

# TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR DEVELOPING THE LOWER ATHABASCA REGIONAL PLAN



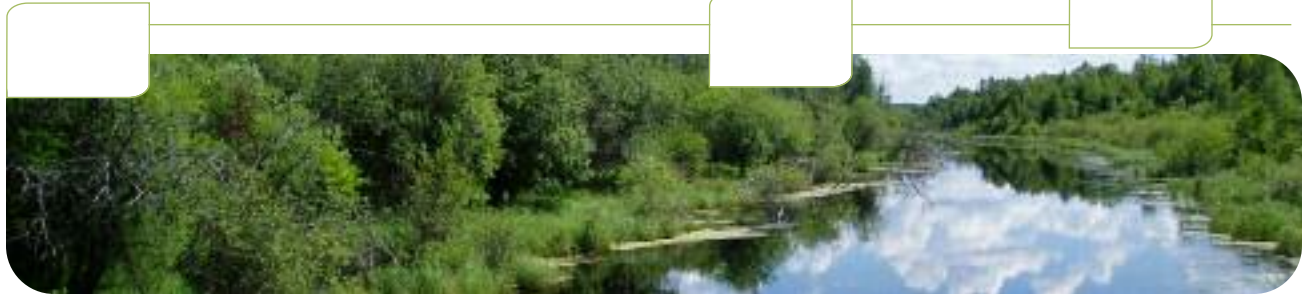
Beaver River



**Government  
of Alberta** 



# The Land-use Framework



## What is the Land-use Framework?

Alberta's Land-use Framework sets out the new approach for managing public and private lands and natural resources to achieve Alberta's long-term economic, environmental and social goals. It is a blueprint designed to guide us in making decisions about our land and natural resources, developed after extensive consultation with Albertans.

The Land-use Framework establishes three desired outcomes for our province:

- a healthy economy supported by our land and natural resources;
- healthy ecosystems and environment; and
- people-friendly communities with ample recreational and cultural opportunities.

These outcomes are inter-related. How we pursue one unavoidably affects the others. For example, new resource industry projects in a region will create jobs, provide income to local residents and contribute to Alberta's economy. However, they may attract new workers to the region, placing added pressure on the region's public infrastructure and social systems. Each project will also have effects on the air, water, land and biodiversity.

Alberta's economic growth must therefore be balanced with our social and environmental goals. The Land-use Framework is designed to help Alberta achieve this balance through smart growth.

The Land-use Framework sets out seven key strategies for improving land-use decision-making in Alberta.

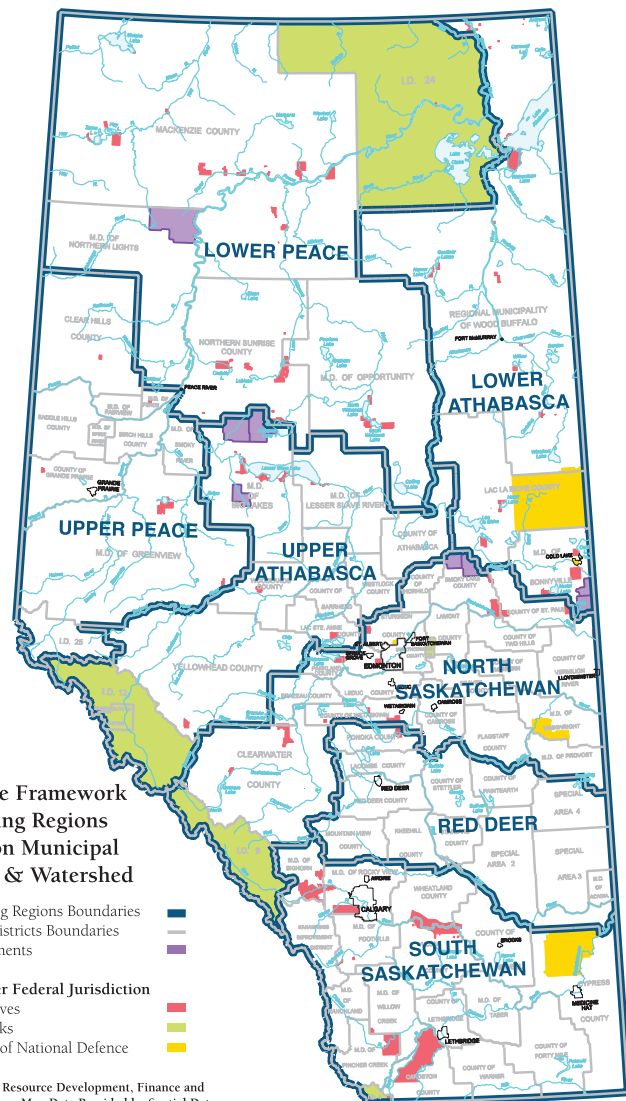
1. Develop seven regional plans based on seven new land-use regions.
2. Create a Land Use Secretariat and establish a Regional Advisory Council (RAC) for each region.
3. Cumulative effects management will be used at the regional level to manage the impacts of development on land, water and air.

