

# Stakeholder Input on the Provincial Land Use Framework Initiative

## Summary Report

Prepared by: Canada West Foundation  
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# **Alberta's Land Base**

## **Stakeholder Feedback Identifying Key Land Use Issues and Principles for a Policy Framework**

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Resource Development

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# Executive Summary

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“This is a fabulous bit of the world – how in 20 or 50 years from now are we going to ensure that we still have this fabulous bit of the world?”

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Following the Government of Alberta’s decision to develop a provincial *land use framework* (LUF), the Canada West Foundation was contracted to conduct a series of stakeholder focus groups. The objective was to identify the concerns, issues and challenges that stakeholders bring to the land use policy file, and to identify the desired attributes of a land use policy framework for Alberta. Somewhat parallel consultations were carried out concurrently with elected municipal officials and First Nations, the results of which are reported elsewhere.

Stakeholder perceptions were collected through 15 focus groups held in Calgary, Edmonton, Pincher Creek and Nisku. The approximately 160 individuals who participated reflected a variety of sectors and organizations – oil and gas, forestry, agriculture, recreation users, environmental groups, municipal planners, academics, and civic leaders. Participants were asked to identify both the key issues that should be addressed by the proposed LUF and the principles it should reflect. Their insights are quoted extensively throughout this report.

What, then, did these diverse participants have to say? **First and foremost**, they felt strongly that Alberta needs a comprehensive land use framework. Despite the acknowledged complexity of the task, people expressed an urgent desire to get something done as soon as possible.

**Second**, there is a sense that the Province has not played the leadership role that is necessary if land use issues are to be addressed. There are increasing demands on Alberta’s land and increasing conflict, but few processes in place to address these on a timely and consistent basis.

**Third**, there is more consensus than diversity among the various sectors and groups when it comes to the broad strokes of a land use framework. People want to see a framework in place. They want it to set a clear vision for the long term, outline clear processes and mechanisms for implementation, have a stepped up capacity for enforcement, and have measurable results. This is not to suggest that there won’t be differing expectations of how the framework should be implemented, and conflicts over decisions for individual pieces of land across the province will not disappear. Nonetheless, the focus group participants were anxious and eager to get the planning underway.

**Fourth**, one of the most challenging issues will be determining the scope of the land use framework. Some see the LUF as a high-level platform that will address the pace of growth in Alberta, establish future resource and energy policies, and shape an overall vision for Alberta as the province moves into its second century. Others see the LUF in a more limited way, as a process for resolving specific disputes among municipalities or determining where utility corridors should be located.

**Fifth**, people want the land use framework to work. They want it to engage Albertans and provide them with better information about the choices we need to make about Alberta’s land. They repeatedly stated their concern that this could be yet another plan that gets developed with much fanfare, but then is virtually ignored when tough decisions are needed.

**Sixth**, participants strongly believe that the LUF must be created for the long term. It should be based on principle of sustainability, meeting the needs of both the current population and their descendants. Participants insisted that future generations of Albertans should be able to enjoy our landscapes and benefit from our land base as much as we do today.

**And finally**, participants felt that Alberta’s land base is strongly connected to our quality of life, which in turn will determine our success in an increasingly competitive global economy. Unless we make the right decisions now and take a long-term view, we could put our future economic prosperity and quality of life at risk. The stakes are indeed high.

## 1. Introduction

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“Alberta’s quality of life is linked to the power of place.”

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Following the Government of Alberta’s decision to develop a provincial *land use framework* (LUF), the Canada West Foundation was contracted to conduct a series of stakeholder focus groups. (Somewhat parallel consultations were carried out concurrently with elected municipal officials and First Nations, the results of which are reported elsewhere.) The objective was to identify the concerns, issues and challenges that stakeholders bring to the land use policy file, and to identify the desired attributes of a land use policy framework for Alberta. (See Appendix A for a description of the focus group process.) Stakeholder insights are quoted extensively throughout this report.

It is important to begin by noting the general tone of the focus groups, which took on the character of thoughtful conversations among well-informed and highly energized Albertans. Participants felt that Alberta has been served reasonably well by land use planning in the past, and there was ready acknowledgement of progress that has been made to date (e.g., Eastern Slopes Policy, CASA, Water for Life Strategy, the Rural Development Strategy, ILM initiatives). However, there was also recognition of the growing pressures on the Alberta land base stemming from extensive resource development, population growth and its dispersion across the province, changing patterns of agricultural production, and changing patterns of recreational use. In short, as Albertans reside, work and recreate they are bumping into one another more and more on a limited land base. Two focus group participants neatly summed up the core of the policy challenge:

- “Everything we’re trying to do in Alberta all happens in a place. The more you’re trying to do, the more you run into conflicts. Land use generates more conflict than anything else.”
- “The system doesn’t recognize that everything we do or value takes space.”

