

Land-use Framework

Lower

Athabasca

Regional Plan

Implementation

Progress Report 2022

This publication is issued under the Open Government Licence – Alberta
(<http://open.alberta.ca/licence>).

For more information about Land-use Framework Lower Athabasca Regional Plan: Implementation Progress Report 2022, contact:

Land Use Secretariat
12th Floor, Petroleum Plaza South Tower
9915 – 108 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2G6
Phone: 780.644.7972
Email: LUF@gov.ab.ca

This publication is available online at <https://landuse.alberta.ca> and <https://open.alberta.ca/publications>

Land-use Framework Lower Athabasca Regional Plan: Implementation Progress Report 2022 | Land Use Secretariat
© 2024 Government of Alberta | April 22, 2024 | ISBN 978-1-4601-5915-6



Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Lower Athabasca Regional Plan Progress	5
LARP Strategies.....	6
Provincial outcome: healthy economy supported by our land and natural resources.....	6
Provincial outcome: healthy ecosystem and environment	16
Provincial outcome: people-friendly communities with ample recreational and cultural opportunities.....	21
Cross Reference Table	25

Introduction

Introduced in 2008, the Land-use Framework provides a blueprint for land-use management and decision making to address mounting pressures on Alberta's land and resources. It also establishes a vision of Albertans working together to respect and care for the land as a foundation for our environmental, economic and social wellbeing.

Since that time, many advances have been made including the establishment of the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* and the adoption of an integrated approach to resource management. This approach encourages cumulative effects management of natural assets, considering the impacts of development on the land over several years. It relies on legislation, regulations and land-use framework regional plans to provide direction to achieve the outcomes Albertans expect. To date, two regional plans, including the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan for northeastern Alberta and the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan for southern Alberta, have been completed and are in effect as regulations under the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act*.

Regional plans are developed with input and feedback from stakeholders, Indigenous communities and organizations and the public. They establish a long-term vision for the region, set desired economic, environmental and social outcomes and objectives using a cumulative effects management approach, and align provincial policy at the regional level. Regional plans specifically describe the strategies, actions, approaches and tools required to achieve the desired outcomes, and contain regulatory provisions to support implementation. They are enforceable by law and binding on everyone as identified in the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act*. This provides guidance and clarity for land users and land-use decision makers.

The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan: Progress Report 2022 meets the legislative requirements for reporting described in the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* and the regulatory requirements embedded in the plan. It also fulfills a public commitment to regularly monitor and ensure that progress is made toward achieving the desired regional outcomes expressed within the approved regional plans. This report highlights work accomplished, and the barriers encountered in 2022 during the plan's implementation.

Copies of this and earlier reports are available online at <https://landuse.alberta.ca>, the open government portal at <https://open.alberta.ca>, or by contacting the Land Use Secretariat at LUF@gov.ab.ca or 780.644.7972.

Lower Athabasca Regional Plan Progress

The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan came into effect in September 2012 and was the first regional plan established. It presents the desired economic, social and environmental outcomes for northeastern Alberta and a detailed plan to achieve these results. For example, to achieve a healthier environment and ecosystems, the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan set environmental management triggers and limits for air and surface water quality and provides for six new conservation areas with the aim of conserving two-million hectares or 22 per cent of the region in northeastern Alberta.

The plan encourages economic diversification, addresses infrastructure challenges around Fort McMurray, commits to continued consultation with Indigenous Peoples, offers more certainty to industry, and provides for nine new provincial recreation areas to address growing demand for recreational and tourism opportunities. It commits to the development of a biodiversity management framework, a tailings management framework, and a surface water quantity management framework to guide land and natural resource management decisions.

The Alberta Land Stewardship Act requires the Land Use Secretariat to review each regional plan at least once every 10 years, and report to the Stewardship Minister on its ongoing relevancy and effectiveness. The 10-year review of the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan began on August 26, 2022. The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan remains in effect and continues to provide strategic direction for the region.

The Government of Alberta will consider lessons learned in implementing the existing regional plans, their 5-Year Evaluations and feedback provided over the past 10 years as part of its review, as well as the recommendations of the Review Panel Report 2015: Lower Athabasca Regional Plan.

This report highlights the status of all the strategic commitments made in the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan. Although timelines for some strategies in the regional plans were delayed, they are continued commitments of the Government of Alberta. Reporting for regional plan supporting indicators has moved online and can be found at <https://landuse.alberta.ca>.

IMPLEMENTATION STATUS CATEGORIES AND THEIR DEFINITIONS.

Implementation Status	Description
Complete	No further work required.
Complete and in implementation	Strategy is in place and being implemented. Work is ongoing to implement the strategy, including changes to ongoing programs, continuous improvement, or through succeeding government action.
In progress	Development of the initiative is underway.
Delayed	Progress has not met original timelines due to unforeseen or changing circumstances, or because it is dependent on other work that remains incomplete.
Deferred	Work is on hold pending further government direction.

Ministries listed as responsible for strategies in this report are current as of the publication of this report. Refer to the cross-reference table at the end of the report showing the ministry responsibilities now versus when the plan came into effect.