4. Develop a strategy for conservation and stewardship on private and public lands.
5. Promote efficient use of land to reduce the footprint of human activities on Alberta's landscape.
6. Establish an information, monitoring and knowledge system to contribute to continuous improvement of land-use planning and decision-making.
7. Inclusion of Aboriginal peoples in land-use planning.



The first three strategies involve the development of regional land-use plans for our province.

This document sets out the process by which these regional plans will be developed, and provides guidance from Cabinet on specific economic, environmental and social factors that must be considered.



**Land-use Framework  
Planning Regions  
based on Municipal  
Districts & Watershed**

LUF Planning Regions Boundaries  
Municipal Districts Boundaries  
Metis Settlements

Lands Under Federal Jurisdiction  
Indian Reserves  
National Parks  
Department of National Defence

Produced by Sustainable Resource Development, Finance and Administration Division. Base Map Data Provided by Spatial Data Warehouse Ltd. © Nov 27, 2008 Government of Alberta



# Regional Planning



## What will a regional plan do?

Each regional plan will address the current conditions in a region, and will anticipate and plan for the major activities, opportunities and challenges in that region over the long-term.

A regional plan is intended to paint a picture of how a region should look over several decades. At the broadest level, each regional plan will consider a planning horizon of at least 50 years. The plan will be designed to be effective for a five to 10 year period, after which it will be reviewed and updated as needed to address the realities of the day.

As set out in the Land-use Framework, regional plans are designed to integrate and achieve – not hinder – the Government of Alberta’s environmental, economic and social objectives over the long-term.

Each regional plan will articulate desired outcomes for a region, which should reflect and integrate provincial policies and objectives that have been set by Cabinet. In effect, the plan will demonstrate how major provincial strategies will align with each other at the regional level.

Regional plans will also set thresholds to manage the cumulative effects of development at the regional level. This recognizes that a region’s airsheds, watersheds and landscapes are not limitless; this will help guide future development in the region.

Regional plans need to balance regional and provincial considerations. Airsheds and watersheds, for example, cross regional boundaries. Transportation and utility systems and corridors (e.g., highways) span multiple regions. Each regional plan must therefore consider how choices made in the region will impact other, adjacent land-use regions.

Lands under federal jurisdiction, such as First Nations lands, national parks and military lands, also need to be considered. Although a regional plan will not direct activities on these lands, it must consider the long-term needs of these areas and how they may impact desired outcomes in the region.



## Who is responsible for regional planning?

The Government of Alberta is responsible for regional planning. Regional plans will be reviewed and approved by Cabinet, and they will become official policies of the Government of Alberta. Municipalities and Alberta government departments will be required to comply with regional plans in their decision-making.



Regional planning also involves local input. For each land-use region, a Regional Advisory Council is being established. Each RAC is comprised of members with a cross-section of social, economic and environmental expertise and experience. They will bring local insight and perspectives on present and future land-use activities and challenges in the region. The mandate of the RAC is to provide advice to Cabinet regarding the regional plan.

## What's in a regional plan?

A regional plan sets out information about the state of a region today. It describes our future vision and outcomes for that region. And it articulates the strategies, actions and approaches that should be followed to ensure the region is developed in ways that achieve the vision and outcomes.



Each regional plan will contain the same main components:

### **Profile of the Region**

The plan will summarize the current state of the region, discussing key economic, environmental and social considerations and trends in land use. Major issues facing the region now and in the future will be highlighted, with particular attention to the next decade.

### **Policy Context**

The plan will explain the context in which the plan is being created. This includes key policy direction and instructions provided by Cabinet that framed the plan's development.

### **Regional Vision Statement**

The plan will set out a vision that describes the desired future of the region. This vision must support the outcomes and principles of the Land-use Framework.



### **Regional Outcomes**

The plan will outline integrated outcomes that qualitatively describe what we want to achieve at the regional level to support the three outcomes of the Land-use Framework: a healthy economy supported by our land and natural resources; healthy ecosystems and environment; and people-friendly communities with ample recreational and cultural opportunities.

