



# Managing Prosperity

Developing a Land Use Framework for Alberta

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## Executive Summary

Over their first 100 years, and particularly over the past three decades, Albertans have been remarkably successful in combining extensive resource development with the preservation of the province's outstanding natural environment, thereby generating both economic prosperity and an unsurpassed quality of life. However, cracks are appearing in the existing policy approach to land management, cracks that reflect the combined pressures of population growth and economic development. In short, *there is heightened competition for a limited land base* as Albertans in their various pursuits bump into one another more and more.

Although these cracks do not signal an acute crisis, they foreshadow serious challenges to come as pressures on the provincial land base increase. If we look ahead, it is very doubtful that the existing set of policies will enable Albertans to manage increased pressure on a limited land base. It is time, therefore, for the Government to act on its commitment "to develop, in consultation with Albertans, a comprehensive land use policy for the province." It is time to put into place a *comprehensive and integrated* land use framework for handling both current tensions and the inevitable pressures to come. Failure to act will result in increased policy adhocery, growing uncertainty, and lost opportunities.

A broad political consensus exists that the once-open frontier has closed, that Alberta's finite land base and its stock of natural capital are under mounting pressure from population growth and economic development, and that the pressure will only intensify in the years to come. There is also a consensus that the management problem results not from a lack of policy but rather from the lack of policy *integration*. Infusing this consensus is an overarching anxiety about the nature, pace, and magnitude of change.

How, then, should the Government meet its commitment? In broad strokes, it should: (1) prepare the ground over the next six months; (2) hold a provincial "retreat" on the values and visions to be embedded in a comprehensive land use framework; (3) in light of this input, prepare a draft land use framework by the summer of 2006; (4) provide for a provincial dialogue on the draft report during the fall of 2006; and (5) release the final framework document by the winter of 2007.

Today's land use decisions, or for that matter lack of decision, will shape Alberta for generations to come. The stakes are high, with both prosperity and quality of life depending on harmony among sustainable economic growth, the stewardship of public resources, and the preservation of natural capital. Although action on this complex policy file is not risk-free, inaction brings even greater risk.

The Canada West Foundation was hired by Alberta Sustainable Resource development to conduct a scoping exercise relating to the Government of Alberta's commitment "to develop, in consultation with Albertans, a comprehensive land use policy for the province." The goal of the exercise was to provide strategic advice on how the Government might best meet this commitment; it was *not* to provide advice on the content of a comprehensive land use policy, although the distinction between process and content was occasionally blurred. To this end, the authors met collectively and individually with the Ministers of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Energy, Environment, Municipal Affairs and Sustainable Resource Development. They also met with the Deputy Ministers from the five departments, first as a deputy ministers' group and then along with members of the Foundation's advisory committee for its ongoing natural capital research. In addition, the authors drew from the extensive interview work and consultation sessions associated with that research. Drafts of the report were reviewed internally within the Government and the Foundation, and by members of the advisory committee who were present at the meeting with the Deputy Ministers.

## 1. Setting the stage

### **A world-class strategic and sustainable resource system needs a world-class land management system to support it.**

Over their first 100 years, and particularly over the past three decades, Albertans have been remarkably successful in combining extensive resource development with the preservation of the province's outstanding natural environment, thereby generating both economic prosperity and an unsurpassed quality of life. The reasons for this success are rooted in a public policy framework that has facilitated and regulated resource development while at the same time enabling Albertans to find the necessary harmony between growth and conservation. It is not incidental, for example, that Alberta was the first province to establish a Department of the Environment. In addition, an innovative private sector has progressively reduced the environmental footprint of natural resource development, and vigorous citizens and community groups have spoken up on behalf of Alberta's wild, working and urban landscapes.

So far, so good. However, cracks are beginning to appear in the existing policy approach to land management:

- population growth and a booming economy have combined to increase pressure on Alberta's stock of natural capital. Natural areas are being compromised, and large areas of natural prairie and provincial wetlands have been lost.
- there is growing concern, and hence investment uncertainty, among resource industries about timely and appropriate access to the land, about their social *license* to operate as granted by citizens who collectively own so much of the natural resource base.
- better coordination is needed between subsurface and surface permitting for resource development.