LARP Strategies

Provincial outcome: healthy economy supported by our land and natural resources

1. Continue implementation of the Alberta Provincial Energy Strategy

Alberta Energy and Minerals – complete and in implementation

Description:

Alberta's Provincial Energy Strategy charted the course of Alberta's energy future more than a decade ago. It is no longer in effect. Responsible development of Alberta's energy resources, the strategy's principal objective, remains a priority for the government, and has been incorporated into the programming and policy work of Alberta Energy and Minerals.

Progress:

Alberta's priorities for advancing responsible development of the province's energy and mineral resources in 2022 focused on external advocacy and acting domestically to support investment, innovation and improvement of the regulatory system. Some key highlights of this work include:

Advocacy

- Reinforcing the importance of Alberta's role in providing environmentally responsible, reliable and affordable energy products to Canadians and the world;
- Advocating for all projects that secure additional market access for oil and gas producers and help protect the value of Alberta's resources; and
- Engaging with international partners to promote the value of Alberta's energy and mineral resources, while exploring common opportunities in hydrogen, liquefied natural gas, critical minerals, geothermal and other emerging resources.

Investment

- Approving two grants totaling approximately \$194 million under the Alberta Petrochemical Incentive Program; and
- Implementing the Site Rehabilitation Program, which invested nearly \$1 billion of federal COVID-19 recovery funding into well, pipeline and site clean-up efforts in the oil and gas sector to create jobs, improve the environment, and ensure that Indigenous businesses and communities play a meaningful role in the post-pandemic energy strategy.

Regulatory

- Putting into place regulatory regimes for geothermal and brine-hosted metallic and industrial minerals, and advancing the Carbon, Capture, Utilization and Storage Regulatory Framework, including successfully completing two competitive carbon storage hub application processes;
- Continuing to implement the Liability Management Framework, which is a more proactive approach to liability management that aims to reduce the number of inactive wells and provide more assurance that companies will be able to meet their regulatory obligations, thus reducing the risk of oil and gas sites becoming orphaned; and
- Reducing unnecessary red tape by 24 per cent since 2019, resulting in over \$1.3 billion in cost savings for industry without any loss in environmental, health or safety protections.

Further information about these initiatives and Alberta Energy and Minerals' other policy and programming work can be found in this report's discussion and analysis of results under strategies 2, 3, 14, and 15.

2. Continue implementation of Responsible Actions: A Plan for Alberta's Oil Sands

Alberta Energy and Minerals – complete and in implementation

Description:

Responsible Actions: A Plan for Alberta's Oil Sands was a proactive 20-year strategic plan for innovative, responsible and collaborative development of Alberta's oil sands. Responsible Actions no longer actively guides provincial policy and program

delivery for the oil sands, though its strategic objectives – optimal oil sands development and improved environment performance – continue to be relevant and have been incorporated into the Government of Alberta’s programming and policy work.

Progress:

A priority area of the original strategy that remains today is emissions management. The Technology Innovation and Emissions Reduction Regulation (TIER), which came into effect on January 1, 2020, is a major part of this effort. TIER supports clean technology innovation and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions management from large industrial emitters, like oil sands operations, by directly funding research and innovation and by creating a compliance system that incentivizes investments in emissions reducing technologies across the Alberta economy. The regulation has created significant demand for renewable electricity production and funds a variety of other emissions reduction initiatives. Recent examples include:

- Providing \$50 million over the next four years to the Clean Hydrogen Centre of Excellence, which is also expected to draw investments and grants from industry and other levels of government totaling \$150 million. The Centre is operated by Alberta Innovates and provides support services to early-stage hydrogen development and deployment projects.
- \$57 million from the TIER fund, and \$270 million overall for methane emissions reduction. Thanks to investments like these, methane emissions have dropped in Alberta’s upstream oil and gas sector 44 per cent since 2014, putting Alberta well on its way to reaching its 2025 target of a 45 per cent reduction.

Alberta Energy and Minerals also continues to provide input and co-ordination with the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Secretariat that was established in 2021 to build capacity and knowledge on ESG-related issues in the oil sands industry as well as the energy sector more generally. The goals of the government’s ESG-related activities are to showcase Alberta’s ESG success with key audiences, provide accurate information related to Alberta’s ESG performance to support investment in Alberta, and to clearly articulate the role for Alberta’s industry, particularly its energy industry, within a carbon-constrained world.

3. Continue implementation of improved regulatory processes to enhance competitiveness of oil sands and other key industries

Alberta Energy and Minerals and Alberta Environment and Protected Areas – complete and in implementation

Description:

Building a robust and efficient regulatory system is critical to supporting continued growth and environmental management in the region and province. Effective regulation of energy and mineral development requires a balanced and integrated approach that takes into consideration the range of constantly evolving social, economic and environmental factors. This is incorporated in Alberta Energy and Minerals and Alberta Environment and Protected Areas’ programming and policy work that requires ongoing effort and collaboration among government, regulators, industry, Indigenous communities, and other rights holders.