There was also pervasive concern about Alberta’s pace of growth, albeit concern mixed with a sense of exhilaration about what Albertans have accomplished, and what they might accomplish together in the future. (One of the focus group participants nicely described this as a combination of

intoxication and angst.) Perhaps as a consequence, there was no pushback with respect to the LUF initiative; no one argued that the initiative was unnecessary or premature. If anything, participants expressed a sense of urgency in coming to grips with land use challenges:

- “We’ve got a freight train coming at us.”
- “If the people on the Titanic had been able to predict far enough ahead what was going to happen, they could have made a very small course correction and it would have prevented the disaster. The same is the case with the environment. We can make small corrections now and they will have a significant impact over time.”

Admittedly, a number of participants expressed scepticism about the LUF initiative, suggesting either that the Government has been down this road before or that talk was a substitute for action. However, the sense of urgency was so high that this scepticism had little impact on the tone of discussions or the engagement of participants.

Finally, it should be noted that the bulk of the focus group conversations focused on Alberta’s *working landscapes* on both public and private lands. Although land use planning *within* municipalities was not ignored, and Alberta’s natural areas were certainly not ignored, the conversation tended to centre on those areas where subsurface resource development, forestry, agricultural producers, residential communities, and recreational users are coming into increased contact and, in many cases, conflict.

## 2. Overall Comments and Impressions

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“Where will intellectual capital want to locate?  
We have the chance to say that Alberta is a good place to make a life, not just a living.”

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What, then, did the focus group participants have to say about the LUF initiative? Let’s begin with some overall impressions that set the context for the more specific concerns, suggestions and ideas expressed by the various groups.

First and foremost, they felt strongly that Alberta needs a comprehensive land use framework. Despite the acknowledged

complexity of the task, people expressed an urgent desire to get something done as soon as possible.

Second, there is a sense that the Province has not played the leadership role that is necessary if land use issues are to be addressed. There are increasing demands on Alberta's land and increasing conflict, but few processes in place to address these on a timely and consistent basis.

Third, there is more consensus than diversity among the various sectors and groups when it comes to the broad strokes of a land use framework. People want to see a framework in place. They want it to set a clear vision for the long term, outline clear processes and mechanisms for implementation, have a stepped up capacity for enforcement, and have measurable results. This is not to suggest that there won't be differing expectations of how the framework should be implemented, and conflicts over decisions for individual pieces of land across the province will not disappear. Nonetheless, the focus group participants were anxious and eager to get the planning underway.

Fourth, one of the most challenging issues will be determining the scope of the land use framework. Some see the LUF as a high-level platform that will address the pace of growth in Alberta, establish future resource and energy policies, and shape an overall vision for Alberta as the province moves into its second century. Others see the LUF in a more limited way, as a process for resolving specific disputes among municipalities or determining where utility corridors should be located.

Fifth, people want the land use framework to work. They want it to engage Albertans and provide them with better information about the choices we need to make about Alberta's land. They repeatedly stated their concern that this could be yet another plan that gets developed with much fanfare, but then is virtually ignored when tough decisions are needed.

Sixth, participants strongly believe that the LUF must be created for the long term. It should be based on principle of sustainability, meeting the needs of both the current population and their descendants. Participants insisted that future generations of Albertans should be able to enjoy our landscapes and benefit from our land base as much as we do today.

And finally, participants felt that Alberta's land base is strongly connected to our quality of life, which in turn will determine our

success in an increasingly competitive global economy. Unless we make the right decisions now and take a long-term view, we could put our future economic prosperity and quality of life at risk. The stakes are indeed high.

### 3. Discontent with the Status Quo

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“People have this sense of unease – that something is wrong in the province and the status quo is leading us to problems on the horizon.”

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The Albertans who came together in the 15 focus groups are markedly dissatisfied with the land management status quo. Although participants recognize that the existing policy architecture has significant strengths, they also believe that the status quo cannot handle the pressures to which the provincial land base is exposed due to economic and population growth:

- “The system we have in place today hasn't caught up with today's realities. We're moving fast, and we have a system that's just chugging along, and it can't keep up.”
- “It's not broken yet. But at a time when we really need expertise and resources, we just don't have it. So we're floundering.”
- “You feel like they're rushing ahead on some of this stuff . . . chasing the almighty dollar and not asking what will be left when we're done.”
- “Where is the province going? If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.”
- “We've got a horse and buggy when we need a Porsche.”

In the absence of better land management processes, conflict on the land base is escalating; people just “sharpen their elbows and go in for a fight.”

Participants often complimented the project-specific work of existing regulatory processes (e.g., the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board), although even here there was concern from municipalities, community leaders and agricultural producers

who feel they are marginalized by the process. Concerns were also raised by the oil, gas and forestry sectors who feel that in the absence of a land use plan, the AEUB is making ad hoc *policy decisions* on a case by case basis, decisions that should more properly be made by the elected provincial government. Sensitive policy decisions are being loaded onto the regulatory process; by default or through regulatory creep, policy and regulatory functions are compressed into agencies that are not designed for this dual role.

In short, the policy and regulatory status quo, even when combined with voluntary agreements and industry best practices, is not sufficient to handle the growth pressures to which the Alberta land base is now exposed. In the words of one participant, who could well have been speaking on behalf of all participants, “the system that got us into this is not going to get us out.”

## 4. Key Issues to be Addressed by a LUF

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“We’ve had the luxury of land so we haven’t had to be smart, and we’re not smart today.”

