

RSDS Report on Progress

This issue of the Sustainable Times is devoted entirely to reporting the progress of the Regional Sustainable Development Strategy (RSDS), and the work done by the Cumulative Environmental Management Association (CEMA) over the past year. This month, Alberta Environment and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development released the *RSDS Report on Progress*, a document prepared by the Alberta Government's RSDS team. The report outlines the RSDS- and CEMA-related work in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo over the past two years.

The July 1999 release of the RSDS outlined a framework for managing cumulative environmental effects to ensure sustainable development in the Athabasca oil sands area in northeastern Alberta, a region experiencing tremendous economic growth, and at the same time, significant environmental impacts.

The cumulative environmental issues identified by stakeholders and listed in the RSDS are being addressed in partnership with CEMA, a regional multi-stakeholder group

made up of industry, government, environmental organisations, Aboriginal groups and regional parties. CEMA is funded primarily by industry with substantial in-kind support by government, Aboriginal members, and environmental groups. The RSDS and CEMA are recognised as separate entities working toward a common goal: a consensus-based environmental management system for the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. This management system will be composed of management objectives and tools, as well as monitoring systems to ensure that objectives, once in place, continue to be achieved over time.

The development of an environmental management system was described in the RSDS. The strategy outlined activities and timelines for 14 different "themes" representing groups of regional environmental issues. Work on the most pressing themes was to begin immediately, with work on the remaining themes to be initiated within a five year timeframe. It has become clear as work has progressed that the strategy's original goals for work to be completed by 2001 were somewhat unrealistic. This is because of the complexity of the environmental issues and the consultative, interactive nature of the partnership process. The strategy's original implementation schedule suggested interim management



Brenda Erskine, chair of CEMA's Communications Committee, spent some time at the Fort McMurray fall Trade Show on September 22 introducing CEMA to local residents. Thanks to Don Klym, Maria Salvador Hogden, and Ruth Kleinbub, who also volunteered at the weekend event.

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objectives for all “first round” themes would be prepared by July 2001. CEMA is now forecasting delivery of initial products from the fall of 2001 through 2002.

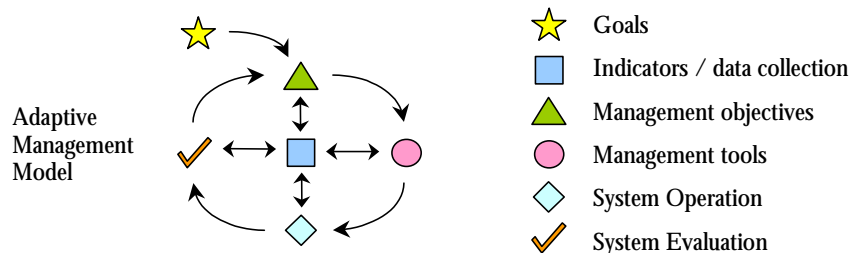
Despite these challenges, there has been much progress during the past two years. CEMA has formed five working groups and numerous subgroups. These working groups have established work plans, budgets, and funding plans, and some groups are close to setting management objectives, which will be brought to CEMA for approval. As objectives are developed and approved, they will be published as individual product reports and will be made available to the public. A schematic diagram of the schedule for delivery of products from the CEMA working groups is presented on page 2.

The implementation of the RSDS still faces several challenges: maintaining the support of a diverse cross-section of groups, acquiring adequate funding and human resources, and delivering high quality products in time to influence

management of the current wave of development in the region. CEMA members are working hard to meet the challenges facing them and are taking a proactive approach to resolve obstacles that may arise.