### **Objectives and Goals**

The plan will describe what must be done to achieve the regional vision and outcomes, and it will set quantitative, measurable targets and thresholds in this regard. The plan will also identify trade-offs and choices that will be made in the region to balance economic development with environmental and social considerations, and it will provide rationale for these choices.

### **Strategies, Actions and Approaches**

The plan will also recommend possible regulatory and non-regulatory approaches that could be used to achieve the plan's objectives and goals.

### **Monitoring and Reporting**

The plan will outline how the Alberta government will monitor, track and report on the quantitative targets and thresholds that have been established in the plan.



## **What process will be followed?**

The development of a regional plan is a complex task, involving a significant amount of data, policy input and decision-making. It requires collaboration among the Alberta government, the Regional Advisory Council and those working, living and doing business in the region.

The Alberta government's Land Use Secretariat will oversee the development of each regional plan. It will provide policy analysis, research and administrative support to the RAC. A project team, representing Alberta government ministries and agencies, will work with the Land Use Secretariat to develop the regional plan.

Cabinet will provide guidance to the RAC regarding the economic, environmental and social expectations for the region in the context of the entire province. This will ensure that the regional plan is consistent with the Alberta government's vision, objectives and priorities for the province.

The government will also consider input on the draft regional plan through public, stakeholder and Aboriginal consultations.

Cabinet will approve the final plan, which local governments, provincial departments and other decision-makers will need to follow. Once the regional plan is approved, the Alberta government will determine what action will be taken to implement the plan.

This overall process will ensure that development of the regional plan responds to new and emerging issues and meets the expectations of Albertans.





## How will regional plans be developed?

The RAC will start by conceptualizing the region in broad terms. It will provide advice on **what** the region should look like over the long-term and **how** activities in the region should be planned.

As the RAC is informed by data, modelling projections and provincial policies about the region, it will refine its advice in more focused and specific terms.



Guidance from Cabinet will be provided in stages, framing the work of the RAC as it progressively narrows its focus from broad to specific questions and issues.

In turn, the RAC will feed back advice to Cabinet, which will inform the development of the regional plan.

This will be an evolving conversation between Cabinet and the RAC as the RAC addresses important and complex questions about land use in the region.

The Government of Alberta has articulated many broad policy objectives at the provincial level. But applying those at a regional level won't be a simple exercise.

Some policy objectives may conflict with each other. Some will have greater relevance in one region than in other regions. Some policy objectives will be more achievable in certain regions and less achievable in other regions.

An important part of the RAC's work is to sort out these issues, based on the guidance it receives from Cabinet about the region. Guidance will include elements such as:

- general directions on priorities for the region;
- specific policies that should be considered by the RAC;
- qualitative and quantitative assumptions that the RAC should follow;
- possible land-use conflicts that must be reconciled; and
- key land-use questions on which Cabinet would like the RAC's advice.

## What issues will Cabinet provide guidance on?

Cabinet will provide the RAC with guidance regarding three major aspects of land-use:

### **The Balance Between Development and Environment**

Economic development is important for creating jobs and prosperity for Albertans. But development must be balanced with protection of





the environment, to ensure current and future generations have clean airsheds, watersheds and landscapes and healthy ecosystems. The RAC will be given guidance about how to strike this balance in the region.

### **Assessment and Allocation of Resources**

Resources such as air, water and land have finite carrying capacity. Assessing and allocating these resources for different land-use activities (e.g., conservation, recreation, agriculture) will be an aspect of the RAC's work.

### **Policy Alignment**

The RAC will be asked to identify policy gaps or conflicts that must be addressed in order to align provincial policies with the regional plan.

## **What will Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) provide advice on?**

The RACs will provide advice on the following:

### **Future Development**

Each RAC will provide advice on how the region should develop over the long-term while achieving:

- a healthy economy supported by our land and natural resources;
- healthy ecosystems and environment; and
- people-friendly communities with ample recreational and cultural opportunities.

### **Regional Outcomes**

Within the context of provincial outcomes set by Cabinet and the Land-use Framework, the RACs will provide advice on desired outcomes at the regional level.

### **Provincial Policies**

The RACs will provide advice on how these policies should work together at the regional level.

### **Trade-offs**

The RACs will provide advice on how competing land uses in the region should be reconciled and how trade-offs could be addressed.

### **Public Input**

The RACs will provide advice on public and stakeholder consultations in the region as part of the regional planning process.

## Are there limits on what the RACs will do?

The following issues fall outside the scope of regional plans, and will not be considered by the RACs:

### **Municipal Governance**

Regional plans will not consider the re-organization or restructuring of municipalities in the province, nor make recommendations concerning the dissolution, amalgamation or creation of municipalities.