- urbanization, population growth and the dispersion of human settlement have led to the increasing fragmentation of agricultural land.
- although Alberta has a comprehensive regulatory regime for site-specific developments, there is insufficient capacity to measure and plan for their *cumulative* effects.
- recreational pressure on the landscape is increasing, as are conflicts between human activity and the preservation of wildlife habitat.

According to the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, there are currently over 231,000 active dispositions on the Alberta land base, 80% of which are related to oil and gas activities. There are approximately 17,000 new dispositions annually.

These examples, and they are only a few examples, reflect the complexity of the combined pressures of population growth and prosperity. *There is heightened competition for a limited land base* as we bump into one another more and more. Biodiversity, the preservation of wetlands and management of watersheds, soil erosion, climate change, and urbanization are all issues that have become entangled in land use policy.

Many of the land use challenges Albertans confront—population growth, urbanization, the fragmentation of agricultural land, watershed management, and the preservation of both emblematic landscapes and wildlife habitats—are not restricted to the province. As a consequence, there is an *opportunity for Albertans to demonstrate national leadership*.

However, what also makes land use policy in Alberta unique and unusually complex is the interplay of natural beauty, agricultural production, urban settlement and forestry resources on the land with an immense natural resource bounty *beneath the land*, a bounty that extends under most of the province. Albertans therefore have complicated interests in land use management—they collectively own the Crown land surface, individually occupy private lands and, through the provincial Crown, own subsurface mineral rights to Alberta's natural resource bounty. In addition, the conservation of natural capital is a concern for all Albertans. The uniquely Alberta dimension of the land use challenge is the integration of subsurface resource development and surface management for humans and other species.

Although cracks in the status quo do not yet signal an acute crisis, they foreshadow serious challenges to come as pressures on the provincial land base rapidly increase. Population growth and urbanization will continue, fueled by economic prosperity and an enviable quality of life. The energy sector could expand dramatically in the next decade in response to strong markets and the huge opportunities provided by untapped conventional deposits, enhanced recovery, unconventional deposits like oil sands and coal bed methane, and increased value-added processing. The agricultural and forestry sectors will continue to rub up against both urban areas and the energy sector, and expanding recreational activity will increase stress on the natural environment. If we look ahead, it is very doubtful that existing land use policies will enable Albertans to manage increased pressure on a fragmenting and limited land base.

The stakes are high, for both Alberta's prosperity and quality of life depend on harmony among sustainable economic growth, the stewardship of public resources, and the preservation of natural capital. It is time, therefore, to plan ahead, to put into place a *comprehensive and integrated* land use framework for handling current conflicts and the inevitable pressures to come. To its credit, the Government of Alberta (GOA) has initiated this work by its commitment to develop a comprehensive land use policy. Now is the time to walk the talk, to put that commitment into action.

***“The provincial government will ensure that the province’s land base is used as effectively as possible, recognizing traditional and different possible users, for the benefit of all Albertans. The government, in consultation with Albertans, will develop a comprehensive land use policy for the province.”***

– GOA's 2005-2008 Business Plan

## **2. Building the case for action**

**Although the existing land use policy framework is not broken, it is not sustainable in the face of the pressures on the land base that are rapidly coming down the track.**

Fortunately, Albertans are not starting from scratch in the development of a comprehensive and integrated land use framework. Existing legislation, including the early Eastern Slopes land use policy, the *Public Lands Act*, the *Mines and Minerals Act*, the *Municipal Government Act*, the *Forests Act*, and the *Forest Reserves Act*, provides an extensive foundation upon which to build. The province also has in place comprehensive air and water policy frameworks. In total, more than 50 policy documents exist. The emerging land use tensions, therefore, spring not from the absence of policy, but rather from limited policy integration, the lack of institutional structures for effective policy implementation, and absence of priorities across the existing policy frameworks.

The lack of integration may be further compounded by disparate initiatives already underway with respect to biodiversity, integrated land management, SREM, wetlands, and the Water for Life Strategy, to name but a few. This impressive corpus of creative policy work runs the risk of being fragmented and ineffectual unless it is grounded in an overarching policy framework. Uncertainty and even confusion could multiply rather than being reduced.

