

2021/2022

ANNUAL REPORT



PREPARED BY

MILK RIVER WATERSHED COUNCIL CANADA

www.mrwcc.ca
Our Water, Our Legacy



MRWCC VISION

A watershed where community well-being is supported by a vibrant economy and sustained by a healthy environment that will endure as our legacy for future generations

MRWCC GOAL

To achieve balance among a thriving community, a healthy environment and a prosperous economy through understanding, dialogue and action

PLANNED OUTCOMES

Reliable and Safe Water Supplies

- Water is managed in a manner that benefits communities while meeting the needs of the aquatic and riparian environment.
- Water sharing disputes are resolved.
- Groundwater is mapped, interactions are understood, and the resource is properly managed.
- An improved economy in the Milk River watershed due to a secure supply of water.
- Information on water use in the Milk River watershed is available to the public.

Quality Water

- Quality water is available for communities, terrestrial and aquatic life, recreation and industry in the Milk River watershed.
- Baseline water quality information is available to the public.
- Water quality and quantity information is used to achieve sustainable use and integrated management of water resources.

Riparian Protection

- Healthy, functioning riparian areas contribute to stream bank stability, good water quality, forage, shelter and biodiversity in the Milk River watershed.

Land Use

- Innovative and sustainable land use and development practices take place in the watershed.
- A healthy, vibrant economy that will attract people and investment to the watershed.

Biodiversity

- A diverse native wildlife and plant community is present in the Milk River watershed through habitat protection and enhancement efforts.

Informed Community

- A community that is informed and actively involved in the Milk River Watershed Council Canada and its initiatives.

Transboundary Relationships

- Good working relationships with Saskatchewan and Montana that create a process and forum to address transboundary watershed concerns.



2021-22 HIGHLIGHTS

Water Supply and Management Team

Ken Miller, Chairman

The Team participates in the Alberta-Montana Water Management Initiative, a joint cross-border Council formed to address water sharing and management for the Milk River.

- Addressed issues of water supply including water shortages, predicting future supply scenarios and working with our Montana neighbours to investigate international water sharing management strategies.
- Worked with other partners and stakeholders to promote water conservation strategies.
- Assisted Alberta Environment Parks and Milk River water users to update the community on updates on river conditions, water quality, water quantity information, and water management actions.
- Continued promotion of water security options and opportunities e.g. providing a forum for water users to explore other water storage investigations
- Contracted WaterSMART Solutions Ltd. to develop a water shortage contingency plan using a \$20,000 Ecotrust grant. Gathered information through interviews with water managers, agricultural producers, community leaders, and regulatory experts and reviewed relevant documentation including existing municipal water back-up plans, transboundary agreements, and water management reports.
- Conducted 6 Water Supply Management (WSM) Team meetings including 5 additional water contingency project meetings with the project committee, and 4 additional virtual meetings with the International Joint Commission, and AIPA.



Milk River at the HWY 880 Bridge site. by Mary Lupwayi

Research and Monitoring Team

Will Lindeman, Chairman

The Research and Monitoring Team is responsible for collecting information about the watershed and identifying gaps in our current knowledge. The team initiates science and research projects that will further understanding of the watershed health.

- Conducted 2 Research and Monitoring Team meetings.
- Completed 16th year of water quality monitoring on the Milk River.
- Monitored invasive mussels on 5 Milk River locations.
- Partnered with AEP in monitoring tributary locations throughout the watershed.
- Reviewed and provided feedback on the draft Risk Assessment undertaken following the Investigation of Salinity in the Milk River seen during the winter period.
- Completed a report on Red Creek Water Quality trend analysis to investigate potential pesticide uses and their impact on amphibians and heavy metals (e.g., mercury, cadmium and lead) and their potential impact on livestock health
- The Council is working to produce a 15-year long-term Milk River water quality trend report to be completed this fiscal year.
- Have shared Council's 2021 Water quality data on DataStream, an open-access platform for water quality data, with the aim of promoting knowledge sharing and advancing collaborative water stewardship. To view the data please click the link below:
<https://doi.org/10.25976/33tj-bs38>
- Contracted Palliser Environmental Services Ltd. to produce the 2023 Transboundary State of the Watershed report. Reviewed and completed Terms of Reference. Gathered information for the report. Report to be completed in 2023.
- Contracted Kristine Dahl with Arvensense to produce a report on "Producers Leading the Way Project: Opportunities for Improved Native Grassland Conservation and Species at Risk Stewardship within the Milk River Watershed," in an effort to help understand native grassland conservation in this sensitive and ecologically important area.

