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Examining the impact of Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils

A first-of-its-kind University of Lethbridge study has found that the effectiveness of Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils in enhancing land stewardship and water management is closely link to how well they are connected to and engaged with municipal governments.

Alberta's Water for Life strategy, launched in 2003, provided a blueprint for managing the province's water resources and paved the way for the establishment of 11 Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils (WPACs), each representing a major river basin. WPACs are independent, non-profit organizations responsible for planning at the watershed or basin level. They report on watershed health and lead collaborative planning among their stakeholders, which include municipal governments.



“Because municipal governments have a significant bearing on the management of land and water, they play a crucial role in the WPACs’ ability to fulfill their mandate,” says Dr. Lorraine Nicol, senior research associate in the Department of Economics at the University of Lethbridge. “An effective working relationship between WPACs and municipalities is vital. However, no one has evaluated the impact of WPAC initiatives on municipal land and water management and planning.”

Nicol and her husband, Dr. Chris Nicol, professor of economics, conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of WPAC initiatives, identify barriers and develop recommendations. With funding from the Alberta Real Estate Foundation, they conducted a study which looked at four WPACs — Battle River Watershed Alliance, Milk River Watershed Council Canada, North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance and Oldman Watershed Council — and surveyed the municipalities located within these watersheds.

Results show municipalities have relatively high levels of awareness of WPACs and their work, and over 80 per cent of survey respondents felt it was important their municipality work with their WPAC. They reported the greatest benefits of working with a WPAC were increases in

knowledge, awareness, education, expertise and information. Some municipalities reported a lack of awareness of WPAC planning exercises and the results were mixed in terms of impact on municipalities in making more informed decisions and developing statutory documents.



“WPACs are making an impact, but the degree of impact varied from a high of 69 per cent to a low of 41 per cent, depending on the WPAC,” says Chris.

In general, the percentage of those surveyed who said WPACs increased awareness for municipalities in broad subject areas — such as the relationship between land-use planning and watershed health and water quality and quantity — varied between 80 per cent and 40 per cent.

“These mixed results point to the degree of effectiveness of WPAC communications with municipalities,” says Lorraine. “For some councils, poor communications are limiting the full benefit of information sharing and expertise on land and water management and planning. While WPACs have a lot to offer, not all municipalities are maximizing the benefits.”

Municipalities identified making connections, engaging and communicating as the greatest challenges and they most often recommended increasing engagement through presentations to decision makers, either in person or virtually to allow multiple municipalities to attend. WPACs can also collaborate together in communicating with municipalities, especially about government initiatives or policies that affect all watershed.

“In the end, improving the effectiveness of WPACs will enhance land stewardship and water management for sustainable communities, which affects property values and impacts all citizens,” says Chris.

This news release can be found online at [WPACs](#).

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