If we move, then, from the pieces of the puzzle to the larger frame, there is little question that Albertans are primed for a discussion on how to handle growing pressure on the provincial land base. They also appear to have an appetite for a bold and timely response. A broad political consensus exists on the following points:

- the open frontier has closed, and the entire land mass is under pressure from a wide range of human uses.
- both the province's finite land base and its stock of natural capital are under mounting pressure from vigorous economic development, population growth, settlement patterns, and recreational activities.

- the existing buffers and boundaries between different types of land use are eroding as Albertans reside, work and recreate on an increasingly crowded landscape.
- pressure on the land base will only intensify in the future as resource development responds to market opportunities, the population grows, transportation expands, and residential settlement further fragments forests, wilderness areas, and agricultural land.
- although this pressure will differ in degree and kind from one region to another, no corner of the province will be untouched.
- uncertainty over land use policy, and thus uncertainty over appropriate and timely access to resources, threatens to impair Alberta's business climate.
- uncertainty over land use policy also breeds uncertainty with respect to policies on conservation and habitat preservation.

Infusing this consensus is an overarching anxiety about the nature, pace, magnitude, and implications of growth. Alberta is being transformed, but is the transformation taking us in the right direction? Is the *Alberta Advantage* sustainable, based on current land use policy? Are we paying enough attention to the long-term benefits of natural capital assets?

More immediately, is there a sufficiently robust consciousness and consensus among Albertans to support a positive and constructive discussion on the future of land management policy and practice? We believe there is. Indeed, the message we hear again and again, and with increasing urgency, is that the time to act is now. If the GOA does not act with dispatch, the policy landscape will be increasingly characterized by adhocery and the resultant uncertainty. This in turn could erode both economic prosperity and natural capital. The question, then, is how to advance the land use policy file, and how to do so *in consultation with Albertans*?

Policy development can be compared to surfing. If there are no waves—no public concern, for instance, about the management of the provincial land base—then the proponents of policy change are left stranded on the beach. However, if the waves are too big, if we are inundated by land use conflicts, there is little opportunity for surfing skills; simple survival becomes the name of the game. Today, the surf is up but not yet treacherous.

### 3. Consultation architecture

**Alberta will be a very *different* place in 15 to 20 years. The challenge is to make sure that it will also be a *better* place.**

Designing an appropriate public consultation strategy for an issue as complex and potentially vast in scope as integrated land use management is more an art than a science. Nonetheless, a starting point can be found in three simple but critically important assertions:

- What is needed is a land use framework for Albertans rather than for the Government of Alberta. Because any such framework will be value based, inevitably entailing tradeoffs among competing values, public input into the creation of a land use framework is essential.
- Public engagement is not a substitute for provincial policy and political leadership. Indeed, consultation without such leadership could easily become a counterproductive cacophony of local interests and disputes.
- There cannot be a foregone outcome to public engagement. To ensure this, the engagement process must be open, fair, accessible, inclusive, transparent, accountable, flexible, respectful, and comprehensive.

How, then, should public engagement be structured? In broad strokes, the GOA might consider the following stages:

- 1. *preparing the ground – fall 2005;***
- 2. *a provincial “retreat” on the values and visions to be embedded in a comprehensive provincial land use framework – winter 2006;***
- 3. *in light of this input, the internal preparation of a land use framework – spring/summer 2006;***
- 4. *provincial dialogue on the draft report – fall 2006; and***
- 5. *the release of the final framework document – winter 2007.***

These timelines recognize the complexities of the file for the GOA. It is worth noting, however, that many outside the government argue that the timelines are too generous, that Albertans cannot afford to wait. There is a widespread mixture of anxiety and impatience, coupled with the understanding that other important policy files will be stalled if land use policy is in abeyance.

Let's look in more detail at the stages of this strategy, with particular attention being given to the first two stages.