### **Aboriginal Consultation**

*Alberta's First Nation Consultation Policy on Land Management and Resource Development* will guide Aboriginal consultations. Regional plans will not modify the policy.

### **Population Limits**

Regional plans will not consider or set maximum caps on human population or settlement.

### **Taxation**

Regional plans shall not address tax policy, tax rates or questions regarding taxation of individuals or businesses.



### **Provincial Royalties**

Regional plans shall not address or make recommendations concerning provincial royalties.

### **Government Expenditures**

Regional plans will not stipulate, estimate or recommend levels of capital or operating expenditures required of the Government of Alberta or cost-sharing arrangements concerning infrastructure. Budgetary decisions remain the sole responsibility of the Government of Alberta as part of the plan's implementation. The plans may recognize, as part of meeting the overall objectives, that investment in infrastructure is required and may suggest efficient ways to implement.

### **Existing Laws and Regulations**

It is recognized that objectives and goals in the regional plans may require legislative and regulatory changes during implementation. The Alberta government will assess and determine the need for such changes, and make any required changes through Alberta's legislative procedures. The RACs are not being asked to advise on current laws and regulations but may pass comments to Cabinet as part of their advice should something become apparent as part of their deliberations.



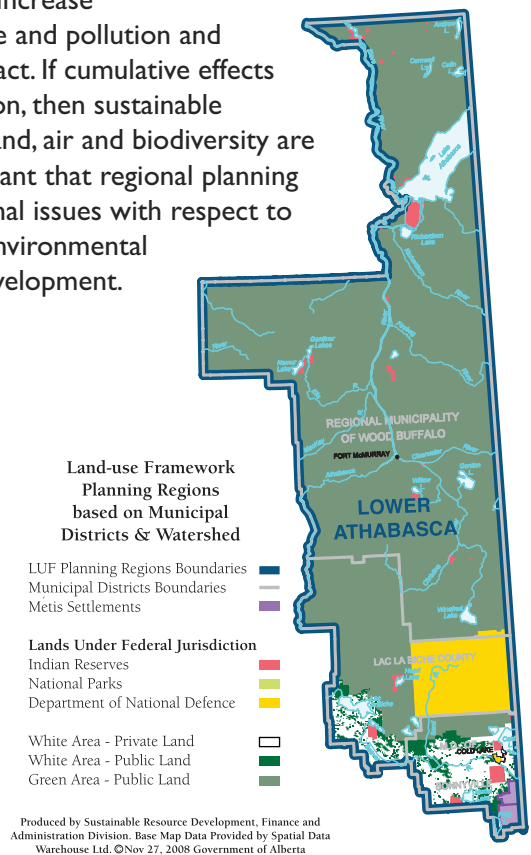
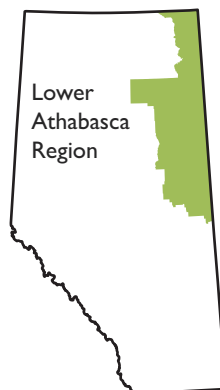
# The Lower Athabasca Region



The **Lower Athabasca Region** includes the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Lac La Biche County and the Municipal District of Bonnyville.

The Land-use Framework identified the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan as an immediate priority. On December 19, 2008, the Government of Alberta appointed a Regional Advisory Council for the Lower Athabasca.

First Nations and Métis have expressed serious concerns about the state of their traditional areas. Some seek creation of “preserved” areas to ensure the future of treaty rights. First Nations believe they should be consulted on regional plans beyond the land-use region in which their reserve lands lie because of the broad expanse of traditional territory. Aboriginal people are concerned that the rapid pace of development will increase environmental disturbance and pollution and that government will not act. If cumulative effects thresholds are not set soon, then sustainable environments for water, land, air and biodiversity are compromised. It is important that regional planning take into account Aboriginal issues with respect to Aboriginal consultation, environmental protection and human development.





## Balance between development and environment

Initial guidance to the RAC from government regarding the balance between development and environment in the Lower Athabasca, is provided in four key areas:

- economic growth and development scenarios;
- land conservation objectives;
- regional air and water thresholds; and
- human development considerations.



### Economic growth and development scenarios

The Lower Athabasca is major source of economic growth in Alberta. The region contains almost all of Alberta's proven oil sands reserves, and is home to the majority of oil sands developments in the province. Natural gas production is concentrated in the southern part of the region, and supports oil sands developments.

The forest industry is also a major contributor to economic development in the region. Timber production is estimated at 3.5 million cubic metres per year.