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In order to drill down beneath general unease with the land management status quo, participants were asked to address the following question: *what are the key issues that you would like to see addressed by a provincial land use framework?* Not surprisingly, the very diverse groups of participants mentioned a wide array of issues and concerns.

### 4.1 Vision

The overarching concern rippling across the 15 groups was the perceived lack of a provincial land management plan. More generally, and often emphatically stated, participants stressed *the lack of a provincial vision* for Alberta’s land base:

- “Right now, no one is minding the store.”
- “The [land use] horse is not only out of the barn, it is over the horizon.”
- “We have fractured regional planning decisions but not an overall perspective.”

- “When there’s a lack of vision, it’s exhausting. We get into triage. We end up in the corner folding triangular bandages and ignoring the sucking chest wounds.”

There is no doubt that the GOA’s decision to create a *provincial LUF* speaks to a deeply felt need within communities around Alberta.

Concerns about the lack of a provincial vision or framework coincided with general agreement that incremental policy changes will not take us where we need to go. As one participant put it, “we have a huge hole in our policy framework,” and the proposed LUF was seen as the way to plug this hole. Another participant made the same point in a more pessimistic manner: “One of my biggest fears is that they’ll just put lipstick on the pig and call it good.” For the focus group participants, incremental change is not the answer.

### 4.2 Cumulative Effects

Another recurrent “big picture” concern was our perceived inability to assess and thus manage the *cumulative effects* of development on the provincial land base. Currently, the impact of any particular project in, for example, oil and gas or forestry is assessed on a project-by-project basis, but there are no processes in place for assessing and managing the cumulative impact over time of multiple projects. Land use planning suffers from a “site-specific mentality” as the provincial government is better equipped to determine the impact of one gas well than it is to determine the impact of 1,000 or 10,000 wells. Yet it is the growth-driven cumulative impact across the landscape that leaves the Albertans we talked to uneasy.

### 4.3 Concerns about governance

A good deal of the discussion of key issues focused on governance. Participants stressed *the lack of regional planning capacity*, arguing that municipalities currently don’t have the tools they need to undertake effective regional planning. In some cases, municipalities are able to work together voluntarily on regional plans but this appears to be the exception rather than the rule, and there is evidence of increasing conflicts among municipalities.

Focus group participants also stressed the *lack of integration*, and in so doing noted four overlapping concerns. The first is the lack of integration *within* the Government: “we have departmental positions, but no position from the Government of Alberta.” Participants referenced inconsistencies among various government departments, with different positions taken by departments responsible for energy, the environment, agriculture and rural development, municipal affairs and sustainable resource development. The result is confusion “on the ground” when people have to deal with siloed departments in order to get decisions made.

The second and closely related concern is the lack of *policy integration* and thus consistency across departments, agencies, municipalities and regions. Participants called for the land use framework to be integrated with the Water for Life Strategy, and with policies around climate change and air quality. Included here was the lack of sufficient coordination among resource industries on the same land base (e.g., forestry and oil/gas, agriculture and oil/gas) where their activities affect one another’s businesses.

The third concern is the lack of consistent policies across different sectors and industries. Industry participants noted that the rules for accessing land or expectations for reclaiming land once it’s been used don’t appear to be the same for different sectors. They called for a “level playing field” among industries. Participants also noted inconsistencies among municipalities in the rules and mechanisms they use to deal with land use issues.

Finally, many participants criticized weak and inconsistent enforcement of existing policies. In some cases, this was attributed to a lack of resources:

- “Some of the off-roaders down here go illegally into areas that are off limits – sensitive areas, wetlands, and that sort of thing. But even if they are caught, the fine is only \$87 – that’s just a joke to them, it’s one tank of gas. And most of the time there aren’t enough people to catch them.”

In summary and almost without exception, participants said that the provincial government has to step up to its land management responsibilities by setting a provincial vision, outlining the processes that should be put in place, and making the tough decisions. Several participants said that the province

has downloaded these responsibilities onto municipalities and communities while failing to provide the direction, resources, and processes for dealing with them at the local level.

#### 4.4 Land access

Concerns about access to land flowed across the 15 focus groups. The need for predictable access to subsurface resources, transmission corridors, and other resources (e.g., sand and gravel) was mentioned repeatedly by representatives from the resource sector. For example:

- “From a business point of view, it’s really chaotic. We need three things: certainty, timeliness and efficiency.”
- “Everyone out there on the land base should know what’s allowed and what isn’t – we need greater certainty.”
- “If you’re going to sell subsurface rights on land where you don’t want any surface disruption [Special Places], there’s a conflict.”
- “Tell us what the rules are, make them consistent, and don’t change them midstream.”
- “What we really need more than certainty of outcome is certainty of process.”

Recreational users also raised a variety of concerns about access to public lands.

Different industry sectors expressed concerns about access to land for industrial purposes. Both the forestry and oil and gas sectors see increasing challenges in getting access to land due to a combination of competing demands, growing concerns from private landowners, and unwieldy regulatory processes. Others pointed to growing nimbyism: Albertans want roads and highways, cell phones and power, but they don’t want gravel pits or transmission towers anywhere near to where they live.