**Stage 1: Preparing the ground (fall 2005)**

The short-term goal for the GOA is not to develop a comprehensive land use policy; rather, it is to create a constructive environment within which that policy can be developed in consultation with Albertans. To this end, numerous steps can be taken in the near term:

- The GOA needs to sort through the principles and mechanics needed for effective project governance. What is the role of the project office? What are the lines of reporting and accountability? Is there a need for a standing advisory committee? For subcommittees? If so, what would be the composition of such committees and subcommittees? What is the optimal mix of internal and external advice?
- The GOA should review past and current efforts (e.g., the former regional planning authorities, the Alberta Biodiversity Strategy, the Water for Life Strategy, the Clean Air Strategic Alliance, the Southern Alberta Sustainability Strategy, Alberta's Rural Development Strategy, the Integrated Land Management Program, and Forest Management Agreements) to identify process and substantive lessons that might be applied to the development of an integrated and comprehensive land use framework.
- The GOA should assess the lessons for integrated land use management that might be learned from existing institutions such as the EUB and NRCB.
- Models from the private sector should be explored for applicable lessons. Examples include the Alberta Chamber of Resources' integrated land management process and the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers' roadmap for integrated land and resource management.
- NGOs such as Ducks Unlimited Canada, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Association, and the Alberta Wilderness Association are filled with professional staff, creative ideas and volunteers who are passionate about Alberta's natural capital. Alberta's human capital in this respect is vast; the challenge is to find a way to harness that human capital to provincial policy development.
- The GOA needs to clearly articulate the status quo—the policies and planning mechanisms currently in place, their existing strengths and weaknesses, areas of overlap and tension, and potential linkages. In short, the existing land management system has to be understood—what works well, what works poorly, and what needs to be improved.
- The initial scoping exercise launched by *Managing Prosperity* should be continued through informal focus group consultations with resource industries, agricultural producers, academic institutions, research groups (e.g., the Alberta Research Council), municipal governments, recreational users, environmental groups, and other key stakeholders. It is essential to bring these stakeholder groups into the front-end of the conversation in order to identify priorities and principles that could guide the broader discussion. This informal phase of consultation should also bring potentially competing stakeholder groups to the same table so that trade-offs can be identified in the early stages of the process.

- It will be important to work through the communications challenge of launching the land use initiative. What will Albertans read into such an initiative? What will be their expectations about both scope and product? What language is needed to frame a *productive* public discussion?
- Other jurisdictions should be examined for measurable and quantifiable benchmarks, and for applicable models of stakeholder engagement.
- The GOA needs to establish and/or clarify its internal lines of jurisdiction, responsibility, and accountability for the land use file. *An integrated land use policy must rest upon internal integration across and within government departments and agencies.*
- The GOA should assemble the documentary materials necessary to support a constructive public discussion—materials relating to the extent and growth of natural resource developments, population growth, wildlife habitat, and various other existing policy frameworks. *A Facts on Land* analogous to *Facts on Water* would be particularly useful for public education and as a backgrounder for the public consultations to come.
- The GOA should pull together an “ideas group” that could serve as an ongoing creative bridge between land use policy work taking place inside and outside government. This group could help harness work being done in different sites to a common process and goal.
- Perhaps above all else, Alberta needs a comprehensive land use information system. Good land use information simply does not exist at present. While it is very unlikely that such a system can be put into place in time to inform the public discussions outlined below, it will be an essential component of land use planning and policy implementation in the years ahead. It makes no sense to delay putting an information system into place.

All of the above are necessary albeit not sufficient conditions for success as the GOA embarks on developing a comprehensive and integrated land use framework for the province.

### **Stage 2: A provincial retreat (winter 2006)**

The second stage could encompass a two-day retreat with approximately 100 invited participants—not a representative cross-section—drawn from across the province. (A significant block of time would be needed given the complexity of the issues.) In a process analogous to a citizens’ jury, thoughtful people who are engaged in ways that bring the complexity of land use issues to the surface could be invited by the Premier. They would be supported by expert advisors drawn from inside and outside government. If possible, the retreat should be held in a location that would bring natural capital values to the fore (e.g., Jasper, Athabasca, Cold Lake or Kananaskis rather than downtown Edmonton or Calgary). The retreat would signal the start rather than the end of an informed provincial discussion on managing prosperity. It would also provide a clear signal of the Government’s determination to develop a comprehensive land use policy.

The GOA should consider the benefits of having a third party host the event. A host other than the GOA may help take the provincial government out of the firing line and it may make it less likely that the forum would be used to address specific land use disputes. It would also reinforce the point that the development of a comprehensive, integrated land use framework by the GOA is not intended to be a top-down exercise.