Progress:

Regulatory efficiency and effectiveness in the oil sands and for other key industries was enhanced in 2022 through several different strategic programs, including Red Tape Reduction and liability management, but also through sector-specific regulatory enhancements.

Red Tape Reduction

Since proclamation in 2019, the *Red Tape Reduction Implementation Act* has provided policy direction for the Government of Alberta to reduce the regulatory cost burden for businesses. At the end of fiscal 2022/23, Alberta Energy and Minerals, along with its agencies, had achieved a total reduction in red tape of 24 per cent, leading to over \$1.3 billion in anticipated cost savings for the energy industry. This has been achieved without compromising environmental protections or safety measures within the industry. The government is continuing to make further improvements. Significant examples include Alberta Energy and Minerals removing obsolete oil sands royalty forms from public access, which resulted in the removal of over 4,500 unnecessary regulatory requirements, and the Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) accomplishing a 48.2 per cent reduction in its regulatory requirements, resulting in faster application reviews.

The Alberta Energy Regulator also made meaningful progress reducing red tape completing nine projects under its Regulatory Change Program in 2022. Highlights include:

- Amendments to Directives 055 and 058 to provide a solution to increased water-use requirements for hydraulic fracturing operations associated with unconventional resource development where water reuse reduces the reliance on fresh water. This work was accomplished by clarifying and consolidating various elements of the instruments and was the Alberta Energy Regulator's second largest red tape reduction project to date.
- Updates to Directive 050 were made to clarify requirements and improve the efficiency of the regulatory application process that applies to drilling waste management. This was amongst the Alberta Energy Regulator's top contributing efficiency projects for both red tape count and industry-verified cost savings and was achieved without compromising safety. The updates also improve environmental performance by enabling operators to reduce the amount of land disturbed by drilling waste management practices.
- Release of Manual 025 to assist operators in applying for new water licenses, license renewals and license amendments pursuant to the Water Act and under the scope of the Water Conservation Policy for Upstream Oil and Gas Operations. The Alberta Energy Regulator also released a mapping tool to help industry compare desired diversion locations against water short, potentially water short and locally constrained areas.
- Updates to Directive 065 and related instruments to enhance the existing regulatory framework to support the deployment of large-scale carbon capture, utilization, and storage projects in the province.

Liability Management

The Government of Alberta announced the new Liability Management Framework for upstream oil and gas in July 2020. It includes both short and long-term initiatives to proactively manage site closures and anticipated liability throughout the development life cycle. A major milestone was achieved in December 2021, when the Alberta Energy Regulator released Directive 088: Licensee Life-Cycle Management as part of the framework. Directive 088 provides detailed requirements for the implementation and enforcement of the new management programs under the Liability Management Framework, including the new Holistic Licensee Assessment, Licensee Management Program and the Inventory Reduction Program.

- The Holistic Licensee Assessment uses a multifactor approach to assess the capabilities of oil and gas operators to meet their regulatory obligations at each stage of the development life cycle prior to receiving regulatory approvals. The Holistic Licensee Assessment will replace the liability management rating over time. As a first step, it is now used in the Inventory Reduction Program, the Licensee Management Program, license transfers and security collection for transfers.
- The Alberta Energy Regulator operationalized the Licensee Management Program in 2022, enabling the regulator to provide proactive, practical guidance and support to licensees before they start struggling to manage their regulatory and environmental liabilities.
- The framework's Inventory Reduction Program established mandatory annual closure spending quotas for site clean-ups that every licensee must meet and incentives for additional supplemental closure spending. This initiative, which builds on the success of the Alberta Energy Regulator's area-based closure program will ensure sites get cleaned up while also providing flexibility for licensees to close sites in a cost-effective and efficient manner. Industry was required by the Alberta Energy Regulator to spend \$422 million on closure activities in 2022, rising to \$700 million in 2023.
- Another part of the Inventory Reduction Program is a formal opt-in mechanism known as the Closure Nomination Program, which provides a way for landowners, land users and communities to nominate specific inactive sites for clean up to the regulator. Licensees will have to provide rationale for keeping the well or facility, otherwise it will be required to be cleaned up. The Alberta Energy Regulator published materials and held engagement sessions on the program in 2022. It went live on April 3, 2023.

Regulatory Enhancements

The Government of Alberta made considerable progress in 2022 on emerging resources, setting out and implementing new regulatory regimes for geothermal and brine-hosted metallic and industrial minerals, which will help position the Lower Athabasca region and the province for more economic diversification.

Major milestones were achieved at the end of 2021 with the passing of both the *Mineral Resources Development Act* and the *Geothermal Resources Development Act*. These two pieces of legislation established the Alberta Energy Regulator as the single regulator for mineral resources and geothermal energy and set out the statutory requirements for development. Work was undertaken in 2022 to develop a new Metallic and Industrial Minerals Tenure Regulation (MIMTR), as well as the rules and directives required to implement the brine-hosted regulatory regime. The new brine-hosted regime came into force in March 2023. Geothermal followed a similar development path with the release of the Geothermal Resource Development

Rules and the Alberta Energy Regulator's Directive 089: Geothermal Resource Development in August 2022, completing the regulatory framework for geothermal resource development.

