



## Partners FOR the Saskatchewan River Basin - *“Legacy”* Workshop

March 21, 2023 – 1330 – 1630 CST

Partners FOR the



Saskatchewan  
River Basin

Partners has left a legacy of education about water and water management, the effects of which will be felt for many years after its departure from the scene. However, as we close our doors, there are lessons we can leave to Saskatchewan River Basin residents who share a concern for the state of water and water management. This document is the result of an on-line workshop sponsored by Partners.

## **Introduction**

Bob Halliday welcomed participants to the session. He stated that Partners finds itself in the position of having to cease operations and wants to leave a last document to support water stewardship in the basin in the future. He noted that Partners had been founded in 1993. Over the years some governments had dramatically reduced their support for water stewardship NGOs like Partners making it difficult to obtain core funding and to conduct programs.

## **Approach to the Session**

Sheldon Mcleod described the approach to the session. A number of questions had been prepared and each would be discussed for about 30 minutes with an open-ended question to wrap up. The goal was to determine lessons that can be left behind. He noted that none of the remarks made in the session would be attributed to an individual or to an organization.

## **Question 1 – Existing and Emerging Challenges of Importance**

*Climate change is an obvious challenge to water managers in our basin. Seven vulnerabilities identified were identified in State of the Basin in 2009. What are the other challenges to which we should draw attention? If PFSRB were continuing, what would you like to see be accomplished?*

### **Indigenous Relations**

Treaty rights, reconciliation, consultation, decolonizing water. There is an opportunity for stewardship organizations to take approaches different from governments who have constraints that NGOs do not.

### **Climate Change**

Challenge is how to make progress in the face of the current political climate.

### **Land Use Change**

Transition from grazing to intensive agriculture, increased drainage, increased drought and wildfires.

### **Municipal Water Use**

Source water supply, risks to quantity and quality.

### **Groundwater Quality**

Out of sight, out of mind.

### **Governance**

Do we have the structures in place to deal with conflicts, both within and across jurisdictions? To what degree can, or should, water stewardship organizations take strong advocacy positions? Advocacy for evidence-based decision-making vs issue-related advocacy? Need to build partnerships, including with indigenous organizations. How to jointly work on the same puzzle?

### **Financial Support for Stewardship Organization**

Core funding for operations is a challenge as government support, for the most part, diminishes. The organizations need champions. Need to explore various funding models as the current model is not allowing stewardship organizations to play their needed role in water governance.

### **Sharing Knowledge**

Partners did good work in producing materials and activities for school students. Some of these are transferable to other organizations. (For example, Meewasin works with Saskatoon area school districts and continues to use some Partners materials.) The 2009 State of the Basin report should be updated. Boundary organizations, such as Partners, need to serve as translators of scientific findings and engineering reports so as to grow a better-informed public.

## **Question 2 – The Contributions of Partners**

*Over the years, Partners has made the following contributions: newsletter, annual conference, webinars, activities for school students, State of the Basin Report, and the Basin Map. Has Partners made a significant contribution to you or your organization? How and to what extent? What have you appreciated in working with or hearing from PFSRB?*

### **Education**

Noted that Partners original education programs such as Water Watchdog and Click on Climate were not aimed specifically at school students. These helped build the base for a science-oriented, non-political NGO. Youth programs such as Yellow Fish Road, Irritable Sewer System, and Caring for our Watersheds enhanced knowledge of water infrastructure and resource protection. Special relationship with school districts developed.

### **Annual Conference**

It was useful that Partners usually shared the hosting of the conference with a local organization thereby bringing disparate persons together and enhancing connections across the basin. The Saskatchewan River Delta conference was an important one and made a significant contribution to raising public awareness of the largest inland freshwater delta in North America.

### **Webinars**

The webinars during Covid – a time of no annual conferences – helped fill a gap although they could not be as effective as the in-person conferences.

### **Governance**

Partners programs helped solidify the transboundary nature of the basin. The need for big-picture views is important. Delivery of programs by a third party, rather than government, was useful. Perhaps better execution and avoidance of political overlays for community partners. Also, organizations have credibility with audiences where governments lack that same credibility.

### **Heritage Rivers**

Partners played a pivotal role in the challenge of having the South Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan rivers within Saskatchewan declared as Heritage Rivers. Support for the project was not unanimous and as a result a designation was not obtained.

### **State of the Basin report**

The report was integral in informing the public and stitching diverse parts of the basin together and bringing focus to existing and emerging issues.

### **Question 3 – Partners’ Contribution Missed?**

*Are there emerging or continuing opportunities or challenges to which Partners could have made a significant contribution had we been able to continue?*

#### **Context**

Basin-wide approach appreciated as is the opportunity to interact with people from various disciplines and perspectives. People who may not be encountered in day-to-day activity add nuance, sometimes from an official perspective, sometimes an opinion that opens one’s mind.

#### **Classrooms**

Hands-on experience will be missed. Compare to Agriculture in the Classroom.

#### **Canada Water Agency**

The Winnipeg-based agency could have benefited from Partner’s engagement during its start-up phase.

Sheldon asked for any specific comments related to governance. Some comments:

- Governance is pretty well nailed down with regards on who manages water. Gaps may exist in knowledge/awareness. Water quality/quantity information not being translated widely by professionals.
- Communication of information to public is lacking, particularly in Saskatchewan; transparency of governance – making it public, and publicly available; could be due to lack of understanding on behalf of decision makers
- Include Indigenous perspectives
- Distrust of governments and ‘experts’ – role of stewardship organizations to bridge that gap in trust
- Need to be careful who provides funding for stewardship organizations, as stipulations are sometimes attached

### **Question 4 – Partners’ Advice to Others?**

*If you were advising a water stewardship group which was aiming to contribute to water and water management on the Prairies, what helpful lessons arising from Partners’ experiences would you think would be particularly helpful to those groups?*

#### **Goal**

Need clear goals, focus related to available funding. Need awareness of potential for mission creep. Try for early successes and keep funders engaged.

## **Structure**

Member-based organization, or not? How will members be engaged as opposed to the broader public?

## **Partnerships**

Survey the landscape. Be aware of each organization's niche and make the most of funding, avoid overlap, partner where it makes sense to. Avoid competing for funding when working together. Helping each other is more productive. Seek out allies and partners, especially reluctant partners. Developing a productive relationship with a reluctant partner will often be much more difficult, but the benefits of bringing them into the tent will often justify the effort expended.

## **Indigenous Engagement**

Acknowledge inherent rights and make the distinction with other basin residents.

## **Advocacy**

Understand advocacy as opposed to lobbying.

## **Question 5 – Other Perspectives?**

*Is there anything top of mind for you that you have not had a chance to share?*

## **Transboundary Basin**

The nature of the basin was emphasized. Difficult for locally-based sub-watershed groups to provide the transboundary context.

## **Climate Change**

The dominant issue for current water managers. The Colorado basin provides a cautionary tale.

## **Book Recommendations.**

Bacigalupi, Pablo 2015. *The Water Knife*. A science fiction novel in which an evil-doer disrupts water boards in the drought-stricken American southwest.

Reisner, Marc 1986. *Cadillac Desert*. This award-winning book provides a history of water management in the American west. Reisner is the origin of the expression, "Water **can** run uphill, towards money".

## **Closing Comments**

Bob and Sheldon thanked participants for sharing their opinions and insights. The information from the discussion will be compiled in a report which will be placed on the Partner's website. Any watershed group that would like to use Partner's material should contact Bob or Meewasin.