This stage of the public consultation process should be framed provincially rather than locally. If public engagement is built up from smaller community-based forums, it is likely to get mired in specific land use conflicts. Given that the end product is a *provincial* land use framework, it makes sense to frame the retreat within this context.

Setting the right time frame for the public consultations is essential. There should be no expectation that existing land use disputes are on the table, and every expectation that “business as usual” will continue while the province moves to develop a long-term comprehensive plan. This can be achieved by asking participants to look ahead 15-20 years, well beyond the life of the current government, rather than focusing on the immediate policy landscape.

The GOA must also set clear expectations for the provincial retreat. The goal is not to create detailed land use policy, and participants would not be asked for policy solutions. Instead, participants would be asked to identify the values we should protect and the questions we should ask as the provincial planning process moves forward. *What outcomes do people want for the provincial landscape, and for the provincial economy? What is their future vision of Alberta and its land base, and what kind of land management system do we need to arrive at that destination?*

To pull this potentially complex discussion into focus, it would be useful to establish the foundations of what should be included within a land use framework. This can be accomplished by:

*(1) Preparing a foundational discussion paper*

A discussion paper laying out a preferred outcome for Albertans 15-20 years down the road should be prepared. The paper should fully articulate both a proposed structure for a comprehensive land use framework in Alberta as well as the preferred outcome of this structure. Participants would then have the opportunity to engage in facilitated discussion based upon the proposals in the paper and explore the values they believe should underlie a land use framework, as well as the outcomes they want for the landscape, and for the provincial economy. The point would be to establish a jumping off point for the larger land use discussion.

*(2) Proposing a structure for the Framework*

A major purpose of the provincial retreat should be to explore the expectations for the content of the land use framework. To direct the dialogue towards these expectations it will be valuable to establish in the discussion paper a proposed structure for the framework, including the underlying values, goals, principles and strategies of the land use discussion. Of course, these will be open to debate and subject to change as the consultative process proceeds.

It is important to get the language right around what should be included in the land use framework. It is no coincidence that the structure used below as an example of what the content of a land use framework should be mirrors that used by the GOA in other documents—most notably annual business plans. The GOA must demonstrate consistency on this complex policy file, and getting the language right with respect to the hierarchy of vision, goals, principles and strategies is one effective way of doing this.

It must be noted that neither the language nor the content suggested below is set in stone, nor should it be. Though the example reflects the consolidation of what currently exists in government documentation as well as much of what we have heard in our discussions on land use policy across the province, it must be open to change and evolution throughout the framework development process, both at a provincial retreat and during the larger public consultations.

The GOA should consider seeking out a third party to assist with the early stages of the policy development process. This would send the signal that the GOA wants the development of the land use framework to be an open, organic process. Moreover, if the GOA brings a comprehensive proposal to the table too early, it may lead those involved in the summit and public consultations to believe that the result is a foregone conclusion.

With this in mind, we believe that the discussion would best be served by providing participants with the following starting points:

**Vision**

It would first be useful to articulate an over-arching, values-based land management vision for the province, an objective towards which more specific policy development can be directed and against which progress can be assessed.

Importantly, any such discussion must reinforce and be congruent with the GOA's vision expressed in *Today's Advantage, Tomorrow's Promise*, the Government's 20 year strategic plan: "A vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children." More specifically, the GOA's strategic plan states that "Alberta's landscape supports a vibrant and prosperous province, providing a superior quality of life now and in the future, and its distinctive landscapes and recreation make Alberta a good place to live, work and visit!"

**An Illustrative Vision Statement:**

***"An effective land use policy that ensures the most appropriate use of resources while recognizing our obligations as stewards for future generations"***

## Goals

While the vision is an over-arching statement reflecting the preferred outcome of the land use framework, goals should be put in place to reflect the values to be served by developing a land use framework. These values were explored above in making the case for why the GOA should develop a framework. Goals should demonstrate *how* the framework would alleviate present issues around land use. Goals should include:

- **Certainty** – Strive to reduce conflict over access to the land for surface and subsurface resource development, conservation, and recreation activities.
- **Community and Regional Advancement** – Successfully manage the “two Albertas” by encouraging activity in areas of the province where the economy is lagging and by managing growth in areas where it is booming.
- **Effective Governance** – Reflect the needs and desires of Albertans by responding to residents’ concerns, operating transparently, and requiring accountability in the land use decision-making process.
- **Economic Sustainability** – Foster a stable and sustainable business climate by ensuring access for resource-based industries in certain areas of the province, while at the same time planning for conservation and preservation in others.
- **Environmental Sustainability** – Require an integrated planning process so as to best protect Alberta’s water, air, soil and biodiversity.