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas continued to work on its Regulatory Assurance Framework, a foundational approach to enabling economic development while ensuring environmental standards outlined in policies, plans and legislation are maintained. As part of the transformation, a Digital Regulatory Assurance System (DRAS) is shifting the department from using multiple independent and outdated systems to a single consolidated system for applications, approvals and monitoring, with the first module released in June 2021. All *Water Act*-related activities are now built into DRAS with work underway on future activities, including aggregates as well as commercial and industrial dispositions under the *Public Lands Act*, and regulatory assessment and response activities under multiple legislation. The work is iterative, with user feedback being received and incorporated to continue improving functionality.

4. Sub-regional plan using a strategic environmental assessment approach for the South Athabasca oil sands area

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas - due 2013, in progress

Description:

Development of a sub-regional plan using a strategic environmental assessment approach for the South Athabasca Oil Sands area will contribute to the management of cumulative effects and support efficiencies in the regulatory review process for in-situ oil sands operations. The South Athabasca Oil Sands Regional Strategic Assessment examines the potential cumulative effects of three energy development scenarios in an area between Fort McMurray and Lac La Biche that will likely see significant development of bitumen resources over several decades.

Progress:

A draft of the South Athabasca Oil Sands Regional Strategic Assessment was completed in 2015, with subsequent technical refinements. The regional strategic assessment is a rigorous and science-based approach that integrates social, economic and environmental considerations and provides information necessary for planning. The approaches used in this assessment have informed subsequent sub-regional planning.

Sub-regional planning initiatives taking place in the region include caribou sub-regional task forces. A task force for the Cold Lake sub-region was announced in August 2019 with a mandate to provide recommendations on land-use planning, including caribou recovery actions. In 2021, a draft Cold Lake Subregional Plan informed by recommendations from the task force was released for feedback. The final plan was released in April 2022 and provides overarching policy direction for a variety of land uses in the subregion. Implementation is ongoing and regulatory details are expected to be complete in early 2024.

The task force for the Wandering River subregion, adjacent to the Cold Lake subregion, completed their work in 2022 and development of the subregional plan is expected to continue through 2023. These subregional plans support a working landscape, which considers the economy while also supporting caribou and other species, Indigenous traditional land use, and recreational activities.

5. Implement key recommendations in Connecting the Dots: Aboriginal Workforce and Economic Development in Alberta

Alberta Indigenous Relations – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Connecting the Dots: Aboriginal Workforce and Economic Development in Alberta (2010) report was submitted by a Member of Legislative Assembly Committee highlighting 30 recommendations to increase participation of Indigenous Peoples in Alberta's workforce and economy. Due to new government mandates and priorities, the recommendations are no longer being worked on; however, the principles described in the report remain important to the Government of Alberta and Indigenous Peoples.

Progress:

The Government of Alberta continues to promote social and economic opportunities for Indigenous Peoples in Alberta through a variety of programs and services available to Indigenous communities and organizations that support Indigenous Peoples, including:

- The Aboriginal Business Investment Fund continues to partially or completely fund capital costs for Indigenous community-owned economic development projects. Projects like these improve social and economic outcomes for Indigenous Peoples and their communities.
- The Employment Partnerships Program supports initiatives that help Indigenous communities and Indigenous-serving organizations connect their members to employment.
- The Site Rehabilitation Program targeted \$133 million to clean up inactive oil and gas sites within Indigenous communities and organizations, helping ensure those communities and organizations play a meaningful role in Alberta's post-pandemic energy strategy. Several measures strengthened Indigenous participation in the SRP, including establishing an Industry Advisory Committee, regular Indigenous Roundtable meetings, and appointing a dedicated Indigenous liaison to answer questions and support completion of eligible applications. Incentives were also put in place to encourage Indigenous participation in the SRP, which created new opportunities and new partnerships that are expected to last beyond the program.
- The Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation (AIOC) is designed to bridge the gap between Indigenous groups seeking commercial partnerships in major projects and their financial capacity. AIOC has been delegated the authority to provide up to \$1 billion in loan guarantees to reduce the cost of capital for Indigenous groups and to support their ability to raise capital to invest in natural resources, agriculture, telecommunications and transportation projects. In 2022, AIOC achieved a landmark deal which includes 23 Indigenous communities, who collectively make up Athabasca Indigenous Investments and Enbridge. AIOC provided a \$250 million loan guarantee to secure financing in the \$1.12 billion deal with the 23 communities purchasing an 11.57 per cent non-operating interest in seven pipelines in the Athabasca region.

6. Continue to prevent future shortfalls in timber supply

Alberta Forestry and Parks – complete and in implementation

Description:

Alberta's forest sector faces several growing challenges caused by natural factors such as insects, disease, wildfire and climate change, and non-natural factors such as international trade agreements and diminishing productive forested public lands as a result of competing development projects and use.

