

DRAFT NWT WATER STEWARDSHIP STRATEGY

Mr. Speaker, water is fundamental to life. Clean and abundant freshwater is essential to the social, spiritual, cultural and economic well-being of all NWT residents. We rely on our clean waters and healthy aquatic ecosystems, and recognize it as one of our most valuable resources.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR), Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and designated representatives of Aboriginal governments, partnered to develop a draft Water Strategy. Later today I will be tabling the draft NWT Water Stewardship Strategy, Northern Voices, Northern Waters, which is the result of two years of hard work and consultation.

The draft NWT Water Stewardship Strategy entitled Northern Voices, Northern Waters is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to the responsible management of water resources both within the NWT and upstream. Aboriginal governments, the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT), the Government of Canada, regional organizations, communities, environmental non-governmental organizations, co-management boards and agencies, industry and residents contributed towards the development of the draft Strategy.

Water quality in some local areas may be under stress but most of the waters of the NWT are clean, abundant and productive. However, pressures on waters throughout the NWT and in neighbouring jurisdictions continue to increase.

The NWT economy is very dependent on resource development, Mr. Speaker. There are three producing diamond mines in the NWT with more in the planning stages.

Several other mines including gold, polymetallic, base metal, and rare earth are also in the planning stages. All the mines use existing water bodies to store tailings and process water for treatment before discharging it into the environment. There are also oil and gas developments in the NWT with more developments proposed.

Upstream developments in neighbouring jurisdictions, including hydro, mining, agricultural and oil sands operations also have implications for NWT waters. These are major concerns for NWT residents.

As stewards of NWT waters, we have an obligation and a responsibility to adopt more sustainable water management practices. The draft Strategy will result in more effective water stewardship, and ensure water quality, quantity and ecological productivity will not be degraded. It will ensure the use of water resources to meet the needs of the present generation will not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The waters of the NWT are a world-wide resource. The Mackenzie River Basin's (MRB) natural water-ice-climate systems help stabilize the Earth's climate. There could be ecological and water-related implications for the entire continent if the MRB system changes too much.

Mr. Speaker, water brings life, and it is life. NWT residents agree that water is a living thing, not just a commodity or something to be traded or used and thoughtlessly discarded. The natural environment is one of the NWT's most valued features and its water resources are particularly significant.

Aboriginal people in the NWT have a long and intimate relationship with the land and water. Their traditional knowledge results from a deep understanding of the natural environment. The draft Strategy recognizes that an integral part of the Strategy is a balanced approach to traditional and scientific knowledge.

It promotes an ecosystem-based approach to integrated watershed management which includes the concepts of natural capital and sustainability accountability.

The draft Strategy does not alter existing water responsibilities. It respects Aboriginal and treaty rights as well as rights and processes set out in settled land claim and self-government agreements. The Strategy is intended to support existing rights and government agreements. It is intended to improve the decision-making processes of all parties involved in water stewardship, including regional forums like the Mackenzie River Basin Board, by increasing information sharing and communication, enhancing knowledge bases and encouraging greater cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, we take our water stewardship responsibilities seriously. The success of the NWT Water Stewardship Strategy depends on active involvement of all water partners in promoting and determining water stewardship objectives and actions. NWT residents want us to show strong leadership in water stewardship by setting high standards to hold ourselves and others responsible and accountable. Our leadership in, and approach to, water stewardship can provide valuable input to the development of a national water strategy.

Residents will be advised on a regular basis of the effectiveness of water stewardship actions. Publication of an annual overview of research and monitoring results, as well as summaries of water uses within the NWT and neighbouring jurisdictions, will assist in keeping communities and residents informed.

Mr. Speaker, we have an obligation to protect and steward our water resources for ourselves, for future generations and for all living things that rely on water. The draft Water Stewardship Strategy will help us achieve this.

The NWT Water Stewardship Strategy will be finalized during the winter of 2009/2010 following engagement and input from the public. Mahsi.