

SEAWA organizes

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Water solutions top priority for SEAWA

Provincial dignitaries showed their support for the Southeast Alberta Watershed Alliance when the group held its inaugural annual general meeting at the Esplanade in Medicine Hat last Thursday.

Lorne Taylor, chairman of the Alberta Water Research Institute was the keynote speaker for the meeting that enveloped more than two years of hard work and commitment from an initiator committee.

The Journey to a Thousand Miles Begins with One Step was the title of Taylor's presentation that focused on the importance of sustainable water supplies in the province.

"I can assure you that this is important to our government. We can move forward with confidence. The Water for Life Strategy was born right here in Medicine Hat many years ago. My family has been here since 1945. My dad was in the cattle business and I became interested in water early in my life," said Taylor.

"We farmed on the south side of the Trans Canada Highway, close to the Saskatchewan border and I remember as a five-year old boy, being out with my dad looking at the water holes, the dugouts, for our cow/calf operation. When you can hear your dad talking about water, it stays with you for life. I grew up with a sense of water, with the importance of water," he added.

Taylor said his Water for Life Strategy was a vision he had for the people of Alberta when he first entered politics.

"When I entered politics, I knew the focus of my ministry was going to be on water. It was a two-and-a-half year process to develop Water for Life and the one thing I have learned about government is that you can not give up. You need perseverance. Do not give up. Develop a strategy," said Taylor.

"Water for Life started with a community meeting where we asked community people from across the province what they thought were the important issues surrounding water. Eighteen months to two years later, we brought 200 people together to get the people's input into our water strategy. This is not a government-created document, but a document created by the public," he added.

The Water for Life Strategy is comprised of three main components; safe and secure water supply, healthy aquatic systems and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy.

"These are the goals, the fundamentals, but how do we get these? How do we do this? We need knowledge and research. We need partnerships, and we need conservation," said Taylor.

"Currently, we do not have good science around our water. There is little understanding of groundwater and the interaction between groundwater and surface water. We need better monitoring of our surface water."

"We have a 10 to 20-year window of opportunity to do something or we will end up the same as Arizona or California. If we do not take action in that time, we will be in a dire situation. This is not a 40-year project. We have huge opportunities, but not in the long term," he added.

Taylor who began chairing the Alberta Water Research Institute about one year ago, said his group is focused on the solutions to the issues, rather than the issues themselves.

"I am focusing on solutions. The government is wanting for us to go to them with solutions so they can use that information for policy development and changes. Too many times, people identify the problems and not the solutions. It is not enough to identify the problems. We will discuss the issues and problems, but we will be focused on the solutions. We will kick in \$30 million to start. The premier told me the money for water research in this province is unlimited," said Taylor.

Medicine Hat MLA Rob Renner also was on hand to provide support for SEAWA.

"We really need to recognize how important water is, especially here in southern Alberta. This is a monumental day. It did not just happen. There have been working groups for the past two or three years who need to be congratulated for bringing this day about," said Renner.

"Alberta Environment and I appreciate all the work you have done. Much more work is yet to come. If you think it was a challenge to get to this point, there is much more to come. The secret to the success of these organizations is that they are broad-based with municipalities, corporations, agriculture, and recreation users all having a common goal. This particular organization has done an outstanding job in ensuring its representation is broad-based. Every one of the participants on this council is appreciated and respected for being there," he added.

The SEAWA initiator committee was adamant about having a broad-based representation in forming its organization.

"This group came out of Alberta's Water for Life Strategy. We are the last of the water basins to have one in place. We are the main stem of the South Saskatchewan River following the fork of the Bow and Oldman Rivers. Membership is meant to be as inclusive as possible, to reflect all points of view and to have a broad representation that is workable, but represents all points of view," said John Moldon.