#### 4.5 Surface/sub-surface conflicts on private and public lands

Many participants, particularly from the agricultural sector, were very concerned with escalating conflicts between themselves



as rural private land owners and the oil and gas sector. These conflicts are over the disturbance to surface lands and watercourses – the bedrock of their businesses – in the effort to explore and drill for subsurface resources. Participants asserted that there is not a level playing field in negotiating access or having rights of refusal, that poor practices on the part of some industry players were impairing their agricultural businesses, and that there is insufficient recourse for unhappy landowners:

- “There should be an equal right to representation. Just give us the same rights. Oil and gas companies are just a runaway, it’s gone completely haywire.”
- “I don’t know what’s going to happen because people are getting to the end of their rope.”
- “Landowners are being pitted against landowners. They come to me and pressure me because neighbours have signed and I haven’t.”

It was mentioned that there are new landowner groups are now forming on a regular basis to mobilize around this issue.

Surface/sub-surface conflicts were also identified as an issue on public lands where surface dispositions may not allow access to sub-surface resources.

#### 4.6 Natural habitats

Focus group participants frequently mentioned the need for greater emphasis on the preservation of natural habitats and concern over the fragmentation of land held for conservation:

- “In the long run, it’s the land that will save us. Every time you build a house, road or whatever, it affects the land.”

Several pointed out that the land use framework has to address the impact of land use decisions on biodiversity. Representatives from environmental groups stressed the growing fragmentation of wilderness areas and Alberta’s landscapes, the need for more integration across wetlands, the importance of maintaining ecological functions for working landscapes, the need for a more science-based protected areas system, and the need to upgrade and maintain Alberta’s parks system.

#### 4.7 Agricultural land

Agricultural producers and ranchers were more inclined than other participants to raise concerns about the protection of property rights. They also registered concerns about the growing fragmentation of agricultural land into non-productive tracts, the lack of legislation to protect prime agricultural land and heritage range land from industrial encroachment, and the growing encroachment of residential developments (both urban and rural) on prime agricultural land:

- “There has to be a clear priority on land to be used for food production. At this point, I don’t think there is a single acre that has that as a priority.”
- “The only thing that stands between humanity and apocalyptic collapse is 12 inches of top soil; if we don’t protect that, we’re done.”
- “An acre of land for oil and gas will always be worth more than an acre of land for agriculture or conservation until we begin to measure it differently.”
- “We’re seeing too much flagrant use of the land base that someday we’re going to need.”

It is important to note here that the preservation of agricultural land for agricultural production is only part of the challenge. Unless agricultural production is economically viable, land set aside for production will fall into neglect. Here some participants noted that the protection of agricultural purposes could depress land prices, and therefore the sector.

#### 4.8 Sprawl

Many participants referred to what one person called the “vinyl wave” – the growing spread of urban residential developments onto what was formerly agricultural land. Some suggested there should be limits on urban growth. Others expressed concerns about leap-frogging – having cities grow to a certain boundary surrounded by green space, and then having big suburban or acreage developments on the outskirts, thereby increasing travel and infrastructure costs while taking up more land than more intensive urban housing developments would do. Others noted that “sprawl” is not just an urban phenomenon.

Rural communities are also under pressure to grow and this is causing increasing conflicts between urban and rural municipalities. In addition, a number of farmers noted land use conflicts between themselves and Hutterite colonies in terms of availability of land for expansion and the effects on land prices.

#### 4.9 Shortage of tools

Participants lamented a lack of policy tools for land management, particularly within and among municipalities, and a lack of policy incentives to encourage stewardship on private lands. Note, for example, the following comment:

- “No one makes a living from preserving the land and water. We need to have the right incentives to make it attractive to do these things.”

In short, the LUF should provide policy incentives for stewardship on private and public lands.

#### 4.10 Aboriginal peoples

Although First Nations were consulted through a separate process, focus group participants also raised a number of land use concerns related to Aboriginal peoples, including the erosion of development buffer zones around First Nations and Metis settlements. In the words of a Metis community leader, “In the past, people on Metis settlements had to be involved if there were developments within a mile of the Settlement; now there are oil and gas, forestry developments, and cattle grazing within a hundred yards, and we haven’t been consulted.” While the focus group consultation process did not directly involve participants from First Nations, we did hear that traditional uses and sacred sites need to be protected. As one person put it, “We have to make sure you can protect a lifestyle for people who have been here all along.” It was also noted that while First Nations and Metis can make decisions on their land, they have limited ability to affect development decisions on their doorstep.

#### 4.11 Recreational interests on the land

Recreation users articulated a growing interest in access to land for hiking, all-terrain vehicles, and snowmobiling. They

want to see better coordination and linkage of recreation trails, the development of recreational corridors, better information for recreation users in terms of which land they can and cannot access, and, on the part of some recreational users, an ability to use abandoned forestry and oil and gas roads for recreation purposes.

However, there are conflicts among recreational users. For example, hikers and anglers expressed annoyance with quad users about the destruction of trails and fishing habitats. There are also conflicts between both forestry and agricultural producers and off-highway vehicle users for the same reason – destruction of landscapes with resulting erosion, disturbance of grazing animals, and loss of land to be used for replanting, particularly when abandoned roads or seismic lines are illegally converted into off-road trails. Tensions with and within recreational users reflect the pressures that come from population growth on a limited land base.

