

Environment

Municipalities are tasked with fostering the well-being of the environment. This includes environmental considerations related to land-use planning, water management, climate change, industry development and managing growth responsibly.

What is RMA's position on the importance of having a municipal perspective related to the environment?

- Environmental responsibility in Alberta includes consideration of impacts on air, land, water and biodiversity. Municipalities play a key role in front-line environmental management to provide healthy communities for citizens.
- Municipalities are responsible for land-use planning decisions which take into consideration the environmental impacts of growth, industry activities, development or land-use changes, as well as land-use decisions where water bodies and wetlands are a factors.
- Municipalities play a role in managing water systems that impact residents, the environment, and industry.
- Municipalities are active participants in programs that aim to reduce climate change impacts and value the opportunity to be involved in partnerships, such as Municipal Climate Change Action Centre (MCCAC).
- Municipalities respond to severe weather events related to water (e.g. drought or flooding) that have short-term safety and long-term economic, environmental and social impacts.
- Regulatory tools such as environmental reserves and conservation reserves provide municipalities with the ability to balance local development with the protection of environmentally sensitive lands.

What financial considerations do rural municipalities have with respect to the environment?

- Municipalities strive to find a balance between being responsible environmental stewards and ensuring their communities are safe and vibrant.
- The construction or re-development of municipal infrastructure typically requires an environmental impact assessment. Municipalities must evaluate whether the sometimes very high cost of conducting such an assessment is proportional to the projected value of the infrastructure.

- Industrial development that provides economic benefits to rural municipalities may also have significant environmental impacts. Municipalities must be engaged in industrial development and planning processes to weigh short-term benefits against possible long-term concerns.
- Water and wastewater infrastructure is costly and competes with the other priorities in municipalities. Adequate funding needs to be put into place to ensure that Alberta's rural municipalities and rural residents are guaranteed equitable access to safe and secure water.
- Current funding for water and wastewater infrastructure does not reflect the unique needs of rural Alberta including delivering water to small growth areas or accessing regional water lines.
- Delays in the application process for Water Act approvals can delay municipal projects and prevent work on critical community infrastructure during Alberta's relatively short construction season.

What collaborative relationships are essential to rural municipalities in relation to the environment?

- Environmental stewardship requires effective communication between municipalities, Indigenous communities, the provincial and federal governments, industry, citizens and other stakeholders.
- Effective collaboration requires clear, specific roles. Decision makers must acknowledge and work with municipalities in their role as a primary authority regarding local environmental stewardship.
- Where compliance with provincial and federal legislation requires specific expertise not typically available within municipalities, the regulating government should not download those roles to municipalities.
- To promote sound environmental stewardship, it is necessary to have coordinated legislation and jurisdiction to protect water bodies and the environmentally sensitive areas adjacent to them.
- RMA participates on numerous multi-stakeholder committees to promote environmentally conscious and sustainable practices and programs (ex. Agricultural Services Boards, Alberta Water Council, Clean Air Strategic Alliance, Agri-Environmental Partnership of Alberta).
- Water is a limited resource in high demand by multiple stakeholders including municipalities and industry. Effective communication and coordination between stakeholders is essential to enhancing effective water management practices.

How does the work of RMA support environmentally sustainable practices?

- Protecting the environment, including Alberta's rivers, lakes, wetlands and groundwater is an important priority for municipalities.
- RMA positions itself to have a role in initiatives focused on environmentally sustainable practices (ex. Alberta Water Council, Clean Air Strategic Alliance).
- RMA is a proud partner of the Municipal Climate Change Action Centre which provides funding, technical assistance and education to support Alberta municipalities in addressing climate change.
- Representing municipal concerns is a primary focus of RMA's involvement as a member of the Alberta Water Council. The multi-stakeholder approach used by the Alberta Water Council allows for diverse discussions and recommendations on water-related issues.
- RMA co-chairs the Drought and Excessive Moisture Advisory Group, which provides input to the Government of Alberta on how to prevent, mitigate, and respond to water-related disasters such as floods and droughts.

What current environment-related issues are impacting rural Alberta?