While CEMA’s work is in progress, the provincial and federal governments will continue to use the existing regulatory system to manage development in the region. The current regulations allow for stakeholder input into the decision-making process, and for consideration of cumulative effects through Environmental Impact Assessments. The government will provide a regulatory backstop to ensure that the RSDS is implemented in a timely manner and is consistent with the government’s mandate of environmental protection and sustainable development. The best management practices currently in use by industry on a voluntary basis will also continue to be developed and encouraged both within the CEMA working groups and through the regulatory approval process. ❖

Working Group	2000	2001	2002	2003
Sustainable Ecosystems Working Group	★	□ ●	▲	●
Wildlife & Fish Subgroup	★	□ ▲	▲	●
Landscape & Biodiversity Subgroup	★	□	▲	●
Cultural & Historical Resources Subgroup		★ □	▲	●
Trace Metals and Air Contaminants Working Group ...	★	□	▲	●
NO _x /SO ₂ Management Working Group	★ □	□ ▲	□ ● ◇	● ✓
Water Working Group	□	★	□	▲ ●
Reclamation Working Group	□	★	□	▲ ●



At-a-glance schedule for delivery of products from the CEMA working groups.

CEMA Working Groups' Progress

One of the original intentions of the RSDS was to provide a forum for stakeholders in the Athabasca Oil Sands area to address cumulative effects in an ongoing manner rather than only through approvals and related regulatory hearings. Until this initiative there was no other means of ensuring that these issues were being addressed in an ongoing manner, and that proponents would have the necessary input from local groups on how and to what extent they should be addressed.

Two years have passed since the release of the RSDS, and CEMA members have been working hard to implement the strategy. This section highlights the progress made by the CEMA working groups.

- The NO_x/SO₂ Management Working Group is mapping the sensitivity of ecological resources to acidification, has initiated field data collection, and anticipates developing management objectives for acid forming compounds (oxides of nitrogen and sulphur dioxide) by the end of this year or early next year. This group has also been designing an ozone measurement program to evaluate sources of ground-level ozone, and expects to implement this program in the summers of 2001 and 2002.
- The Reclamation Working Group recently joined CEMA, bringing with it three completed reclamation guidelines. Since becoming a CEMA member in February 2001, the Reclamation Working Group has formed six subgroups to work on a number of reclamation issues of high priority: Soils & Vegetation, Wetlands & Aquatics, Reclamation Certification, Wildlife, Biodiversity, and Landscape Design subgroups.
- The Sustainable Ecosystems Working Group (SEWG) and its three subgroups (Landscape & Biodiversity, Wildlife & Fish, and Cultural & Historical Resources) have been working on a number of tasks, including identifying values and goals, drafting a strategic approach for the development of its management system, developing a list of management tools to address fragmentation issues, and evaluating the use of various models for assessing current and future conditions. All three SEWG subgroups have selected and prioritised indicators, as well as hired consultants to compile and synthesise information.

- The Trace Metals and Air Contaminants Working Group has completed a report titled *Review and Assessment of the Deposition and Potential Bioaccumulation of Trace Metals*.
- The Water Working Group has formed four subgroups to work on watershed integrity of the Muskeg River Drainage Basin, regional surface water quality, in-stream flow needs of the lower Athabasca River, and communication of surface water information.

While not a CEMA working group, the regulator-driven Regional Information System is assisting the working groups with their data needs. The Regional Information System team is in the early stages of designing a regional database to support the regional work being done by CEMA.

In addition to the CEMA working groups' endeavours, two CEMA committees have also been active in the region. The Communications Committee has been involved with communicating regional information relevant to CEMA to interested parties with the *Sustainable Times*, and the construction of the CEMA web site (www.cema-wbr.org). A second committee, the Traditional Environmental Knowledge Standing Committee has been considering how to incorporate regional traditional environmental knowledge into CEMA's work. ❖

