



Water Security Agency

Agricultural Water Stewardship Policy Engagement

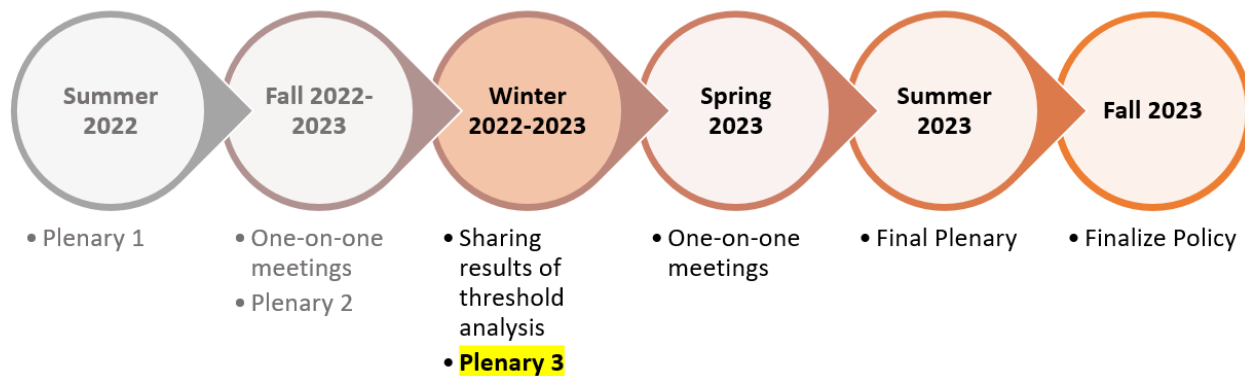
Plenary Session 3 – April 2023

What We Heard

Background & Methodology

In June 2022, Inshightrix Research Inc. (Inshightrix) was contracted by the Saskatchewan Water Security Agency (WSA) to facilitate engagement plenary sessions to support development of an Agricultural Water Stewardship Policy by fall 2023. This report summarizes findings from the third plenary session held in April 2023. The main objective of this session was to gather feedback and input on potential stewardship tools and approaches to achieve desired policy outcomes.

Timeline for development of policy and on-going engagement process:



The plenaries were structured for stakeholders and Indigenous communities that may be directly impacted by the stewardship policy, and whose advocacy directly relates to wetland management at the provincial scale. Over 70 separate organizations have been invited to the engagement sessions to date, representing the following broad categories:

- ✓ **32 agricultural producer groups**
- ✓ **8 environmental groups**
- ✓ **5 research groups**
- ✓ **4 municipal / community organizations**
- ✓ **21 Indigenous organizations / communities**

Plenary 3 was held in Saskatoon on April 12, 2023. A total of 38 individuals representing 28 organizations attended (including all broad categories noted above).

The key objective of this plenary session was to collect feedback on potential stewardship tools and approaches to achieve the desired policy outcomes that were written based on input collected during earlier phases of engagement. Plenary feedback was collected via six break-out groups with approximately six to seven participants in each group.

During the plenary session, participants were introduced to a group exercise where they were asked to discuss and identify tools and approaches that could be used to achieve the desired policy outcomes in one of two practical scenarios. Each group was provided with a map of a drainage network, a list of the draft policy outcomes as well as information on potential tools / approaches for consideration. Following the exercise, participants were led through groups discussions focused on collecting feedback on:

- Key takeaways from the group exercise
- What stewardship practices they used and how they contributed to policy outcomes
- What stewardship practises were considered but not used, and why? Advice for WSA when developing stewardship practices.

Following groups discussions, participants were invited to complete a short feedback survey. Of the 38 participants, 35 responded to the survey.