Progress:

The Government of Alberta continues to implement the Forest Jobs Action Plan to help maintain timber supplies. The plan includes five focus areas:

- Ensuring a more expedient return of wildfire burned areas to productive forests.
- Awarding currently unallocated allowable cut through an open competition.
- Exploring the enhanced utilization of harvest waste and residual fibre.
- Using superior seed for regeneration (i.e., tree improvement programs).
- Ensuring best utilization of allocated timber in forest management plans.

The Government of Alberta also continues to maintain a robust forest tenure system providing long-term secure access to fibre for companies. This long-term secure access to fibre is the anchor for capital investment and job creation for Alberta's world-class industry.

7. Continue work on wildfire management planning initiatives

Alberta Forestry and Parks – complete and in implementation

Description:

The amount of wildfire risk in Alberta is increasing due to population growth pressures, rapid development in the wildland/urban interface and industrial activity on the landscape. In 2013, the Government of Alberta developed a Wildfire

Management Planning Standard as a guideline for wildfire risk management in Alberta. These standards and plans are intended to guide wildfire prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery within a forest area for a five-year period. Wildfire management strategies are aligned with regional outcomes.

Progress:

Work continued on the strategies and actions in the Fort McMurray Wildfire Management Plan, 2017, and Lac La Biche Wildfire Management Plan, 2017. These strategies and actions were put in place to reduce wildfire risk to identified values in each forest area, which support regional outcomes within the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan.

8. Continue work on the Alberta Forest Products Roadmap to 2020

Alberta Forestry and Parks – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Alberta Forest Products Roadmap was a collaboration between the Government of Alberta and the forest industry sector to make Alberta's forest sector the most successful in North America based on economic competitiveness and environmental performance. In 2014, the roadmap evolved to focus on trade advocacy, fibre security, and value-added business development.

Progress:

The Government of Alberta is currently implementing some of the key concepts and ideas from the roadmap and will look to new strategies and ideas to advance the sector. Collaborations between the Government of Alberta and the forest industry sector are focused on:

- Initiating the Alberta value-added wood products program in partnership with Alberta Woodworks and the Alberta Forest Products Association.
- Enabling 12-storey wood construction and partnerships with organizations to increase wood use in design and construction.
- Advocacy and litigation efforts aimed at supporting the negotiation of a long-term managed trade agreement with the United States to provide secure and predictable market access for Alberta lumber producers.
- Continuing to secure long-term fibre through the administration of the Forest Tenure system.

9. Lakeland Country Destination Development Strategy and Tourism Opportunity Plan

Alberta Tourism and Sport – due 2015; delayed

Description:

Lakeland Country will be developed as an iconic provincial tourism destination to diversify the regional and local economy, increase tourism and recreational opportunities, provide an attractive destination for domestic and international visitors, support hunting, fishing and trapping, protect and maintain private property rights, honour existing statutory consents and tenure on public lands, and provide for continued issuance of new ones.

Progress:

The Government of Alberta has supported the growth of the tourism industry in Lakeland Country over the past decade through funding for various destination strategies, plans, and forums championed by municipalities and local associations. These initiatives include cultural tourism planning by the Conseil de développement économique de l'Alberta (2016-18), visitor readiness and action planning by Lac La Biche County (2017-18), and tourism entrepreneurship sessions hosted in Cold Lake (2018).

In 2022, Travel Alberta initiated the creation of two tourism development zones, Fort McMurray/Wood Buffalo and North-East Lakelands, which encompass the Lakeland region. Travel Alberta also undertook analysis of areas across the province to identify which had the most potential for growth. The Northeast Lakelands Tourism Development Zone was identified through

this process. Engagement in the region as well as the discovery phase of destination development planning was initiated on regional and sub-regional land-use priorities. This work also provides local tourism organizations and communities with the tools and data to consider expanding their tourism business lines and seasons of operation, expanding their visitor markets, and/or implementing technologies and digital solutions to address key business challenges.

Also in 2022, the Cold Lake Subregional Plan was approved by government and includes the identification of several tourism and outdoor recreation areas. Upon plan implementation, these areas will be provided strategic direction for tourism development that supports efforts related to the Lakeland Country Destination Development Strategy and Tourism Opportunity Plan, including recognizing the importance of supporting traditional land uses, the exercise of Treaty rights and Indigenous tourism opportunities.

10. Continue to enhance and expand the supply of tourism products and infrastructure

Alberta Tourism and Sport – in progress

Description:

The tourism industry has great potential to diversify Alberta's economy. It is a multibillion-dollar industry that supports over 17,500 tourism businesses and employs more than 213,000 people either directly or indirectly. Tourism revenue is an important economic driver for the province that contributes to the well-being of all Albertans and has strong potential to grow.

Progress:

The Government of Alberta supported Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic Development and Tourism to develop a Tourism Asset Inventory and Northern Lights Viewing Attraction Investment Opportunity, alongside a Tourism Product Development Plan (2016-18). These tourism plans set the short and long-term vision for tourism product development and detailed specific action items to develop products into market-ready experiences.