The region's economic growth has been a key driver of the provincial economy, creating jobs and opportunities for residents in the Lower Athabasca region and the rest of the province. Royalties and taxes from the energy and forestry industries contribute significant revenues to the Alberta Treasury, helping fund infrastructure and important programs and services for all Albertans.

- For the 2007-2008 fiscal year, the oil sands contributed almost \$3 billion in royalties to Alberta.
- In 2007, total revenue generated from the forest industry in the Lower Athabasca, directly and indirectly, was approximately \$1.4 billion. Currently, \$1.5 to \$4.3 million is generated as revenue to the provincial Crown.

Alberta's vision is to be "a global energy leader, recognized as a responsible world-class energy supplier, an energy technology champion, a sophisticated energy consumer, and a solid global environmental citizen."<sup>1</sup> The international and provincial significance of the oil sands resource means that oil sands development will continue to form a centrepiece of this vision.

<sup>1</sup> Provincial Energy Strategy



Future oil sands development will depend on a number of factors, including:

- commodity prices;
- global energy demand;
- cost constraints, such as labour, materials and compliance costs;
- physical constraints, such as availability of qualified labour and infrastructure;
- environmental objectives; and
- the development and use of new technologies and innovations.

The current level of bitumen production is 1.3 million barrels per day (mbd). Our knowledge of the oil sands resource shows that it is possible to produce 6.0 or more mbd from this deposit. In the short-term, oil sands development will mostly involve expansion of existing projects and those where significant upfront capital has already been invested.

Future development of the oil sands resource is expected to expand outwards beyond the concentrated locations within the bitumen land base, where the return on investment is highest and is in proximity to existing infrastructure.

About 40 per cent of the Lower Athabasca land base (or about 400 townships) is underlain with known oil sands deposits that are commercially attractive or potentially commercial bitumen, based on the ultimate potential of the resource.

Existing surface mining and in-situ developments, including associated infrastructure, are concentrated in locations throughout the Lower Athabasca land base. They comprise approximately two per cent of the land base.

The land base associated with bitumen deposits also supports many communities in the Lower Athabasca, as well as the forest industry and a range of other uses/activities. The scope of future oil sands development therefore engages other land-use considerations, including the following:

- land use must be managed to meet regional and local environmental objectives, such as the protection of vulnerable waterbodies and wetlands;
- land use must be managed to include Aboriginal traditional use activities; and
- social infrastructure, municipal growth, community and labour needs will need to be addressed.

Expansion of oil sands developments also has consequences for timber harvesting, reforestation and reclamation schedules. The forest industry's planning horizon is about 200 years, or two timber rotations.



Coniferous timber quota holders and Alpac have the rights to harvest timber in the region. Much of the fibre supply for their mills will come from integrated operations with oil sands operators, where timber is harvested in advance of oil sands development. However, timber shortfalls may start to be seen in 2050, as oil sands development occurs at a pace faster than harvesting and reforestation schedules. To address potential timber shortfalls, a range of strategies will need to be explored.



How these land-use considerations are influenced will depend on the nature and extent of future oil sands development. Given the volatility of energy prices and market demand, it makes sense to consider a number of economic development scenarios in developing the regional plan.

The RAC will consider three development scenarios, as follows:

### **Current State Scenario**

Energy prices remain moderate. Existing production levels continue, with some new investments made. Current environmental management systems and technology continue to be employed. Production levels are approximately 1.5 to 2.0 mbd.



### **Mid-range Scenario**

Increased average energy prices. Production levels grow with new investments. Technological advancements and innovations are employed, aimed at achieving environmental objectives. Production grows to meet a mid-range level of demand, and to a point of cost constraints. Production levels are approximately 4.0 to 4.5 mbd.

### **High-end Scenario**

Robust and sustained energy prices. Production levels increase in response to increased energy demand. Technological advancements and innovations are employed, aimed at achieving environmental objectives. Project and compliance costs remain moderate, with limited cost constraints. Production levels are 6.0 mbd or more.

The mid-range scenario is achievable based on bitumen production increasing at a rate of 20 per cent each year. Government has set an aspiration goal of one-third (i.e., 1.3 to 1.5 mbd) bitumen production for bitumen sales, one-third for synthetic crude sales (i.e., upgraded), and one-third for value-added products and petrochemicals. Based on the stated goal, a bitumen production rate of approximately 4.0 to 4.5 mbd would be required. Market analysis is to be undertaken by the Government of Alberta to determine if this goal is economically achievable.



The RAC will explore these three development scenarios within the context of desired cumulative environmental management objectives for the Lower Athabasca.

