

# Guide for Facilitating Water Stewardship on Behalf of a Group of Producers: Supporting watershed understanding and stakeholder engagement

## 1.0 Document Purpose

Practicing good water stewardship, in the spirit of the Alliance for Water Stewardship Standard, requires understanding the context of the watershed a producer is operating in, and connecting to the stakeholders of the operation to understand their water needs, their concerns and to gather suggestions and partners for appropriate water stewardship actions. Good water stewardship also requires communicating the commitments and results of actions.

While water management is about responsible use and management of water within the boundary of the operator's property, water stewardship requires extending your understanding and actions beyond your operation boundaries. While small-scale agricultural producers are often very experienced water managers, they typically do not have time or capacity to document an understanding of the local watershed, or do the stakeholder engagement that is a key part of water stewardship. For producers that are interested or required (through their supply chain) to implement water stewardship work, a larger entity that will coordinate the engagement and conversations with stakeholders is needed. An example of an organization that would be well-positioned to support this process is an irrigation district or a crop sector group.

This document is designed to provide guidance to a larger agriculture entity in a localized area to support water stewardship with a group of producers.

## 2.0 Stakeholder Definition

A stakeholder is any organization, group or individual that has some interest or 'stake' in the implementing organization's activities, and that can affect or be affected by them. The four main categories of stakeholder are: (1) Those who impact on the organization; (2) Those on whom the organization has (or is perceived to have) an impact; (3) Those who have a common interest; (4) Neutral - those with no specific link, but with whom it is relevant to inform (Alliance for Water Stewardship, 2019).

The most relevant stakeholders for water stewardship activities are individuals, groups, and entities that share the same water sources. Many issues are interlinked, such as environmental health, community wellbeing, local economy, and the organization's reputation. This means that stakeholders will not be exclusively water users upstream or downstream from the implementer. For a larger agriculture entity such as an irrigation district or a crop sector group, agricultural producers are a key stakeholder group.

For a group of producers the stakeholders will likely be other producers, the entities that provide their

drinking water and farm water, any downstream water users like a municipality, the water stewardship group, and possibly local buyers of their product.

### **3.0 Understanding the watershed**

Because water stewardship is about responsible water use and actions in the context of the watershed, understanding the watershed is key. A large agricultural entity can support a group of producers all operating in one watershed in understanding the context for water stewardship by hosting a local watershed expert or water stewardship group (such as the Oldman Watershed Council) to present the context of the watershed. If done in a coordinated manner for the purpose of water stewardship this presentation could support understanding as well as potential collective actions to mitigate key water issues in the local area. Stakeholders may benefit from being included in the presentation of the watershed, and it may support them to contribute more concrete ideas in the stakeholder engagement process.

The presenter should be invited to discuss the status of the watershed, the water quality and water quantity, wildlife and species of concern, major upstream water infrastructure, water governance and decision-making, and key pressures on the watershed.

### **4.0 Identifying Stakeholders**

Stakeholders can be identified through an iterative process of thinking through which organizations and other producers are connected to the producer group in terms of water-related activities, and then which individual from each organization or farm can be contacted.

### **5.0 Engagement Format and Objectives**

A variety of formats can be used to connect with and engage stakeholders including open-houses or workshops, focus groups, online discussions, and emailed questions. A larger format group discussion may be the best approach to support all producers that are pursuing water stewardship actions to be present, as well as the stakeholders. It is important that the producers doing water stewardship actions hear directly from each other and the stakeholders in the room, and that they be able to ask questions in response.

Likely the beginning of the group discussion will require providing some context for everyone on why the questions are being asked and what the overall purpose is.

The objectives of engagement should be to provide information, to answer questions, understand the local water-related concerns, and hear suggestions for actions that could mitigate those concerns.

Creating an initial list of questions is an important first step to ensure meaningful conversation and engagement. Questions may include:

1. What are your water-related concerns?
2. What are the water challenges you face?

3. What suggestions or ideas do you have for mitigation of these water risks and concerns?
4. What water stewardship actions would you like to see?
  - a. Short-term actions over the next 6 months?
  - b. Long-term actions over the next 2 years?
5. What are the important water-related areas in the catchment?

The Agriculture's Water Future (AWF) project asked these 5 questions using all four formats of stakeholder engagement. Four Working Group meetings were held throughout 2021 and 2022 to discuss risks, opportunities, actions, and progress of water stewardship planning. These Working Groups were held both online and in-person, and included 21 different organizations, representing a wide range of stakeholders in Southern Alberta. An in-person focus group was held in Lethbridge in early 2022 to bring a smaller group together and included 7 different stakeholder groups. This focus group highlighted several key water-related concerns in Southern Alberta, such as the reduction in government support and funding to support water quality and monitoring. This focus group was then able to brainstorm and prioritize potential actions to address water stewardship and sustainability.

## 6.0 Template for event supporting water stewardship for producers

In this example an irrigation district is supporting their membership in doing water stewardship.

### Initiation

- A group of producers are all interested in doing water stewardship (potentially the supply chain is demanding it).
- The Irrigation District is committed to supporting the water stewardship by hosting a member meeting with additional invitees.

### Planning

- The Irrigation District contacts the local watershed organization and invites them to present at the meeting.
- The Irrigation District identifies stakeholders and invites them to the meeting, providing an explanation of what the meeting will be for.

### Event

- Possible agenda
  - Welcome and introductions – 15 minutes
  - Explanation of the goal of the meeting and producer interest in water stewardship - 10 minutes
  - Presentation of watershed by the local watershed organization – 30 minutes
  - Roundtable discussion of water-related concerns and challenges – 20 minutes
  - Roundtable discussion of overall solutions to challenges – 20 minutes
  - Roundtable discussion of farm-based opportunities and possible actions – 20 minutes
  - Summary of key take-aways and where to find more information

- Irrigation District organizes the venue, food, nametags, adequate sound system, etc for the event.
- All producers who are doing water stewardship put their top three actions (already done or near term) on sticky notes and put them on the wall at the event, to serve as ideas, conversation starters and to informally record commitment.

### **7.0 Documenting the Engagement**

Documentation of stakeholder engagement is critical to understand the water challenges within the basin, and to build a water stewardship plan in the spirit of the Alliance for Water Stewardship Standard. Linking water related challenges identified by both stakeholders and the implementer highlights the shared water challenges in the catchment. Examples of shared water challenges identified during the AWF project include:

1. Impact of climate change on water availability.
2. Impact of climate change and the high water demands compounding stress on the ecosystems.
3. Reduced government support for water quality monitoring.
4. Oldman watershed is closed to new licenses.
5. Threat of invasive species.

### **8.0 Communicating**

A key part of water stewardship is disclosing the results of water stewardship work, and communicating the progress as well as the setbacks to relevant stakeholders, partner organizations, and sometimes the public. Individual farm operations may not feel comfortable disclosing information with concerns it will be taken out of context, but amalgamated information for a group of producers doing water stewardship could be disclosed by the larger agricultural entity. The agricultural supply chain is requiring more documentation and disclosure, and communicating and disclosing information to the public with appropriate context, is important for building public trust.

A variety of tools can be used for communicating the water stewardship commitments and progress by producers to a wider audience. The tools chosen should be based on what type of communication is the focus and why, and factors such as who is the audience and how often is the communication going to be happening.

A suggested action for the larger agricultural entity is to create a communication plan that producers will be willing to provide their information to, compile the information to be disclosed from the group of producers, and then publicize and promote the disclosure through all available channels and partner organizations.