- Started the Securing a Home for Bats in the Milk River Watershed project, A multi-year project that will be completed in 2023. The project identifies and documents important roost sites being used by the Little Brown Myotis throughout the watershed. Ultimately, the goal is to develop an inventory of this species to understand population trends overtime, monitor the presence of disease (specifically White Nose Syndrome), and collaborate with private landowners to increase awareness of the presence of these bats on their properties.

Community Awareness & Involvement Team

Ed Sloboda, Chairman

The Team ensures that community members are aware and involved in the activities of the Milk River Watershed Council Canada. 3 Team meetings were conducted.

- Presented a Youth Engagement Program to local schools which included:
 - Participating in the Nutrien sponsored Caring for Our Watershed Program.
 - Partnered with Alberta Parks and local schools to develop a Youth Engagement Program to deliver watershed related education materials within local schools and parks.
- Partnered with local rural municipalities, Alberta Conservation Association, and GOA to develop the Annual Southern Alberta Youth Range Days program. Which was later cancelled due to Covid-19 restriction.
- Planned to host Community Engagement Activities in form of Educational Tours such as Canoe Tour, Hike, and bus Tour, and the Watershed beef contest. Due to Covid-19 restrictions most of the in person community events were cancelled or postponed
- Conducted a very successful online auction and raised over \$5,000 that will help to leverage project funding from other funders.
- Planned to conduct community awards programs to recognize Milk River resident's outstanding conservation efforts in sustaining, protecting, and enhancing the environment in the watershed:
 - Environmental Stewardship Award
 - Tree Heritage Recognition

The community awards were later cancelled because we did not get any entries.

- Hosted the 16th Annual General Meeting virtually, through zoom on May 27, 2021
- Community Presentations – 2 virtual presentations: local landowners and recreational users.
- Municipal Presentations – 3 rural and small urban presentations and technical updates
- Participated in 3 virtual conference presentations
- AB WPAC participation – actively participated in 5 regular managers meetings.
- Distributed 2 Meander newsletters to all residents and stakeholders. The 1,100 copies are distributed throughout the watershed as well as all the MRWCC membership and stakeholders.
- Maintained the MRWCC website and promoted the Council through a strong presence on social media:
 - Twitter – 52,000 impressions , 20% increase, 367 Followers
 - Website – 10,200 page views, with the top views on canoe the milk river (recreational information page), water updates, and MRWCC map series.
 - Facebook – 566 Followers, approximately 10% year-year increase, with over 240,000 post engagements during the 2021-22 fiscal year. Increased access for event information, river and water quality updates, and fish and wildlife related watershed information, and most recently the Milk River Bat Stewardship Project.



2022 Haffner Coulee by Allison Choquette

Transboundary Watershed Team

Ron McNeil, Chairman

The team is responsible for developing an action plan that will identify knowledge gaps and improve information sharing with neighbouring jurisdictions for the better management of common watershed resources.

- Virtually participated in 5 Transboundary Grassland Partnership meetings.
- Hosted 3 virtual Transboundary State of the Watershed Team meetings.
- Continued with ongoing watershed management communication and program delivery with transboundary partnerships for the betterment of the shared common watershed resources.
- Continued with ongoing communication and program delivery with transboundary partnerships for the betterment of the shared common watershed resources.



Policy and Planning Ad-hoc Committee

Ross Ford, Chairman

The MRWCC is a valuable source of local knowledge for relevant government (Federal, Provincial, and Municipal) policy development.

The purpose of Planning and Policy Committee:

- To support Council in setting strategic goals and identify target accomplishments that need to be undertaken to achieve those goals.
- To review and keep abreast of key legislative, regulatory, professional, and other changes that impact the management of the MRWCC such as Integrated Watershed Management Plan implementation, Source Water Protection, Approved Water Management Plan, etc. in response to Provincial and Federal policies.

The Committee took a lead role in promoting and coordinating the creation and implementation of opportunities to integrate and adopt strategies from various planning, policy and operational products and processes. The MRWCC enabled priority actions from current strategic plan and Integrated Watershed Management Plan in 2021-22 which included the following activities:

- Co-chaired the Transboundary Grassland Partnership virtual meetings to help foster improved relationships among transboundary partners and keep the dialogue open towards addressing habitat and SAR issues within the watershed.
- Reviewed and updated a Terms of Reference for a 2023 SOW report with partner jurisdictions who committed to support the project to completion.