In exploring each of these scenarios, the advice provided by the RAC should be consistent with the following guidelines:

- resource development in the Lower Athabasca Region will remain a key economic driver for Alberta. Accordingly, the land base should be managed to support economic development opportunities as the primary but not sole priority;
- the three development scenarios are to be explored within the context of desired cumulative environmental thresholds for the region, as outlined below; and
- options should be developed to address potential forest land base shortfalls in the Lower Athabasca Region over the long-term (i.e., 50 or more years). Continued oil sands development will provide sufficient timber for the region's mills over the next several decades. Strategies are needed over the long-term to prevent or minimize timber shortfalls – such as enhanced reclamation, and integrated land management.



## Land conservation objectives

The Lower Athabasca Region contains diverse landforms, vegetation and species. Maintaining this biodiversity is an important environmental objective. Healthy ecosystems are essential for supporting human life.

Conservation land areas are designed to maintain ecological systems and processes, and are also used for measuring ecological performance in these areas against performance in developed areas.

The dominant ecosystem in the Lower Athabasca is the Boreal forest, which stretches across northern and central Alberta and spans six of Alberta's land-use planning regions. It therefore makes sense that conservation objectives for the Lower Athabasca be established within the context of the Boreal forest.

All regional plans will consider conservation of the Boreal forest and make specific recommendations to government. All regional plans will take into account what is already conserved. For example, Wood Buffalo National Park already protects approximately nine per cent of Alberta's Boreal forest. The province will consider these recommendations as well as those of other external stakeholders as part of a province-wide approach to Boreal forest conservation. For example, the Canadian Boreal Forest Conservation Framework has a goal to protect at least 50 per cent of the Boreal forest in a network of large interconnected protected areas across Canada.



Key criteria for establishing conservation areas include the following:

- areas with little or no industrial activity;
- areas that support Aboriginal traditional uses;
- areas that are representative of the biological diversity of the area (e.g., landforms, species, vegetation); and
- areas of sufficient size (i.e., roughly 4,000-5,000 square kilometres).



Conservation areas also provide landscape connectivity. The protective nature of conservation areas, however, engages other land-use considerations in the Lower Athabasca. Specifically for this region:

- a considerable amount of land area in the region is underlain with oil sands deposits that are commercially attractive or potentially attractive in the future. Development activity is already occurring on some of this land area;
- about six per cent of the Lower Athabasca land base currently contributes to conservation objectives. An additional 10 per cent of the land base could meet the above key criteria for conservation areas, without conflicting with mineral tenure; these would be mostly situated in the northern part of the region. Taken together, the existing total of 16 per cent of the Lower Athabasca could meet conservation criteria without conflicting with mineral tenure;
- however, the Land-use Framework is about striking a new balance between development and the environment. To move beyond the status-quo, a scenario of 20 per cent of the Boreal forest will be used to test the implications of expanding the amount of conserved land;
- a sizeable portion of Lower Athabasca lands are already underlain with mineral tenure – that is, rights to develop oil sands, petroleum, natural gas, coal, metallic and industrial minerals. To achieve a total of 20 per cent conservation in the Lower Athabasca, there could be conflicts with mineral tenure in approximately 40 townships. Some conflicts may occur with current development activities, depending on the location;
- in cases where conservation areas conflict with mineral tenure (as regards surface or in situ development), current policies and regulations (i.e., under the auspices of the *Mines and Minerals Act*) enable the Alberta government to cancel the mineral leases and provide compensation to the leaseholder;
- conservation areas remove lands not only from industrial development, but also from residential development. The region has already experienced a rapid growth in population and will continue to see population increases in the future; and
- various organizations have identified conserving a range of land areas that overlap with the Lower Athabasca Region. For example, Cumulative Environmental Management Association (CEMA), recommended designating between 20 and 40 per cent of the



actual land mass conserved. Including areas such as Wood Buffalo National Park in a conserved area could have a significant impact on the calculation of the actual land mass conserved.

Establishing and achieving a new conservation objective will be very challenging in the Lower Athabasca due to the concentration of oil sands resources in the region, and the scope of development activity underway or expected. Nevertheless, the importance of ecosystem health makes it important to plan conservation areas for the region.

The RAC will provide advice consistent with the following guidelines:

- observe the key criteria for conservation lands as outlined above, and assess and advise which lands in the region could meet these criteria;
- demonstrate how the conservation scenario can be met, while minimizing and limiting any negative impacts, including mineral tenure and fiscal implications; and
- explore the feasibility of meeting a conservation scenario higher than 20 per cent, while achieving the stated economic objectives.

## Regional air and water thresholds

The Government of Alberta is committed to ensuring a healthy environment for current and future generations. In addition to good management of land, there is a need to protect airsheds and watersheds.