CEMA Working Groups' Challenges

Implementing the RSDS and establishing CEMA, with all of its working groups and committees, has been a huge undertaking. While work is progressing at a steady rate, some challenges have presented themselves. One challenge, common to all CEMA working groups, is related to timing and urgency. The RSDS Blueprints for Action suggested that management objectives for the category A themes would be developed within two years of the release of the RSDS document. Two years have passed since the release of the RSDS and no management objectives have yet been completed. Certain CEMA working groups are close to finalising work on some management objectives, and they expect to bring these to CEMA for approval later this year. As work has progressed, it has become clear that the complexity of the environmental issues and the consultative, interactive nature of the partnership process, and work group's demand for a thorough approach make the strategy's

original targets unrealistic. However, this delay is not to be seen as a failure as it has taken some time to bring together a diverse group of people into an organisation that could tackle the complex issues that it faces. Over two years, members have laid a path forward by identifying values, creating terms of references and workplans, contracting consultants, and compiling information at numerous meetings. These efforts have resulted in the completion of a large number of tasks, and have laid the initial foundation of knowledge needed to build lasting solutions.

Another common challenge for all working groups and committees is human resources. The effort required by the working groups is very intensive and necessitates individuals to commit their time over and above their regular work activities. Many individuals are currently involved in more than one CEMA project, in addition to their regular work. At times, this has made it challenging for CEMA work to progress as quickly as initially hoped due to difficulties in scheduling meetings that everyone can attend and in finding time to do CEMA work between meetings. Related to this is the challenge of obtaining scientific expertise from consultants for the CEMA working groups. The work in the oil sands is very specialised, and there are only a limited number of qualified and experienced consultants available to do the work. This is compounded by the increasing pace of development and large number of projects in the oil sands area that are often drawing on the same consultants.

A third important challenge is that of funding. This pressure is felt not only by all CEMA working groups, but also by the local parties. The work being done by the CEMA working groups is significant both in volume and cost. This translates into commitments of time and resources from all CEMA stakeholders, including the environmental and Aboriginal groups, as well as the participating industry and government members. In response, CEMA has implemented a policy for reimbursing environmental and Aboriginal groups. To date, the oil sands companies in the area have been the primary source of funds for CEMA and its working groups. The overall budget for CEMA for 2001 is approximately three million dollars. Each working group is required to establish a funding formula for its planned activities. The challenge for

CEMA is to obtain a broad base of funding from all industrial sectors in the region in a fair and equitable manner, as well as contributions from the regulators. The regulators have been contributing to CEMA primarily in the form of in-kind support to the CEMA working groups, although the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans have funded some activities. Provincial and federal staff have played key roles on many of the CEMA committees, and have made significant contributions to the initiative. ❖

Want to Know More?

If you would like more information about the RSDS Report on Progress, which includes an in-depth review of each CEMA working group and committee, visit <http://www.gov.ab.ca/env/regions/neb/rsds/> where you can download the full report. ❖

CALENDAR OF REGIONAL MEETINGS

OCTOBER, 2001


- 10 – Trace Metals & Air Contaminants, Edmonton
- 10 – Reclamation Working Group field trip, Albion/Suncor
- 15 – Wildlife & Fish Subgroup workshop, Calgary
- 16 – Regional Aquatics Monitoring Program, Ft. Mac
- 22 – Wildlife & Fish Subgroup, Ft. Mac

NOVEMBER, 2001

- 2 – Terrestrial Environmental Effects Monitoring Program, Ft. Mac.
- 27 – Water Working Group, Ft. Mac

DECEMBER, 2001

- 4/5 – CEMA General Meeting, Ft. Mac

 **The contributors of the *Sustainable Times* would like to express their sorrow over the recent tragedies in the United States of America. Imagine all the people living life in peace... (John Lennon)**

Cumulative
Environmental
Management
Association

This newsletter is a joint effort between Alberta Environment, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development and CEMA. For additional copies of this newsletter or to submit an article, please contact Lisa Zaplachinski (AENV) at 403-297-5937 (lisa.zaplachinski@gov.ab.ca), Brenda Erskine (Suncor) at 780-743-6480 (berskine@suncor.com), or visit the CEMA website at <http://www.cema-wbr.org/>.