## Principles

Just as the goals underlying the land use framework are more specific than the guiding vision statement, so should the principles establish another level of detail. Principles can be thought of as the “meat” of the framework: pieces of the puzzle that must be in place for the framework to be successful, and that guide the land use framework in the fulfillment of the goals and, by extension, the realization of the vision. Our Alberta-wide discussions on land use with government officials, resource representatives, environmental organizations and private citizens have demonstrated that the following principles should be included in the land use framework:

- **Comprehensiveness** – In order to be truly effective, the land use framework must involve both public and private lands—Alberta’s green and white spaces—while respecting the balance between the public interest and private property rights. As well, the framework must extend beyond project specific proposals to address the complexity of cumulative effects.
- **Integration** – Integration has a host of meanings within the context of the land use framework:
  - First, land use decisions must work within the hierarchical planning process by looking *up* (to guiding legislation and high-level policy documents), looking *down* (to local planning processes), and looking *within* (to ensure internal consistency).
  - Second, there must be a climate of cooperation between government departments and different levels of government for the framework to be successful.
  - Third, there must be shared decision-making amongst the regions in the final land use framework. It is likely that the framework will function by governing different regions of the province with different land use policies. Because of the potential for cumulative effects inherent in land use decisions, decision-making should not stop at the boundaries of these regions, but instead should be integrated across them.

- **Priority Access** – Given the temporal and spatial nature of land use decisions, the framework must require tradeoffs with respect to access. It cannot allow everything to be done everywhere all the time.
- **Strong Leadership** – The framework must be guided by strong provincial leadership and governance so it does not become mired in specific land use concerns and conflicts.
- **Science-based** – Decisions around land use—especially controversial decisions—must rest upon accurate, current, accessible, integrated and transparent information systems and a comprehensive understanding of the environmental, social and economic effects of development.
- **Public Involvement** – Land use decisions, as well as the content of the framework itself, must only be made following widespread consultation with those who will be affected.
- **Transparency** – The development of a framework must be an open process so as to assuage concerns that one group is being favoured at the expense of another.
- **Flexibility** – Planning is a continuous process with changing conditions, thus the framework must provide for a reevaluation of land use policies and be open to adjustment and modification as circumstances warrant.
- **Place-based** – Led by strong provincial leadership and guided by provincial policy, the framework should ensure that land use decisions emphasize localized policy implementation to bring regional perspectives to bear in a manner that is congruent with community values of the day.
- **Information-based** – Integral to an effective land use system is an effective information system that provides quality measurement on indicators important to land use decisions, and that is accessible by all Albertans.

### Strategies

Strategies are the final level of detail in the hierarchy of content that should be brought into the land use discussion. However, strategies differ from the other levels of discussion in that they propose courses of action that should be taken to realize the principles, goals and vision of the framework. Given this, the development of strategies is an area that should be considered “hands-off” in the early stages of the process. Strategies will inform the *methods* by which the land use framework structures decision-making with respect to land access, and, given the importance of public involvement to the development of the framework, must only be developed in consultation with Albertans.

No matter how comprehensive and creative a provincial land use framework might be, land use conflicts will not disappear. Indeed, competing interests on a finite land base can only be expected to increase as the population grows and as economic development increases. Above all else, therefore, a land use framework is about *dispute resolution, about providing the policy context within which specific land use conflicts can be resolved*. This context must provide for clarity, fairness and predictability.

**Stage 3: Drafting an Alberta Land Use Framework (spring/summer 2006)**

It should be the *primary although not necessarily exclusive* responsibility of the GOA, following the provincial retreat, to pull together a draft land use framework. This exercise in leadership provides the context for the more comprehensive public consultations to come.