The government is shifting to a regional approach for managing the cumulative effects of development. This approach recognizes that airsheds and watersheds have a limited carrying capacity. Each new development has incremental effects on air and water. Together, the effects of all developments exert a cumulative impact.

Under cumulative effects management, regional thresholds for air and water will be established. These will represent the maximum allowable impacts in the region. Development will need to be managed such that these thresholds are not exceeded.

Management of river water and groundwater resources in the Lower Athabasca Region involves several management frameworks, including the Lower Athabasca River Water Management Framework, the Cold Lake-Beaver River Water Management Plan and the Groundwater Management Frameworks.

- *Lower Athabasca River Water Management Framework* – This is a strategy for managing and monitoring cumulative water withdrawals by oil sands companies. It specifies the cumulative water withdrawal limits that industry must meet on a weekly basis,



based on categories of naturally occurring flow conditions. The actions and withdrawal limits were developed based on aquatic habitat requirements, water needs and existing options for reducing withdrawals.

- Estimates were made of freshwater demand by oil sands mines (compared to water supply established in the *Lower Athabasca Water Management Framework*) for the various scenarios. The estimates are based on current ratios of freshwater needed per barrel of production.



- **current state scenario** – it is anticipated that water required from the Athabasca River will grow from 4.4 m<sup>3</sup> per second to 10.6 m<sup>3</sup> per second in 2020. By 2016, it is anticipated that industry will need to have storage to accommodate low flow periods. However, most operators could fulfill this need with existing on-site storage.
- **mid-range scenario** – at 4.0 mbd of bitumen production, the water requirements are projected to increase to 17 m<sup>3</sup> per second. Sustaining this production forecast would require eight to 10 weeks of storage to be available roughly every three years to accommodate low flow periods. To achieve this would likely require the development of better water recycling technologies or development of off-site storage.
- **high-end scenario** – at 6.0 mbd of bitumen production, water requirements are projected to increase to around 27 m<sup>3</sup> per second by 2030. Sustaining this level of production would require 28 weeks of storage every two years. If recent dry conditions continue, it could be every year. Again, this would require improvements in water conservation and efficiency as well as storage.



- *Groundwater Management Frameworks* – The Lower Athabasca Region is divided into three areas for groundwater management, reflecting differences in geology:
  - Athabasca Oil Sands Region (where mining operations are located) – interim framework has been developed and is currently undergoing technical review;
  - South Athabasca Oil Sands Region (in situ operations) – interim framework has been developed and is currently undergoing technical review; and
  - Cold Lake-Beaver River Basin area – to be completed in 2010.



These represent a current state of the knowledge of quality and quantity of groundwater resources in each area. They summarize challenges to the resource, and provide measurable, pragmatic outcomes.

These frameworks will form the basis of water thresholds established by the Alberta government for the Lower Athabasca region.



In regards to airshed management, regional thresholds for oxides of nitrogen (NO<sub>x</sub>) and sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) emissions will be established. The Lower Athabasca Region includes two airshed organizations within its boundaries, the Wood Buffalo Environmental Association and the Lakeland Industry and Community Association.

The NO<sub>x</sub> and SO<sub>2</sub> thresholds will be based on:

- a technical review and assessment of existing and projected oil sands operations; and
- the application of “best available technology economically achievable” to manage emissions from both existing and new oil sands operations.

Thresholds will consider cumulative environmental impacts (e.g., acidification of soil and lakes, etc.) on key condition indicators and may be adjusted accordingly.

The management of cumulative effects on watershed and airsheds will be important aspects of regional planning. Given the importance of future resource developments in the Lower Athabasca, the regional plan will need to consider how air and water thresholds can be monitored and achieved.

The RAC will use the established watershed and airshed thresholds in developing the regional plan, and will provide advice consistent with the following guidelines:

- The three development scenarios to be explored (i.e., current state, mid-range and high-end) should be assessed with reference to the specified regional cumulative environmental thresholds for air and water.
- If both economic and environmental objectives can not both be satisfied in each scenario, then options should be assessed and recommended.

## Human development considerations

Economic development opportunities in the Lower Athabasca will not only need to be balanced with environmental objectives. Land-use planning also involves social considerations. These relate to society or its organization, including living in organized communities and factors such as culture, health and well-being and safety.

Land-use considerations that relate to social and human development include:

### First Nations and Métis

Traditional use lands encompass much of the Lower Athabasca. There are 17 First Nations reserve lands, two Métis Settlements, and several communities with high Métis populations in the region. It will be



important that continued opportunities exist for Aboriginal traditional uses to be in close proximity to First Nations and Métis communities.