Photos **Left:** Northern Leopard frog and Roosters comb formation by William King
Above - Yucca plant in the Milk River Natural Area by William King

Policy and Planning Ad-hoc Committee Continued....

- Participated at the AB WPACs collective to improve collaboration and improved management of Alberta's watershed resources.
- Participated in the development of Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) between WPACs



Photos:

Top left - US/Canada Boundary Marker, Milk River Natural Area by William King
 Top right - .Some of the wonders of the Milk River watershed 2022 by William King
 Right middle - Marmot basking on the Milk 2022 by William King
 Bottom left - Past Hike Tour by William King
 Bottom right - Haffner Coulee, Milk River 2022 by Allison Choquette
 Front page photo: Hoodoos on the Milk by William King

Message from the Chairman

It looks like 2022 is shaping up to be another challenging year as far as water is concerned. While it's nice to have an easy winter, we really needed additional moisture, which we failed to get this last winter. Unless something changes, all signs are pointing towards another drought year.

Due to the dry conditions, it doesn't look like the Letter-of-Intent will be working for our irrigators again this year. The International Joint Committee (IJC), has announced that they will probably not incur a deficit once again, so unless we can get some major moisture event in the next while, our irrigation water will have to turn off again, probably sometime in July.

The IJC has decided to undertake another study. This one is a four-year study to look into the operations on the Milk River and will be looking at both structural and non-structural solutions. If this study is anything like the last ones, it will take a way longer. Our proposed dam on the main stem of the Milk River might still have a little breathing room, but that will be a long way off.

There have been some other off-stream storage sites that have been identified. One or more of these sites could be developed in order to ensure water reliability for our Southern Alberta Watershed in the near term. There may be some announcements in the near future.

On the other hand, it's sure nice to see everything opening up again. We can once again walk into a bank without a mask on (that just felt too weird, didn't it?) or grocery store and see everybody's faces once again. It's been a long couple of years wearing masks and attending Zoom meetings.

We've had several programs on the go this last while which will be paramount to how we manage our watershed into the future. First is the Milk River Water Contingency Plan for Water Shortage Periods. We wanted to look at how we handled the lack of water from the failure of the Diversion Drop Structures in 2020, see what we learned and what we could do better. This will be a work in progress, which can be used as a guide in the future when other major water shortage events occur.

Our Producers-Leading-the-Way project has been a great success. We had about 25% of the producers fill out a questionnaire or attend one of five Open House meetings. Kristine Dahl along with our staff did a fantastic job and we learned a lot about how our producers view the watershed and how we can better support them in the future. I'd also like to welcome Allison Choquette as our new Wildlife & Outreach Technician. She will be undertaking studies to better understand the Little Brown Myotis Bat among others in our area. She may be coming around with bat boxes and potentially bat condos to a location near you. Please give her a big Southern Alberta welcome when you see her.

As always, I couldn't do anything without Tim Romanow and Mary Lupwayi who make sure everything keep rolling along smoothly.

Good Wishes and Good Health.

John A. Ross
Chairman, Milk River Watershed Council Canada

Message from the Executive Director

The Milk River Watershed is wildly diverse, from the physical environment, communities, to our land use and economic investments. A mentor of mine from Montana always says that watershed management is all about people. That it's about community, collaboration, and pulling together during uncertain times. I am convinced more than ever that the people who collectively choose to take part in our community respecting diversity, building collaboration, and pulling together will find common ground and ensure our success. This organization and our relationships as friends, neighbors, colleagues, and partners represent a truly special group of people who have chosen collaboration before conflict and conversation before dispute.

2021-22 was overall a busy year, as we transitioned more towards a virtual meeting space, time was dedicated to four major projects in addition to our regular operations, ongoing educational programming, and monitoring efforts to better understand conditions and changes within the watershed.

