up to date.

**In 10 years, we will have contributed to the WFL strategy by having:**

- Maintained our mandate as the WPAC for the Athabasca watershed.
- A well-funded, well staffed organization with a board that is strategically focused on achieving the WFL goals in the Athabasca watershed.

## Preliminary Performance Measures

Like any organization, the Athabasca Watershed Council has many ways to track and communicate its activities. For example, many of its activities are reported on monthly via newsletters and blogs, or annually via the Annual Report. However, tracking progress over time is more challenging. While a preliminary list of potential measures is included below, these measures will be refined and possibly added to over time.

Goal	Potential Measure	Target
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ‘Reach’ of AWC messages (measured by likes, followers and other social media metrics)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• #'s increase year over year</li></ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• # of individual and organization memberships</li><li>• # of collaborations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• increases year over year</li></ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• SOW and IWMP are up to date</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• &lt; 10 years old</li></ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Water is considered in land use and resource planning in the Athabasca watershed</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• # of land and resource engagement processes the AWC participates in</li></ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The AWC is well supported</li><li>• Staff and volunteers are satisfied</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• % of funding and in-kind support from non-GOA sources</li></ul>

## Baseline Budget

While a more detailed workplan and budget will be developed annually, when we think about our five strategic goals, and what is required to achieve them, we can start to identify a minimum budget required for each area. This amount would include enough funds for committee oversight, and at least one staff person to carry out additional fund-raising and project management.

<b>Minimum Budget Needs to support the achievement of the 5 Goals in the Strategic Plan :</b>					
<b>Strategic Goals</b>	<b>Activities Supported by funds</b>	<b>2023-24</b>	<b>2024-25</b>	<b>2025-26</b>	<b>2026-27</b>
Goal 1 and 2	Funds to support meetings of the CECE committee, the salary and activities of the Education and Outreach Coordinator and some minor project expenses. Funds for larger projects will be applied for as needed.	\$80k	\$83.2k	\$86.5k	\$90k
Goal 3 and 4	Funds to support meetings of the Technical Committee, the salaries and activities of the Watershed Science Coordinator, two new positions (Sub-basin Projects Coordinator and Lake and Stewardship Project Coordinator) and some minor project expenses. Additional project funds will be applied for as identified under each program area.	\$240k	\$249.6k	\$259.6k	\$270k
Goal 5	Funds to support the salary and activities of the Executive Director, board, executive and finance committee meetings, and AWC operating costs (insurance, office space, etc.)	\$125k	\$130k	\$135.2k	\$140.2k
		<b>\$445k*</b>	<b>\$462.8k</b>	<b>\$481.3</b>	<b>\$500.2</b>

\*2023-24 is considered a base year, with each successive year increased by 4% as a Cost of Living adjustment.

## In Closing

This document describes the AWC's five strategic goals, its desired outcomes, and where it will focus its efforts in the next four years. Thinking further out, it also identifies what it can do in the next 10 years to support the implementation of the renewed Water For Life 10 Year Action Plan. Like any plan, it is meant to be a road map or guide only, and will be reviewed annually and adjusted if needed.