The Alberta government is committed to consult with Aboriginal people where land management and resource development on provincial Crown lands may adversely affect treaty or Aboriginal rights; and to consider First Nations and Métis traditional uses.



### **Recreation and Tourism**

There is great potential for increased tourism and recreational development opportunities in the region, particularly in Lakeland Country. Additional opportunities would reduce the amount of tourism and recreational investment that is lost to British Columbia and Saskatchewan. It would also help meet the growing recreational needs of residents in the region and the rest of the province.

### **Transportation and Utility Corridors**

Major transportation and utility corridors offer the opportunity to consolidate critical infrastructure within pre-defined areas, thereby reducing land fragmentation and environmental impacts.

There is a need for a robust, reliable and efficient utility and transportation system that will include a link within the Lower Athabasca, and between the region and the rest of the province. Connection with the Industrial Heartland will be a particularly important consideration.



### **Population Growth**

The current population of the Lower Athabasca is approximately 130,000, with most of the population located in the urban service area of Fort McMurray, Cold Lake, Bonnyville, and Lac La Biche County. In 2008, the shadow population of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo was estimated at 25,000-30,000 people.

The population of the Lower Athabasca has expanded rapidly in a relatively short period of time and future development will drive further population growth. Challenges associated with adequate provision of services, such as housing and municipal infrastructure, are likely to continue. These impacts need to be considered in regional planning, as they also have the potential to act as constraints on future growth (e.g., supply of qualified labour, utilities, etc.).



In providing its advice on the development of the regional plan, the RAC should:

- consider options for tourism development with emphasis on Lakeland Country;
- consider options for recreational development, including advice on effective management of recreation activities on provincial Crown land;
- provide advice on the general location of major transportation and utility corridors in the region and the considerations that

must be addressed by the Alberta government in planning the specific locations;

- provide advice on the implications associated with the three economic development scenarios (i.e., current state, mid-range, high-end) as they affect population growth and labour needs; and
- provide advice on impacts to Aboriginal communities as well as treaty and other constitutional rights exercised by members of those communities.

## Additional guidance

The RAC will also observe the following additional guidance in developing the regional plan:

### Vision for the Lower Athabasca

A considerable amount of prior consultation, policy setting and decision-making concerning the Lower Athabasca Region has already occurred. For example, a great deal of input was gathered in the course of developing Alberta's strategic plan for the oil sands, *Responsible Actions*. The RAC will use this input as it develops an overall vision for the Lower Athabasca Region.

### Integration of Provincial Policies

The RAC will articulate desired strategies for the Lower Athabasca Region that reflect and integrate provincial policies and objectives. Specifically, the RAC will consider the following policies:

- *Aboriginal Policy Framework*
- *Alberta's Plan for Parks*
- *A Place to Grow: Alberta's Rural Development Strategy*
- *Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce*
- *Clean Air Strategy*
- *Climate Change Strategy 2008*
- *Cold Lake-Beaver River Water Management Plan (2006)*
- *Launching Alberta's Energy Future: Provincial Energy Strategy*
- *Responsible Actions: A Plan for Alberta's Oil Sands*
- *The Spirit of Alberta: Alberta's Cultural Policy*
- *Vision 2020: The Future of Health Care in Alberta*
- *Water for Life: Alberta's Plan for Sustainability (Renewal 2008)*
- *Water Management Framework: Instream Flow Needs Water Management System for the Lower Athabasca (2007)*

## Proposed Timelines for Regional Plan Completion

The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan will be developed in the following stages:

### Spring - Fall 2009

- Cabinet guidance provided through the Terms of Reference for the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan.
- Vision, outcomes and objectives for the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan to be developed.
- RAC provides advice based on Cabinet guidance, informing the development of the regional plan.
- Public, stakeholder and Aboriginal consultations on the draft Vision, Outcomes and Objectives will be held, using the Alberta government's consultation processes.



### Winter 2010

- Draft Lower Athabasca Regional Plan to be developed.
- Public, stakeholder and Aboriginal consultations on the draft regional plan will be held, using the Alberta government's consultation processes.
- Feedback from the consultation process will inform further work on the regional plan.
- Final, comprehensive draft of the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan submitted to Cabinet for final review and approval.







Photo Credits:  
Elaine Bartee  
Michael Dempsey  
Nancy Fish  
Jamie Laird  
David Lind  
Jaime Robinson  
Robert Stronach  
Travel Alberta

ISBN: 978-0-7785-8479-7 (Printed Version)  
978-0-7785-8480-3 (Online Version)  
Pub No. I/354  
Printed July 2009