Spurred on from the diversion failure of 2020, the MRWCC received a grant from Alberta Ecotrust Foundation to develop a Water Shortages Contingency Plan that sets a strategy for future challenges to municipalities, water users, and our community. This plan is now complete and identified short-medium term actions that are targeted at mitigating the impacts of water shortage events in the watershed. The plan proposes that the four actions expected to have the greatest effect on mitigating impacts of water shortage periods include: 1) The development of a water sharing agreement(s) intended to address how water is managed during water short situations. Water assignments can be organized between a group of irrigators, or between two individual licence holders. Assignments are intended to take effect when there is less water supply than the sum of all diversions. 2) The development of a water use reporting template; if accepted by the IJC accredited officers improving water use reporting on the Milk River could increase accuracy of water apportionment calculations, which would allow Milk River water users to access more water from the system as they are entitled under the Boundary Waters Treaty. 3) The identification of options for small off-stream storage(s) could be used to store water during high flow periods in the spring and to release water to supplement river flows in the late season when shortages occur to meet treaty obligations and secure irrigation during critical time periods. 4) An evaluation of new locations for bulk water fill stations; are not only used during water shortage events, but also during normal operating conditions. Additional bulk water fill stations could reduce travel times during shortage periods and for those who use or rely on these fill stations, and support emergency preparedness for fire during dry periods. New bulk water stations should not be reliant on surface water.

We are also very excited to have completed an ECCC funded project "Producers Leading the Way" that took a new approach to grasslands stewardship engagement. An online survey was deployed to producers that operate on deeded or lease native grasslands. The survey focused on gathering information from producers on a variety of conservation topics. Additionally, five in-person meetings were held in local municipalities to ensure that producers had the opportunity to speak to the group first-hand. The results of the survey were very informative and provide a wide berth of ideas and comment to understand why producers may feel and act the way they do and provide context to the current mindset of producers on conservation programming.

Two other grants already acquired will support educational programming including the Alberta Conservation Association grant supporting development of virtual 'Field Trips' showing how producers are providing habitat for fish and wildlife in the watershed. And, a grant from the Rangeland Sustainability Fund that will support the continued and modified Youth Range Days program in the coming two years.

Thank you to the staff and membership of the council for making all projects possible this past year. Please watch for future opportunities to help support sustainable management within our watershed; and feel free to contact us to learn more about the projects and work of the MRWCC.

Tim Romanow
Executive Director, Milk River Watershed Council Canada

2021-22 Board of Directors



Executive Board Members:

Chairman: John Ross, Agriculture
Vice Chairman: Ron McNeil, NGO Environmental
Treasurer: Will Lindeman, Water Use
Secretary: Warren Cunningham, Member At Large

Board members:

Ed Sloboda, NGO
Ken Miller, Agriculture
Aaron Domes, Provincial Government
Brian Hills, Provincial Government, AEP
Joan Hughson, Rural Municipality
Ross Ford, Rural Municipality
Shawn Rodgers/Roger Houghton/Dustin Vossler, Alternate, Rural Municipality
Kristen Dykstra, Health
William King/Darcy Wills, Individual/Alternate
Suzanne Liebelt and Peggy Losey/Scott MacCumber, Urban Municipality/Alternate
Ken Brown, Recreation
Ben Ellert, Federal Government
Lorraine Nicol, Academia
Industry - Vacant
First Nations – Vacant



OUR LATEST NUMBERS

2021-22 Income

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Alberta Environment and Parks | \$275,000.00 |
| Alberta Conservation Association (Education Grant) | \$10,000.00 |
| Alberta Ecotrust Foundation | \$20,000.00 |
| Alberta Environment and Parks (Rangeland Sustainability Program) | \$4,000.00 |
| Environment and Climate Change Canada (Bat Stewardship Project) | \$40,500.00 |
| Environment and Climate Change Canada (Producers Leading the Way Project) | \$50,000.00 |
| Other Donations | \$4,064.77 |
| Total Income | \$403,564.77 |

2021/22 Expenditure

| | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Human Resources | \$191,007.00 |
| Society Operations | \$57,294.56 |
| Water Monitoring | \$4,470.60 |
| Other Projects | \$120,500.00 |
| Total Expenditure | \$373,272.16 |

2021-22 In-Kind Contribution

| | |
|---|---------------------|
| Members at large | \$37,145.00 |
| Alberta Environment and Parks | \$27,373.75 |
| Town of Milk River | \$4,439.85 |
| Alberta Health Services | \$3,166.25 |
| Multiple Stakeholders | \$20,400.00 |
| County of Forty Mile | \$1,213.50 |
| County of Warner | \$7,179.25 |
| Cypress County | \$850.00 |
| Cardston County | \$5,987.00 |
| Government of Canada | \$5,163.75 |
| Village of Coutts | \$2,370.75 |
| Alberta Conservation Association Community | \$1,870.00 |
| Colynn Kerr - Drone footage | \$3,000.00 |
| Total in-kind | \$121,809.10 |

Gratitude to our Volunteers and Sponsors!