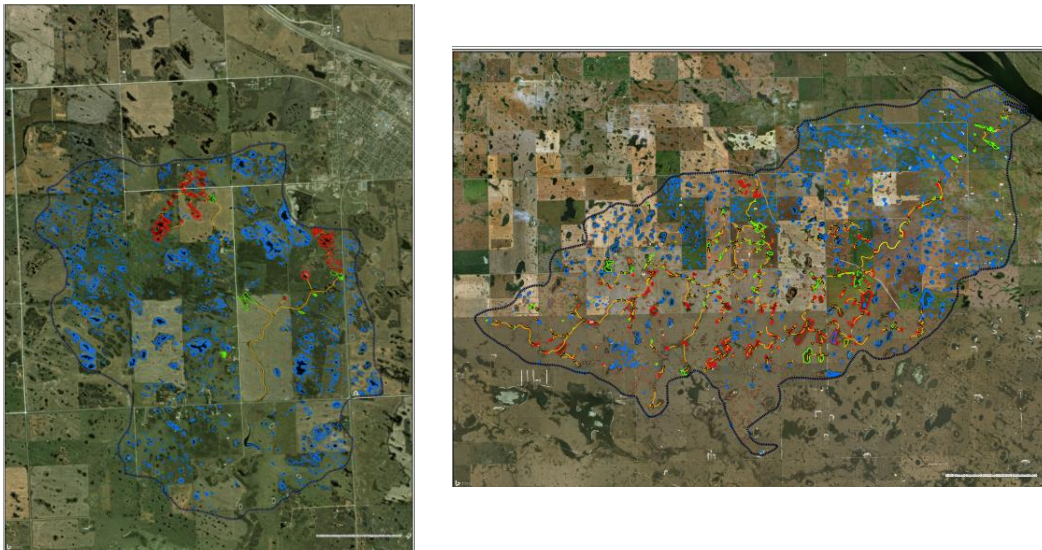
Summary of Key Findings

Map Exercise Learnings

- All agree the task of balancing policy outcomes is challenging. Given the range of stakeholder interests and unique regional conditions, implementation of the Agricultural Water Stewardship Policy will be difficult to streamline / standardize.
- Facilitators observed a natural emphasis was placed on trying to make equitable decisions for all stakeholders when completing the exercise.
- The exercise emphasized that water stewardship should be considered at multiple levels, including regionally but also down to field / farm level. Participants state a “boots on the ground” approach will be required to successfully assess and address water stewardship projects in the province.

- Participants note that to make informed, equitable and effective decisions, a great amount of data, information and context on the local situation is necessary, including needs assessments involving landowners and other stakeholders.
- Participants believe industry / subject matter experts representing a broad range of stakeholder groups will be required to guide and implement solutions that address and balance the draft desired policy outcomes within and across watershed networks.

Group Map Exercise Scenarios



The task for each of the groups was to apply management tools (e.g., wetland retention, wetland drainage, wetland restoration/construction, wetland consolidation, beneficial management practices, flow controls) to create a landscape where all the policy outcomes are balanced. This map exercise was meant for illustration purposes and to facilitate discussions.

Considerations for Developing the Policy

The following are based on learnings from the map exercise, group discussions and feedback from the post-plenary survey. Key findings from the third plenary session build upon themes identified during earlier phases of the engagement process.

- Existing drainage and water management practises will need to be considered and assessed when addressing new and evolving challenges.
 - Ensure full understanding of “what is happening on the ground”, including gaining landowner input on the history of the area (e.g., how quickly water drains, etc.).

- Landowner buy-in and involvement is viewed as essential for success.

Communication and Education

- Education and communication will be fundamental to reducing tensions brought on by conflicting priorities and perspectives.
 - Educate stakeholders and the general public about desired policy outcomes and possible water stewardship tools / approaches to ensure understanding of the complexities and challenges related to watershed resource management.
 - Facilitate transparency through championing policy education to the greater population.
 - Communicate the policy to relevant governing agencies to limit contradictory information stakeholders may receive when navigating the policy guidelines.
- Once a policy document has been developed, embark on a wide-reaching communications campaign to ensure stakeholders and the general public are aware of the new policy and timeline for implementation.

Regional Differences

- Consider regional differences for all policy areas (water quality, water quantity, wildlife resources, agricultural economy, communities).
 - A multi-level approach will be required to address concerns at the broader level (i.e., province-wide, within watershed networks) as well as on an individual level for the various stakeholders involved.
 - Consider how micro-regional scenarios impact broader watersheds.

A Flexible Policy

- Build a policy that offers flexibility vs. stringent criteria on aspects such as “x% of land must be retained as wetlands” given the wide variety of scenarios throughout the province. This includes not just watersheds, but to a sub-watershed level (i.e., field-level).

How, at the level of this policy, will local and regional conservation opportunities or needs be met? The work today highlights the need for local/regional knowledge and data to support where is important for conservation compared with areas where, for example, wetlands and other lands can be removed or drained.

Policy will need to consider regional aspects. A broad-brush policy will be difficult to apply.

How will this policy be collating local and regional knowledge/data to aide effective outcomes for communities, ag sectors and the environment.

Will policy be vetted across other government ministries, agencies, corporations to ensure complementary alignment of policies, and that there are not contradictory or undermining policies elsewhere?

There needs to be a wide scale communication plan to ensure all landowners and the public are aware of the policy and the timeline for implementing.