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It is important to stress that what is reported above are stakeholder perceptions of the current policy landscape, perceptions that may be open for debate. For example, it was frequently mentioned that the existing multiple-use policy architecture assumes that anything is possible, anywhere, anytime:

- “The definition of multi-use is that everyone can do everything, anywhere, anytime. We need a definition that says you can do anything you want somewhere and some time.”
- “Everyone has a backyard. There’s a space for garden, an outhouse and compost pile, but they’re not in the same place.”
- “If you had a coloured map showing all the various land uses in Alberta today, it would be a dirty grey colour because all uses are currently permitted.”

Although perceptions may not fully or accurately reflect the policy status quo, they move the political process as much as realities do.

## 5. Recommended Design Features for a LUF

“My vision is that 20 years from now you won’t have to say, “I wish you could have seen what Alberta looked like 20 years ago.”

Almost half of the conversation in each focus group dealt with recommended design features for the proposed LUF – what principles it should embody, what attributes it should have, and what outcomes it should try to achieve. Not surprisingly, the design features that were sketched in by participants were in most respects a mirror image of their critique of the existing policy architecture.

For example, participants almost universally called for a long-term strategic vision for Alberta. They lamented the perceived current lack of long-term planning, and therefore recommended a vision extending 50 or even 100 years into the future. As one participant noted, “the decision made 40 or 50 years ago to designate the green area was probably one of the most important decisions made in this province; today, we’re only planning for the future five or ten years out.” Although the LUF has to provide the direction and mechanisms for making decisions in the short term, its power for participants would come from a more far-reaching vision, one that articulates “the sort of place that we are trying to create.”

At the same time, participants had somewhat different ideas about what that vision should entail. Some suggested it should be a broad statement on where the province is headed and how land will be used, preserved, and protected in the future. They expect a clear statement about what the Alberta landscape *should* look like in 50 years, and an equally clear set of directions on how we might get there. Others equated vision with a map; they support zonation and want to see the province’s lands divided up into areas designated for certain purposes and clarifying where development could occur and where it could not. Interestingly, some called for a vision that looked backwards as well as forwards, that takes into account both land management practices going back into our Aboriginal past and how the land base has changed over geological time.

Participants recommended that the long-term vision must rest on the founding principle of *sustainability*, explicitly

*recognizing limits* to the long-term carrying capacity of the provincial land base and ecosystem:

- “My expectation is that we’ll recognize a limit on the total amount of activity on the land base, and that the limit will be based on some recognition of ecological impact.”
- “The language of limits, the language of tradeoffs, must be embedded in the LUF.”
- “The LUF will need to address tradeoffs; not all land uses are compatible.”
- “You may not get everything you want but at the end of the day there will be more security, more certainty for all.”

The principle of sustainability (which some thought needed a clearer definition) providing only the starting point as participants identified a range of principles that should be embedded in the LUF:

- Fairness and equity – land owners and users should be treated fairly, consistently and on a level playing field.
- Clarity – it should be clear where land use decisions are made and by whom.
- Integration – land, water and air policies and actions need to be integrated, as do policies addressing subsurface resources and land access.
- Transparent and open – the rules, processes and decisions should be well known and open for all to understand.
- Efficiency – the LUF should reduce rather than increase the cost of doing business in the province.

- Adaptability – the framework should address today’s concerns but also be flexible and adaptable to accommodate changing circumstances over time; it must be a *dynamic* planning tool.
- Enforceability – the framework has to be backed up by legislation, rules, monitoring and enforcement, along with the appropriate resources.
- Outcome based – the LUF should be outcome-based rather than prescriptive.
- Harmony – there’s a need to accommodate different uses of land while recognizing that not all land can be used for all purposes all at once.

Participants stressed need to respect the land and respect the rights and responsibilities of land owners and land users. In their eyes, the LUF should build in value for ecological goods and services, and for natural capital more broadly defined, and recognize the full range of monetary and non-monetary values of land and landscapes. The LUF should acknowledge impacts beyond Alberta’s borders, for how we use land now and in the future will affect our neighbours and the environment in general. The LUF needs to ensure cooperation between different levels of jurisdiction within Alberta. Finally, but by no means last, *the LUF should facilitate rather than constrain sustainable economic prosperity.*

The focus group participants were looking for a values-based LUF, one that recognized traditional patterns of land use and cultural ties to the land while also recognizing the need to adapt to changing circumstances. At the same time, many participants emphasized the principled foundation of the LUF must go beyond human interests and values to recognize the value of wilderness for its own sake:

- “Undisturbed wilderness should be seen as one in a series of legitimate land uses – intact ecosystems are part of the puzzle of sustainability.”

Given the above-mentioned emphasis on vision and values, it is not surprising that focus group participants pushed for a LUF written in bold, inspirational strokes that go beyond incremental change and amendments to existing legislative frameworks, and beyond operational-level land use initiatives that are already underway (e.g., ILM and forest management agreements). It should also go beyond reclamation and minimizing the development footprint:

- “The current objective seems to be minimizing the footprint. But that means we’re walking backwards. We know there’s a cliff there, but we’re not sure where.”