Travel Alberta has been providing financial support for tourism businesses and organizations in the region to enhance their infrastructure and assets. Supported projects have included tipi and Metis comfort camping experiences in the Lac La Biche area and the construction of geodesic domes for comforting camping, as well as dark sky and aurora viewing at Andrew Lake.

Further planning to examine the potential to expand the supply of tourism products and infrastructure is anticipated through Travel Alberta's initiative to create tourism development zones in the Wood Buffalo and Lakeland regions.

11. Tourism Development Nodes

Alberta Tourism and Sport – due 2015, delayed

Description:

Tourism development nodes identify areas on public, municipal or private land that comprise a cluster of natural features, built features, scenery and settings that can provide unique opportunities for recreation and tourism development. An established node is a commitment by provincial and municipal agencies to ensure tourism development is the predominant use and focus for the area.

Progress:

High-value tourism areas, including assessment of existing tourism nodes, continues to be implemented through tourism development zones. Travel Alberta is currently in the early stages of developing these zones, and implementation will commence in 2023. Full implementation of the tourism development zones is anticipated to occur over the next several years.

12. Tourism opportunity assessments for Quarry of the Ancestors, Bitumount and Fort Chipewyan

Alberta Tourism and Sport – complete

Description:

Tourism opportunity assessments identify potential Indigenous tourism development and investment opportunities, including guided tours, educational programs, attractions, exhibits and interpretive sites. This creates a distinctive travel experience and showcases the region's unique scenic resources.

Progress:

Tourism opportunity assessments for Quarry of the Ancestors and Bitumount were completed in 2015. The Fort Chipewyan tourism opportunity assessment was completed in 2016. Assessments considered background reviews, destination analysis, market research, lifecycle evaluations, community engagement input and situational reports.

Based on these assessments, there are no further plans to develop the Quarry of the Ancestors or Bitumount sites for tourism purposes. The results of the Fort Chipewyan tourism opportunity assessment were submitted to the Fort Chipewyan Tourism Committee for action.

13. Scenic Byways Network

Alberta Tourism and Sport – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Government of Alberta is working with municipal governments and other partners to identify, establish and promote scenic byways which include routes, trails, and waterways in and around areas with high-quality attractions for recreation and tourism. Creation of distinctive travel experiences will showcase the region's unique scenic resources and cultural landscapes.

Progress:

In 2014, routes, trails and waterways of the Lower Athabasca region were identified. Over the years, work continued with local communities to address tourism development around these scenic byways.

As part of this strategy, the Government of Alberta developed a tourism concept plan in 2016 for the lower section of the Athabasca River from Athabasca to Fort McMurray. The second phase in 2017 focused on the lower section from Fort McMurray to Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. These plans were known as Live the Athabasca and Live the Athabasca Arctic Water Route recreation and tourism plans. They celebrated the natural and cultural heritage of the Athabasca and upper Slave Rivers and focused on creating a signature boreal and Canadian Shield river experience along Trans Canada Trail's Great Trail Arctic Water Route. Potential recreation and tourism development opportunities along the water route may be considered as part of the implementation of the tourism development zones in this region.

14. Continue to clarify rules for physical access to energy, mineral and coal resources

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas and Alberta Energy and Minerals – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Government of Alberta provides environmental stewardship direction and regulates access, allocation and use of natural resources through planning, policy and policy assurance programs. Clear rules for physical access to energy and mineral resources are necessary for the province to attract investment and benefit from resource development.

Progress:

In 2022, the Government of Alberta continued to advance land-use planning in the Lower Athabasca region and worked with the Alberta Energy Regulator to clarify access rules and requirements in regulatory processes.

The Government of Alberta continued to implement the Moose Lake Access Management Plan. The plan provides clarity to industry and regulatory decision makers on how much development can take place and under what conditions, including a resource development disturbance limit, major infrastructure prohibition and limited energy related activity within one kilometre of the Moose Lake reserves. The plan identifies management actions that support the achievement of three outcomes: ecological integrity, exercise of Section 35 rights and traditional land uses, and well-managed development of resources.

Sub-regional planning initiatives taking place in the region include development of the Wandering River Subregional Plan, which will continue into 2023, and implementation of the Cold Lake Subregional Plan, which was approved by the Government of Alberta and released in April 2022.

Planning for the Wabasca and Richardson sub-regions is anticipated to start in 2023 and 2024, respectively. Planning for the Red Earth sub-region is anticipated to begin in 2025.

Centralized fluid storage requirements were updated in 2022 to reduce red tape and to better incorporate the on-site storage of water for reuse, decreasing industry's reliance on rivers and lakes. These efforts included updates to the Alberta Energy Regulator's Directive 055: Storage Requirements for the Upstream Petroleum Industry and Directive 058: Oilfield Waste Management Requirements for the Upstream Petroleum Industry.