A Balanced Approach

- Strive for balance between agricultural economics and wetland conservation / preservation of biodiversity. Consider cost implications to implementation and potential government incentives / subsidies.
- Define the process for considering whether policy outcomes have been met. Clearly communicate how competing interests / policy outcomes will be addressed and managed.
- Landowners are perceived to carry a heavy burden when poor policy implementations occur and consideration for this key stakeholder group will be important. Robust consultation and communication with landowners prior to decision making is likely to contribute to policy compliance.

Monitoring and Reporting (Once Policy is Implemented)

- A standardized approach for understanding benchmarks, thresholds and targets for each policy outcome / network is desirable to help guide decision making. Identify specific criteria or thresholds to be used for determining whether policy outcomes are being met.

- Revisit the standard of water quality. What is the reference point of “quality” (e.g., current day or date in the past)? Does it vary by intended use of the water usage? How do we protect water quality for downstream neighbours?
- Define desirable water quantities. How much needs to be retained? Is it a percentage of what is existing? How does that factor in historical water levels?
- Impacts to groundwater will need to be addressed within the policy document. Build knowledge about the impacts of water stewardship practices on groundwater and ensure data is included in decision making processes.
- Determine a plan for revisiting the policy document. How will success be measured? What will be the process for evaluating policy performance and implementing changes / improvements in the future?

Broad Engagement

- Continue to engage a broad range of stakeholders and interest groups for feedback and input on the draft policy document.
- Ensure learnings from engagement and consultation with Indigenous communities are represented in the draft policy by integrating Indigenous perspectives, land use needs and treaty rights.

Factor in Climate Change

- The effects of climate change need to be factored into policy implementation. Consider integrating climate change predictions (e.g., changing rain patterns during the growing season).
- Flexibility to adapt to evolving climate conditions will be important for long-term success of the policy.

Compliance and Enforcement

- Enforcement has been a longstanding concern for stakeholders. Develop and communicate clear policies and procedures on how the policy will be enforced / regulated.

Policy Tools

- Consider recommending flow controls that are resistant to tampering by stakeholders (e.g., choose culverts of a specific size to regulate flow vs. enabling people to cut pipes, open/close gates, etc.).

- Determine the scope of regulation in terms of land size. Is there a minimum number of acres considered to be in scope of regulation?
- Explore alternative management practices such as regenerative agriculture or organic agriculture.
- Consider possible compensation models for landowners who positively contribute to wetland retention and management priorities.

Definitions of water quality and water quantity are missing. How do we define when we are achieving or not achieving these outcomes? How much water quantity do we want to retain in a watershed? Is it a percentage of what is existing?

How are the regulations being developed? What are the retention goals?

Climate change was missed. How do we ensure future proofing the policies for changing farming practices?

A wetland policy needs to be designed to prioritize ecologically sound long-term stability and sustainability of biodiversity.

What is the definition of wetland? Once you zero in on actual wetlands then this process becomes so much easier. Class 1 and 2 and 3 are not what society would think of when they hear wetland.

I look forward to seeing metrics associated with each outcome, so we have measurable outcomes.

Advice & Next Steps

Overall, participants are satisfied with level of engagement to date and are looking to WSA to produce a draft policy document for further consideration and feedback. Future engagement should focus on collecting feedback on a draft Agricultural Water Stewardship Policy. Policy enforcement is a top concern for many and will need to be addressed.

Which stakeholders will be deciding whether policy outcomes have been met? How are competing interests going to be managed? Are the policy outcomes ranked by importance?

The devil is in the details. There have still to be any guidelines presented as to what the regulations of the policy will include.

Enforcement hasn't been discussed. Without regulation, how can the desired outcomes be achieved?

What exactly will the policy look like? WSA needs to produce a concrete document and circulate it for public input.

Important that policy be based on solidly established and accepted principles supported by scientific research to reduce the role of opinion, be publicly defensible and to depoliticize through transparency and public education.

The tools are there if they are used prudently and effectively considering the benefits of many as opposed to the needs of a few.

These meetings have become too vague - without a specified policy it is impossible to evaluate policy outcomes.

Session Feedback Survey

Q. How well do you feel your perspectives are represented in the draft policy outcomes?

	Plenary 2 (December 2022)	Plenary 3 (April 2023)
Well NET (Very + Somewhat well)	77%	83%
Very well	23%	14%
Somewhat well	54%	69%
Not very well	15%	17%
Not at all	8%	0%

*Note: Question not asked on Plenary 1 feedback survey.

Session Feedback