At this point it is important to mention two other significant players with respect to any truly comprehensive land use policy for the province of Alberta—Aboriginal peoples and the Government of Canada. First Nations, Métis settlements and the federal government are all large landowners within Alberta, and many of the land-related policies of the federal government reach well beyond federally-owned land. These players must be engaged at some point in the process, and Stage 3 looks like the optimal time; the discussions are no longer overly abstract, but neither are policy prescriptions carved in stone.

This *may* also be the stage at which the GOA begins to monitor public opinion with respect to the land use file. There will inevitably be perceived winners and losers as the file develops, and those who feel disadvantaged by change will understandably fight to retain the status quo. It will therefore be important for decision-makers to have a broad sense of public opinion rather than relying on the grievances to which they will be routinely exposed.

It may be useful throughout this stage to identify “low-hanging fruit,” policy areas where the GOA can act quickly to build positive momentum and gain policy traction within the GOA and other policy-related institutions and organizations. It is tempting, to be sure, to break a very large and complex policy file into bite-sized chunks. To this end, it could be important to identify work that is already underway, such as the development of a provincial wetlands policy, within government, industry, NGOs and ENGOs. At the same time, however, the GOA must avoid the danger of adhocery, of appearing to move precipitously on some fronts before a comprehensive policy framework is in place.

**Stage 4: Provincial dialogue (fall 2006)**

It will be essential to take the draft policy framework “on the road” for public consultations before the final draft is crafted and embedded, if necessary, in provincial legislation. At this stage, regional discussion forums could be used to draw representative sets of participants. Much of the documentation used to support the earlier retreat (e.g., *Facts About Land*) could support the public discussions. At this stage it will be essential to have a strong and clear communications plan in place.

Pilot projects might also be identified at this stage, projects where the GOA can test drive both emerging land use principles and innovative forms of public consultation. Consideration should be given to pilots in areas of intensive energy development (Fort McMurray), rapid urban growth (the Calgary-Edmonton corridor), and emblematic landscapes (southwest corner of the province).

## **Stage 5: Release of the Alberta Land Use Framework (winter 2007)**

It would be up to the GOA in the months following the roundtable consultations, to construct the final land use framework, and to bring it forward for legislative debate and ratification. It has been suggested that this framework be system-based, integrated with the province's water and air policy frameworks, and linked to some type of new regional planning mechanism.

### **4. Risk management**


Although the timing for a land use initiative is right, action is never risk free. This is a policy field with strongly held vested interests and fraught with suspicion that any initiative by the government is designed to help some and hurt others. It is imperative, therefore, that the process be as open and transparent as possible. Even then, there will be risks:

- The potential scope of any land use framework is immense; few industries, individuals or corners of the province, and for that matter few branches of the provincial government, will be untouched. As a consequence, the initiative could spin out of control.
- the GOA may bring too few resources, and too little priority and energy, to a very difficult and complex policy file.
- proposals for action may over-estimate the government's capacity to plan, regulate, or respond through other policy instruments.
- there is a danger that everyone will expect to get their way, whereas the reality is that trade-offs will be an essential part of any successful framework.
- the need for a land use framework stems from the reality of conflicting interests competing on an increasingly crowded terrain; the process of creating a land use framework will inevitably exacerbate some of these conflicts in the short run.
- while some regions of the province need to manage rapid rates of growth, other regions need to stimulate growth. A provincial land use policy must address both parts of the province.
- virtually every square inch of the provincial land base has a municipal government sitting on top of it, and thus municipal governments must be woven into the policy development process. Figuring out how this might best be done is an issue of the highest priority.
- the perfect may be the enemy of the good. It is important to stress, therefore, that it is possible to move forward without crossing every "t" and dotting every "i."

Although these risks cannot be ignored, the long-term risks to the province in not moving are far greater.



## 5. Conclusions

The GOA has already taken a very significant step toward the development of a comprehensive land use framework; the commitment to act is now in place. Moreover, Albertans understand the magnitude, importance and urgency of the problem. It is time, therefore, to stop admiring the problem, and begin addressing it. Today's land use decisions, or lack of decision, will shape Alberta for generations to come. It is time to act, and to get it right. 



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