



Comments on the Manitoba Water Management Strategy

April 1, 2023

In the development of the Manitoba Water Management Strategy, the province of Manitoba did not adequately include Indigenous peoples, communities, nations, organizations and/or rightsholders. The province has not demonstrated any evidence formal or informal engagement and very few of the people interviewed or participating in engagement identify as Indigenous. This is a serious oversight in the development of a long-term strategy on water. Indigenous peoples have rights recognized and affirmed in the numbered treaties, section 35 of Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the United Nations Declaration of Right of Indigenous Peoples¹. Indigenous communities are consistently among the most impacted by historical and ongoing water decision. The resulting strategy very clearly does not reflect an understanding of Indigenous people needs, hopes or perspectives for water and will remain inadequate until corrected.

One of the eleven focus areas of the strategy is to “advance Indigenous inclusion in water management”. Given the lack of engagement so far this focus feels disingenuous, but the province could start. This engagement and consultation must begin immediately within the first year of the action plan. There is no time to waste. The province will need to be humble and be aware that failure to engage early means that trust will be much more difficult. The province will need to be crystal clear in recognizing that the engagement has been absent and long overdue.

¹ UN General Assembly, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 2 October 2007, A/RES/61/295, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/471355a82.html> (accessed April 1, 2023)



On closer read of the focus area on Indigenous inclusion, we see lots of signs that few Indigenous people were involved. I will highlight two: (1) inclusion appears to be limited to “shared priorities” wherein we might wonder what becomes of the areas that the province and Indigenous peoples do not agree, and (2) a focus on Indigenous governments over rightsholders. However, within the focus area there also the possibility and opportunity to redefine elements of the strategy. For many Indigenous rightsholders, so many of the decisions appear to already have been made. Again, if this focus area is to be taken serious this work will need to start immediately in the first year and will need to be prepared to listen and respond to Indigenous peoples priorities.

Indigenous peoples signed treaties with the crown that would allow the province of Manitoba to be formed and exist today. We did not in anyway give up rights to water, instead we agreed to share the land. Today, many of our communities are living with the consequences of very short-sighted decisions made about water over this past century. We adapted and persevered. Attempts were made by multiple levels of Canadian and Manitoban governments to clear Indigenous peoples from the land, deny us our languages and cultural practices. We have persevered through this too. Indigenous peoples will continue to live on the land and in relationship with the water and we will see our grand children do the same. The most important things a water management strategy in Manitoba can do is to seek and strengthen partnerships with Indigenous peoples.

About the Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective

The Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective works collaboratively to seek healthy and equitable solutions for our waters and people from the diverse communities who have a relationship with our sacred great lake. The collective was established in 2014 by fourteen First Nations in partnership with the Lake Winnipeg Foundation. Our vision is that our sacred waters are healthy, traditional livelihoods are restored and Indigenous perspectives are influential in leading the protection and sustainability of Lake Winnipeg as a source of life for all future generations. Our Creation stories speak of how our people were placed on Mother Earth by the Creator. Our ancestors have inhabited Lake Winnipeg basin since time immemorial, long before the current political boundaries were drawn. Our spiritual and cultural connections to our Mother Earth are evident by our willingness to embrace the responsibility of protecting and preserving the lands and waters.