In this context there was some discussion of a *Land Use Charter* or *Sustainability Act* to serve as the vehicle for both a long-term vision and the underlying principles supporting that vision. Among municipal officials there was some discussion of a *Sustainable Communities Act* that could embody new processes and guidelines for municipalities to use in making land use decisions and implementing new approaches to regional planning. Municipal responsibilities and decisions should be respected and reinforced but, at the same time, there has to be an overall land use policy umbrella that guides and, in some cases, delimits the decisions municipalities can make.

The LUF sketched in by participants would combine a *provincial* land use framework with *regional* implementation:

- “We need an enforceable system of land use management with an umbrella created by the province that directs municipal districts to follow the framework of all Alberta.”
- “Land use planning has to be done within a meaningful space and a meaningful timeframe.”
- “We can articulate values at the provincial level but we still need a regional mechanism to wrestle value conflict to the ground.”

- “We need to make values work on a defined landscape.”

Put somewhat differently, the LUF should provide a *provincial policy platform for local decision-making*, ensuring local involvement so that people are responsible for their own communities. The provincial LUF could be the touchstone against which local decisions are tested. Some suggested using models similar to Water for Life or the Clean Air Strategic Alliance. In terms of where decisions should be made, suggestions included geographic regions, sub-regions, municipalities, smaller subsets of municipalities, and watershed basins. One participant suggested there should be local community organizations with delegated responsibilities from the province so they're not just advisory but have the authority to make decisions.

The focus group participants also wanted the LUF to incorporate a commitment to intergenerational equity:

- “The most important thing is our future legacy; our land is the only legacy we have left to offer.”
- “If you conserve land now, you give future generations two options: to continue to preserve or to use it to make money. If you don't conserve now, you don't have that option in the future.”
- “We need to convert from a concept of land as a frontier to taking a longer term view, otherwise our children will not want to live here.”

Linked to this concern with intergenerational equity was the recurrent theme of *stewardship*:

- “We're stewards of the land and our land use planning should be effective enough so my 11 year old son isn't here in 30 years having the same discussion because we haven't acted.”
- “The biggest key to a land use framework is land stewardship. Clean it up, build roads

right, and make different industries work together.”

- “Stewardship to me means respect, and pride in what you've done. Doing what your peers would admire.”
- “We need to be caretakers of the land, not just users of the land, responsible for what our activities are and sustainable for our own and other species.”

Some participants frequently argued that the LUF should be more of a process than a set of outcomes; the guiding principles should provide *the framework within which land use decisions are made*:

- “The framework shouldn't provide the map but set the rules for how the map is developed through an implementation process.”
- “The LUF should be more like an operating manual for the province rather than getting into what should happen on each piece of land.”
- “The LUF should provide stable, predictable rules to govern land use and land access.”
- “This isn't about winning a single battle; it's about designing the battlefield and the victory is a sustainable future.”

The framework, therefore, should clearly outline roles and responsibilities for the provincial government, municipal governments, and other boards and agencies involved in land use decisions. The ground rules for public consultations should be clear, as should who bears the cost. Some suggested that an independent, arms length agency should be established to oversee implementation of the land use framework, but most suggested that responsibility within the provincial government should be jointly held by a number of departments.

The LUF model that emerged from the focus groups would lean more towards facilitation (tools and incentives) and less

towards regulation, although it was also acknowledged that a backbone of regulations is essential:

- “We need to unleash market incentives rather than putting more regulations into place; we need to get away from a coercive model that attempts to coerce people into making certain decisions.”
- “Government should back away from heavy handed regulation, and always work to make the right things easy and the wrong things difficult for those who produce or enjoy services from the land.”
- “If we don’t want people to build homes in certain areas, make it uncomfortable or unacceptable to build there; then there won’t be a market.”
- “Enforcement and a focus on command and control does not foster creativity.”

Several participants noted that decisions about land use should involve more scientific evidence, and not be based on opinion alone. They called for added investment in science and research to guide future work on setting targets and assessing cumulative impacts. However, participants also noted the lack of consistent and comprehensive information about land uses in Alberta:

- “In terms of mapping, Alberta has an abysmal system of spatial information. It should be readily available and centralized on a common database; this would be a real investment and would give people better information to make better decisions.”
- “We should have the equivalent of a GPS system to map out land uses across the province.”

Many participants recommended the need to develop targets, measures and milestones so we can assess the impact of development and track progress in reaching objectives.

However, the measures should take into account not only the physical condition of the land but also the economic, social and cultural dimensions of land use. Here participants recognized that monitoring the quality of land is a much more difficult and contentious matter than is monitoring air or water quality. Many therefore referenced the need to develop broader measures such as “genuine progress indicators” and to take into account the “triple bottom line” – the social, environmental, and economic impact of land development. Some suggested there should be specific targets setting out the percentage of land reserved for agricultural purposes or the percentage of land reserved for natural habitats, watersheds, and wilderness areas.

Participants argued that the LUF should not come as a surprise to Albertans who have to be engaged in its development and see their values reflected in the LUF. It should reflect substantial public consultation built upon a sound foundation of public education.