15. Continue to promote new investment in energy, mineral and coal resource development

Alberta Energy and Minerals – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Government of Alberta continues to improve strategic, integrated systems and approaches to ensure responsible resource development and diversification through programming and policy work to strengthen overall environmental, economic and social outcomes for the benefit of Albertans.

Progress:

Maintaining Alberta as an attractive destination for energy and mineral investment remains a strategic priority involving the promotion of Alberta's interests nationally and internationally and putting in place effective policies and programs provincially. The Government of Alberta works with regulators, industry and other stakeholders to continue to advocate for the federal government to streamline the regulatory environment for energy development, improve pipeline access, win back the confidence of investors, restore the competitiveness of the energy sector and create jobs.

In 2022, the Government of Alberta continued to develop and enhance policy direction and legislative regimes that provide critical foundations for attracting investment in new and emerging resources and technologies like geothermal, minerals and carbon capture, utilization and storage. Progress was also made on market access that is critically important for attracting investment into our traditional energy resources, like the oil sands and protecting and maximizing the value of the province's oil and gas production.

Geothermal

Interest in geothermal energy development has been growing in Alberta thanks to better data, technological improvements, and advancements the province has made in the regulatory space. Prior to December 2021, when the *Geothermal Resource Development Act* came into effect, Alberta did not have a policy framework to guide geothermal development, which led to regulatory uncertainty. Since then, both the Geothermal Resource Development Regulation and Geothermal Resource Tenure Regulation have come into force, and the Alberta Energy Regulator has published the rules, directives, and manuals that proponents must follow throughout the entire lifecycle from initiation through to closure of a project.

With this regulatory framework now in place, Alberta is seeing progress as companies advance projects across the province. The Government of Alberta has received 74 applications for tenure and issued 31 leases since the new regulations took effect in January 2022, and there are currently four projects in advanced planning or demonstration phases in Alberta. Several pilot projects in Alberta have received over \$50 million in funding from several sources, including Natural Resources Canada and Alberta Innovates. These supports will advance geothermal projects, create new jobs and support innovation, helping to position Alberta as a leader in geothermal technology development and exports.

Critical minerals

The *Mineral Resources Development Act* is the first step in implementing Alberta's Mineral Strategy and Action Plan and as was outlined under Strategy 3, major progress has already been made on Stage 1, putting in place the new regulatory framework for brine-hosted minerals. Stage 2, which will make the Alberta Energy Regulator the full lifecycle regulator for rock-hosted minerals, is in progress and is expected to be completed in early 2024. In addition to the regulation of activities, the

Government of Alberta published a new Metallic and Industrial Minerals Tenure Regulation in 2022, which is the main regulation that guides the disposition of tenure rights for metallic and industrial minerals. Additional work is ongoing.

Beyond the work in the regulatory space, the Government of Alberta continues to implement action items under Alberta's Minerals Strategy and Action Plan. This includes increasing the amount and accessibility of geoscience information and data. Alberta has potential in many metallic and industrial minerals, such as lithium, uranium, vanadium, nickel, rare earth elements, potash and diamonds. The government has invested over \$25 million to enable the Alberta Energy Regulator and Alberta Geological Survey to deliver minerals-focused public geoscience information and build an inventory of minerals and their concentrations across the province. This mineral mapping program was initiated late in fiscal 2021-22, and work is continuing to improve our understanding of Alberta's mineral potential, including in the Lower Athabasca region. This work will make investing in minerals exploration and development in Alberta more attractive by reducing exploration risk. It also contributes to the development of well-informed resource development and land-use policies.

Alberta continues to work with the federal and other provincial and territorial governments on Canada's approach to critical minerals and battery value chains through the Critical Minerals and Battery Value Chain Task Force and the Mines Intergovernmental Working Group. These critical minerals initiatives, as well as other pan-Canadian initiatives under the Canadian Minerals and Metals Plan, help to showcase Alberta's minerals potential and the work the government is doing in this space to make the province a future mineral supplier of choice.

Carbon capture, utilization, and storage

Carbon capture, utilization, and storage is necessary for reducing the carbon footprint of large scale and hard to abate industrial projects, like oil sands facilities. It will play a significant role in decarbonizing the provincial economy. Large scale development requires significant investment to move from concept to operations, highlighting the importance of attracting investment to accelerate deployment and retain Alberta's position as a global leader in the technology. Carbon capture, utilization, and storage incentives provided by the American *Inflation Reduction Act* have made development in the United States attractive for industry. In response, Alberta has been working with the federal government to provide more financial supports for projects, and Alberta has provided direct funding to support projects and develop lower cost carbon capture technologies. One such example from 2022 is Emissions Reduction Alberta's Carbon Capture Kickstart program that committed \$40.6 million from the TIER fund to 11 projects from the power generation, oil and gas, cement and agriculture sectors. The Alberta Petrochemical Incentive Program provides grants to new hydrogen and petrochemical projects in Alberta, also requires a carbon capture, utilization, and storage component for projects that produce hydrogen or fuels from natural gas sources.