Wetland Policy

- The Alberta Wetland Policy is intended to provide strategic direction to conserve, restore, protect and manage wetlands in a manner that sustains the social, environmental and economic benefits they provide. Recognizing the benefit of wetlands, rural municipalities are working in alignment with the Alberta Wetland Policy to support development decisions.
- In aligning activities with the Alberta Wetland Policy, rural municipalities are experiencing delayed approvals resulting in increased costs and incomplete infrastructure projects, which impacts the safety of residents. Improvements need to be made to ensure that Water Act approvals in alignment with the Alberta Wetland Policy can be received in a timely fashion.

Species at Risk Act

- Rural municipalities appreciate that protection of critical habitat and species under the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA) is needed. When identifying critical habitats for species protection, the Government of Canada must use a balanced approach which considers social, economic, and environmental impacts.
- Consultation with municipalities and landowners in areas where species may be threatened or at risk is needed to support a transparent process.

- Where appropriate, municipalities and landowners should be fairly compensated for loss of use of land for economic purposes, such as agriculture or industry activities, resulting from sterilization where critical habitats are identified.

Regional Plans under the Land-use Framework

- The regional plan development process under the Land-use Framework must continue forward to provide direction to municipalities, but must also be developed in a way that aligns with new municipal planning requirements under the Municipal Government Act (MGA) (e.g. Intermunicipal Collaboration Frameworks).
- Planning decisions such as those related to the conservation and protected areas must be undertaken within the context of established regional plans.

Flood and Drought Mitigation

- All land-use planning at the municipal level should consider possible environmental impacts, including the potential for flooding and drought mitigation.
- Flooding in different areas of the province has resulted in the ongoing development of legislative changes for land-use planning in flood prone areas. Municipalities recognize the importance of avoiding flood-prone areas, these formalized changes need to be monitored for impacts and unintended consequences. These legislative changes have yet to be incorporated into the existing land-use framework and may require in municipalities to amend land-use bylaws.
- Flood and drought mitigation efforts are timely and needed but must involve local governments and comprehensive consultation. Continued support for provincial initiatives such as the Watershed Resiliency and Restoration Program enable efforts that contribute to environmental health and encourage forward-thinking approaches to non-structural mitigation.
- Drought events can have devastating impacts on industries that rely on healthy moisture amounts, such as agriculture and forestry. Consistent communication between all levels of government, agriculture and forestry producers and other stakeholders is essential to provide timely information and solutions during these events.

Climate Change

- Climate change is increasingly an important policy issue as Alberta seeks to balance population growth, industrial development, and environmental concerns.
- RMA is actively involved in the Municipal Climate Change Action Centre (MCCAC), which provides technical assistance and expertise to municipalities to increase energy efficiency of operations and improve conservation of greenhouse gases.

- The phase-out of coal-generated electricity has already impacted communities and Albertans employed in the coal industry. Supports need to be in place to assist these rural communities during this transition and engagement with RMA and its member municipalities is necessary to ensure there is a balance between achieving climate mitigation objectives and the sustainability of communities impacted by this transition.
- The provincial carbon levy may be an effective tool in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, its impacts on both municipalities and rural residents must be considered. Municipal costs provide services and maintain infrastructure have risen, and rural residents have few alternative transportation options, and therefore may be less able to reduce their use of vehicles.

Indigenous Consultation

- RMA requests that the Government of Alberta produce clear guidelines for municipalities in relation to the Government of Alberta's First Nations and Métis Consultation Policies. These guidelines should identify clear roles for municipal, provincial, and federal governments, and First Nations, and Métis groups. Effective consultation requires clear roles.
- Within the consultation process, RMA recognizes the value that the Government of Alberta and Government of Canada are placing on traditional ecological knowledge held Indigenous peoples. By building relationships with Indigenous neighbours, municipalities will have access to this essential information about the environment through Indigenous perspectives, thus resulting in greater understanding between Indigenous groups and municipalities.

Aquatic Invasive Species

- Aquatic invasive species such as Quagga and Zebra Mussels are serious threats to the health of Alberta's lakes, and have the potential to have major economic and environmental impacts in Alberta.
- A strong regulatory framework that includes a zero tolerance for aquatic invasive species is needed in Alberta and across western Canada. Taking a proactive approach to implementing preventative measures will protect Alberta's aquatic environment from these invasive species.

Brownfields

- Brownfields have been identified as a barrier for municipal development and economic growth due to existing regulatory limitations and lack of funding incentives.
- RMA continues to advocate for progress based on recommendations identified in the 2012 report, Alberta Brownfields Redevelopment: Practical Approaches to Achieve Productive Community Use.

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