

The Ontario Headwaters Institute

Preserving Ontario's headwaters through education and action

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Symposium on Integrated Watershed Management, May 11, 2010

Executive Summary

Key messages heard during the Symposium included:

- From Jennifer Keyes, that MNR addresses complex, basin-wide responsibilities, sometimes involving federal and US agencies, in a manner that can only be described as one of high-level policy integration. The list of programs described was almost over-whelming, extending from the Great Lakes St Lawrence River Basin Sustainable Waters Agreement and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement through LAMPs, RAPs, and COA, to Source Protection, Species at Risk, and Biodiversity initiatives;
- From Don Pearson, that Ontario's conservation authorities have been in the forefront of developing a watershed-based approach that addresses both land and water-related resources; that CAs are using IWM and/or Adaptive Environmental Management to set priorities, secure budgets, and influence municipal and provincial decision makers; and that an evaluation of current science and policy gaps indicates that there are strong rationales to pursue IWM in Ontario;

Don Pearson also brought hot-off-the press copies of an IWM Summary Report from Conservation Ontario. This document distils findings from three efforts pursued in conjunction with CO's 2009 symposium on IWM: Integrated Watershed Management in Ontario; A Water Management Framework for Ontario; and A Water Budget Overview for Ontario. All four documents are available at: http://www.conservation-ontario.on.ca/watershed_management/integrated_watershed_management.html

- From Isobel Heathcote, about the uncertainties that a changing climate will bring to Ontario and how IWM offers an opportunity to: expand the current focus on drinking water to include water allocation, recreation, navigation, and ecological goods and services; pool agency, academic, and community resources and through those partnerships begin to address chronic shortages of field data, and; develop more nimble decision-making that will be multi-disciplinary, inclusive, and consultative;
- From Rick Findlay, that the Great Lakes and Saint Lawrence River Basin is a unique ecological, social, economic, and cultural community; that it suffers from significant environmental challenges but represents significant economic strength rivaling that of many nations. It has benefitted from many bi-national, national and provincial and state-level initiatives but that we need to manage the full region with a fresh, regional, integrated, watershed-based approach based on social, environmental, and economic stewardship, and; that one way to perhaps advance a sustainable vision would be to consider the region a bi-national park, and manage it accordingly;

- From the Expert Panel and the breakout sessions, that:
 - Canada would benefit from a new national water policy and/or actions through the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment focused on watershed management, conservation, better management of water quantity and quality issues, and climate change
 - The state of water for First Nations must be addressed, with increased ability for First Nations to be decision-makers and not just stakeholders
 - That Ontario needs to do better on cumulative water data management, regardless of the debate about whether we have enough data, the data is in too many varied formats and places, or if the data is just not being made publicly available in a timely manner
 - Current Drinking Water initiatives under the Clean Water Act are widely respected, especially vis-à-vis Source Water Protection, but need to be expanded into broader and more integrated watershed planning initiatives
 - The long-term protection of Ontario's biodiversity cannot be relegated solely to parks and preserves. It requires new tools, an integrated vision, and the integration of both science disciplines and governance processes. Whether we call this IWM or adaptive management, it will require data, data, and data, especially as the climate changes;
 - Key implementation measures to protect watersheds and Ontario's biodiversity may include shifting from a regulatory approach to enabling legislation with both policy and technical guidelines as well as desired outcomes, and
 - The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Lake Simcoe Protection Act, with their respective requirements to protect areas in natural heritage and involve a new degree of provincial/municipal/conservation authority cooperation on water quantity and quality, may represent the closest approach Ontario has taken toward embracing integrated watershed management; and,
- From general questions and comments throughout the day, many attendees noted:
 - Some disconnect between aspects of the province's water policy agenda and funding for science, data, implementation, monitoring, and engagement. Examples cited included:
 - Conflicts between the protection of areas in natural heritage, agriculture, and even in watercourses against provisions in the Green Energy Act
 - Conflicts between Permits to Take Water and de-watering permits against water allocations, water for ecological goods and services, and lower water levels "elsewhere", and
 - The impatience of small communities to obtain the benefits of the Clean water Act
 - That Canada and Ontario must improve its engagement with and funding support to First Nations with respect to water
 - That sustainable communities include sustainable agriculture
 - That CAs need a stronger mandate, more funding, and a different relationship with their municipal members, and,
 - That perhaps the OMB finally, really ought to be re-vamped, replaced, and/or augmented with an entity with a mandate to drive the development of sustainable planning.

Recommendations from the OHI

Beyond the confines of May 11, the Symposium marked an interesting step in Ontario's dialogue on IWM. The context for that includes:

- Tangible work being done in MNR, MOE, and various CAs to support emerging deliverables for the Clean Water Act, such as Water Budgets and the mapping of significant groundwater recharge areas, to fix deficiencies in the Low Water Response initiative, and to address problems under Permits to Take Water
- The continued leadership of Conservation Ontario on IWM and the on-going innovation in progressive CAs on IWM, adaptive management, natural heritage systems, low impact development, and sustainable buildings, etc
- Ontario's signature on the October 29, 2009 Canada-wide Vision for Water, from the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, and,
- Discussions on IWM in a committee of Ontario's Water Directors.

Given this context, broad discussion on IWM appears to be just gelling.

For example, while there were few questions asked of presenters at Conservation Ontario's 2009 symposium, the OHI heard vociferous concerns about the need for IWM during our seven workshops held from Elora to Peterborough in the spring of 2010. This included comments also heard on May 11 on the need for more data, better inter-agency cooperation, a stronger role for CAs in regional planning, meaningful opportunities for public consultation, and deep concerns about the Provincial Policy Statement, the need to better protect agriculture, the leeway given aggregate extraction, and the role of the Ontario Municipal Board.

May's OHI Symposium presented a nice compromise between the two, and perhaps points to a simple reality: Ontario appears to have solid Director-level integration for policy management, including budget allocations, but also appears to be experiencing problems in science funding, data management and accessibility, program implementation, monitoring, and governance.

So, does Ontario need "capital P" IWM Policy commitment, or "small p" IWM program implementation?

Here are our recommendations.

- 1. On the policy front, Ontario should ensure significant discussion on IWM, involving the appropriate provincial ministries, Conservation Ontario, municipalities, interested organizations, academia, and the public. The discussions should be launched in the fall of 2010, coinciding with associated efforts on the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, the Clean Water Act, the review of the Provincial Policy Statement, and the expected release of the CCME's business plan for the Canada-wide Vision for Water, and;**
- 2. On the program front, MNR, MOE, and Conservation Ontario should conduct a gap analysis of current implementation deficiencies in Ontario's framework for watershed management, also with input municipalities, interested organizations, academia, and the public.**

Pursuit of these recommendations should assist Ontario in determining if, how, and where IWM might help improve the delivery of the province's commitment to hydrologic integrity, watershed management, and the maintenance of the ecological goods and services upon which our social well-being rests.

In conclusion, the OHI perceives that the implementation of Integrated Watershed Management, or elements of it, could result in significant improvements to Ontario's management of this precious resource, move the province further along in its culture of conservation and stewardship, and increase civic engagement in water governance and social accountability.

We thank all the supporters, speakers, and participants in the 2010 symposium and urge all Ontarians to pursue the dialogue on the best ways to ensure that we manage our water for a sustainable future.

Sponsors:



and



Participants: 96 people, including:

- 31 people from 16 conservation authorities and Conservation Ontario;
- 24 people from 21 community organizations
- 21 from 5 provincial ministries and the office of the Environmental Commissioner;
- 12 people from 7 universities; and
- 8 people from other organizations including First Nations, business, a federal agency, and a municipality.