Finally, I should note a recurrent emphasis by participants on the need for *political leadership* if the LUF is to be successful. There is no way of pleasing or appeasing all of the conflicting interests, so it will be necessary for the provincial government to have a clear plan, a clear process and good tools, but also the willingness – the courage – to make tough decisions when necessary:

- “The bottom-up approach to land use planning is not enough; things must be pulled together at the top.”
- “Until we have the political will to rate the quality of our environment as important as jobs and the economy, we’ll continue to struggle with this issue.”
- “People talk about flexibility, but there have to be some principles that are immutable. That’s where political courage comes in.”

Or, as a participant noted previously when he compared the current policy framework to a horse and buggy when we need a Porsche, “we can have a Porsche, but it still needs a driver.”

Throughout the consultation process, participants stressed that the provincial government must be brought into play in the land use planning process; local initiatives, industry best practices, and market forces alone or together are not sufficient to manage the growth pressures on the Alberta land base. And, if the provincial government can be brought into play, there is an opportunity for national, perhaps even global leadership:

- “We have a natural blessing, the capacity, the expertise, the money; if we can’t do it in Alberta, who can?”

## 6. Moving Ahead

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“It’s more than a regional land use plan. It’s really about what we want our communities to feel like. We want them to have financial security, but also quality of life.”

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Although the focus group participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds and represented a very diverse set of stakeholder interests, there was surprising consensus on the broad strokes of a provincial LUF. In short, many of the building blocks for a LUF appear to be in place. At the same time, there are still some important challenges to meet and nuts to crack.

First, the design features set out above were not tested against the focus groups, and therefore the degree of stakeholder consensus can only be estimated. The proposed sectoral forum in Red Deer might well consider testing a set of design features against the forum participants to see if a consensus can indeed be established.

A second and particularly difficult nut to crack is determining the potential scope of the proposed LUF. The focus group participants tended to drive the discussion upwards, towards a provincial vision, rather than downwards to specific sectoral interests. For some participants, the LUF would be nothing short of a provincial vision, or at the very least a land use policy framework that would be harnessed (the means) to a provincial vision articulated in another forum (the end). Others had more limited expectations. It is important to ask, therefore, whether the proposed LUF will be, explicitly or implicitly, a provincial

growth management strategy? An energy strategy? Will it include changes to the Municipal Government Act, or should changes to the MGA be pursued through other channels and legislative instruments? Should a new MGA be seen as one means among many for implementing the LUF?

A third nut to crack comes from the participants’ stress on the need for regional implementation of a provincial LUF. However, it remains unclear what the best regional containers might be for land use planning and the implementation of provincial policy. Should the boundaries of such containers be determined by existing political boundaries, by new regional boundaries, or by ecological boundaries such as watersheds? In a similar fashion, participants discussed the need to strike the appropriate balance between provincial direction and local autonomy, and stressed the importance of local decision making:

- “The framework must provide a mosaic reflecting unique strengths and vulnerabilities of each locality and its residents. Instead of a melting pot of compromises drawn from wish lists and petitions, the uniting vision must be that each community will feel that it has the backing of the province.”

At the same time, people expressed concerns with the potential for a “patchwork quilt” of land use decisions, for increasing fragmentation, and inconsistencies across the province if there isn’t some overarching direction from the provincial government. More has to be done to establish the appropriate balance between provincial direction and local autonomy.

A fourth challenge comes from a recurrent emphasis on the need for tradeoffs within the LUF:

- “We need to think hard about what the tradeoffs are going to be, establish those, then move forward. Don’t keep moving the tradeoffs back into the picture once decisions have been made.”

If the LUF is inevitably about tradeoffs, how might such tradeoffs be struck? Can we identify the tradeoffs that have

to be made? How can tradeoffs be framed in a way that will encourage a constructive public debate?

A fifth challenge is to be found in the tension between the desire to have a LUF that will not blow with the political winds of the day, and the desire to have a LUF that is flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions and values. Two participants nicely illustrate this tension: in the words of one, the LUF must be “impactful, actionable and unwavering,” whereas in the words of another, “we can’t develop plans based on today’s realities only; we can’t assume the same values, the same products and the same demands as today.” Where, then, should we strike the balance between firmness and flexibility?

Another challenging nut to crack relates to the timing of the LUF. Participants were torn between a sense of urgency and the need to proceed with caution and full public input. They recognized that creating and implementing a LUF will take some time: At issue, then, is how to proceed in the interim:

- “We didn’t get into this overnight and we won’t get out of it tomorrow.”
- “All of these processes are great, but they all take some time. What are we going to do in the interim to get a balanced perspective and to slow things down? We can’t stop the world, but a lot of choices we’re making now cannot be reversed in the future. We have to give ourselves time to make the right choices before it is too late.”
- “We’re not talking about freezing things – that’s a legitimate fear not only for industry but for land owners and people who want acreages. But the precautionary principle means you use science to guide decisions and move more cautiously.”
- “There has to be serious thought about how to deal with issues in the short term. When people know something is coming, there is a tendency to speed up and get decisions made more quickly to protect their interests. How, then, can we prevent inadvertently causing greater problems?”

At issue is how to proceed in the interim. There was little enthusiasm for slamming on the brakes, for freezing development until a LUF can be put into place. At the same time, participants urged greater caution in the short term until a long term framework can be put into place.

These issues might well constitute a significant part of the agenda for the proposed December 2006 cross-sectoral forum in Red Deer.

There are two final issues that need to be resolved as quickly as possible. The first is the need to locate the proposed LUF on a map of existing land use initiatives. Focus group participants were often confused about how the LUF fits in with other provincial initiatives such as the Water for Life Strategy, ILM initiatives, consultations on the oil sands, the development of a wetlands policy, and existing policy commitments to the preservation of biodiversity. In short, participants in future forums will require a map upon which they can locate the various policy initiatives, and determine just where the LUF fits within the broader picture.

The second issue, and a contentious issue, has to do with public education on the land use challenges facing Albertans. Here the focus group participants were of two minds. They thought that more should be done, indeed must be done to bring the public up to speed for an informed policy debate, but they themselves were fully up to speed and would greet any further delays in policy development with frustration and even anger. They would suggest, it seems, that public education and policy development should occur on parallel, simultaneous tracks and should not be sequenced. The need for public education was a theme that participants returned to again and again:

- “We need to educate people at all ages in society so that they will understand what sustainability is, where water comes from, and where the food on their plate comes from.”
- “Albertans own Alberta, and without educating children about what this means, you’re losing out. You can prevent a lot of problems if you educate them when they’re young.”



- “I’m never afraid of a decision made by informed people. It’s how we get them informed about what the issues are that’s the challenge.”

While some participants felt that the public is already much better informed and aware of the issues than the provincial government, others stressed the fact that the public doesn’t fully understand the impact of land use decisions. In their view, there is a need to raise public awareness. Many suggested that unless the public is “leading the parade” the government is unlikely to take up the challenge and make the tough decisions. Some suggested that education should start with children in school, so they have a better understanding of the value of Alberta’s land. Others suggested we should develop a “land ethic” through more public awareness and education about the impact of individual and community actions on the provincial land base.

## 7. In Conclusion

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“Today’s land use decisions will affect tomorrow’s quality of life.”

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What animated the focus group conversations more than anything else was a pervasive concern about the sustainability of Alberta’s quality of life. Perhaps for this reason, participants tended to drive the discussion upwards to embrace both growth management and provincial visions. If the focus group experience is any guide, and I suspect it is, Albertans will have very high expectations for a LUF, and managing those expectations will be a difficult task.

However, it is also clear from the focus groups that *not* proceeding carries even greater risks. Albertans are acutely aware of the growth pressures on the provincial land base, and they expect a policy response from their provincial government. The land management status quo is not seen as sufficient. Albertans expect, and indeed need something more. After all, “We won’t have any golden eggs if we don’t protect the goose,” and for Albertans, the goose is our land base. ■

## APPENDIX: The Focus Group Process

Stakeholder perceptions of the land use framework (LUF) initiative were collected through 15 focus groups; 7 in Calgary, 6 in Edmonton, and one each in Pincher Creek and Nisku. The sessions were 3 and a half hours in length, and in all cases but two (Pincher Creek and Nisku) were facilitated by Roger Gibbins. Peggy Garrity was present to record participant comments at all but one of the sessions, along with observers from the SREM office. The focus groups met between August 28 and October 18, 2006.

Potential invitees were identified through existing Canada West Foundation data bases, through suggestions from the Government of Alberta, and from an exhaustive search of stakeholder organizations within the province. Elected municipal and provincial officials were excluded from the search and invitation list, as were individuals employed by the Government of Canada. However, two of the Edmonton sessions were dedicated to non-elected municipal officials, and in those cases participants were recruited by AUMA and AAMD&C.

Just over 300 invitations were issued, and approximately 155 individuals participated in the focus groups, including people reflecting a variety of sectors and organizations – oil and gas, forestry, agriculture, recreation users, environmental groups, municipal planners, academics, and interested Albertans. Although this report identifies highlights of comments from various sectors, because of the small numbers of people involved with each sector, the views outlined in this summary should not be viewed as representative of the overall views of people in that particular sector.

Participants were assured that neither their names nor the names of their organizations would be cited in the final report. They were also told that although the sessions were designed to collect stakeholder perceptions of the proposed LUF, they were free to speak more generally if so moved. To this end, and prior to their session, participants were provided with a copy of the final report from the *Ideas Group*, which had been convened by the Government of Alberta in April.

### Author

Roger Gibbins is President and CEO of the Canada West Foundation, a public policy research group based in Calgary and operating across the four western provinces. Prior to assuming the leadership of the Canada West Foundation in 1998, Roger was a professor of political science at the University of Calgary, where he started his academic career in 1973 and served as department head from 1987 to 1996. Roger has authored, co-authored or edited 21 books and more than 100 articles and book chapters, most dealing with western Canadian themes and issues. In 1998 he was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and was the President of the Canadian Political Science Association from 1999 to 2000. Roger was born in Prince George, British Columbia, and received his undergraduate degree from UBC and his doctorate in political science from Stanford University in California.