To help meet the growing demand for carbon storage, Alberta Energy and Minerals issued two Requests for Full Project Proposals (RFPP) for carbon sequestration hubs in Alberta. The first RFPP was issued in December 2021 and resulted in six successful proposals in the Industrial Heartland region. The second RFPP was issued in March 2022 and resulted in an additional 19 successful proposals being selected across Alberta, including two that partially overlap the Lower Athabasca region. Following the RFPPs, Energy developed 25 Carbon Sequestration Evaluation Agreements, one each for the successful carbon storage hub project proposals. If evaluation demonstrates that a proposed project can safely provide permanent storage, companies will be invited to work with the government on an agreement that provides them with the right to inject captured carbon dioxide. When fully developed, the hubs will allow operators to safely collect, transport and permanently store carbon dioxide captured from industrial emissions sources across the province.

Pipelines

The Government of Alberta supports energy infrastructure projects that will safely transport Alberta energy to market. In 2022, Alberta continued to play a leadership role in expanding and advocating for greater market access for Alberta's responsible, affordable, and secure oil and gas resources. These efforts were concentrated on ensuring the timely construction of the Trans Mountain Expansion Project, recouping the government's investment in the cancelled Keystone XL Pipeline, and supporting Canada in efforts to keep the Enbridge Line 5 operational.

Construction on the Trans Mountain Expansion Project was nearing 75 per cent as of December 2022, and the project remains on schedule for mechanical completion by the end of 2023. Alberta Energy and Minerals continues to work with Trans Mountain Corporation to ensure this critically important, twice federally approved project is completed and ready for in-service in the first quarter of 2024. Once completed, the pipeline system will have nearly tripled its capacity, representing an increase of 590,000 barrels per day to a total of 890,000 barrels per day, and will provide a route to west coast tidewater for direct access to international markets, including the United States and Asia.

In 2022, Alberta also continued to support the collective efforts of Enbridge, Canada, and other impacted provinces to keep the Line 5 pipeline operational. Line 5, part of Enbridge's Mainline System, is crucial to the energy supply and economies of both the U.S. and Canada and has operated safely and reliably for decades. Line 5 has come under scrutiny by elected officials in Michigan and by the Bad River Band in Wisconsin. Legal action pertaining to the pipeline is ongoing in both states. The Government of Canada has formally invoked the 1977 Transit Pipelines Treaty twice through diplomatic channels with the U.S. government with an aim to prevent the closure of Line 5 over ongoing issues in Michigan and Wisconsin.

Finally, the Government of Alberta's efforts to recover the province's investment in the cancelled Keystone XL project continue. In 2022, Alberta filed its notice of intent to initiate a formal legacy North American Free Trade Agreement claim under the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement over the cancellation of the presidential permit for the Keystone XL pipeline border crossing in 2021. The case is ongoing.

Provincial Outcome: Healthy Ecosystem and Environment

16. Create new conservation areas on provincial Crown land

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas and Alberta Forestry and Parks – in progress

Description:

The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan established an additional 16 per cent of the region as new conservation areas, bringing the total area of conserved lands from approximately six per cent to 22 per cent or approximately two-million hectares. To establish new conservation areas in the Lower Athabasca region, forest tenure, Crown oil sands, and metallic and industrial minerals agreements that fell within or partially within, new conservation areas established under the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan were subject to cancellation in accordance with section 8(1)(c) of the *Mines and Minerals Act*.

Progress:

Building on the five conservation areas (Birch Mountain expansion, Dillon River, Richardson, Birch Mountain, and Kazan) that were designated under the *Provincial Parks Act* in 2018, the Kitaskino Nuwenéné Wildland Provincial Park was established in 2019, initially covering an area of 161,880 hectares. In 2022, the Government of Alberta expanded the Kitaskino Nuwenéné Wildland area, adding over 152,000 hectares. The Kitaskino Nuwenéné Wildland now covers 314,501 hectares.

There is one remaining conservation area established under the regional plan (Gipsy-Gordon Wildland Provincial Park) yet to be designated under the *Provincial Parks Act*.

17. Continue to manage existing conserved lands

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas and Alberta Forestry and Parks – complete and in implementation

Description:

Conservation areas are clearly defined areas that have special rules to protect ecosystems and biological diversity. Examples of conservation areas include Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Natural Areas, Heritage Rangelands, and Wildland Provincial Parks. Each of these have different ecological objectives and different land-use rules associated with it. These rules dictate what kinds of activities, including recreation, development and industry, are permitted in the area and which ones are prohibited.

Progress:

Schedule F of the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan identifies permitted activities for existing and new conservation areas in the region. The remaining conservation area, Gipsy-Gordon Wildland Provincial Park, will continue to be managed with that intent under the Regional Plan until it is designated under appropriate legislation.

The draft Lower Athabasca Regional Parks Plan, which is aligned with the Regional Plan, will continue to guide management direction and objectives for the region's parks.

18. Develop a biodiversity management framework

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas – due 2013, in progress

Description:

Biodiversity management frameworks seek to maintain terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity while also achieving environmental, social and economic objectives for the region. Frameworks provide a systematic approach to environmental management.

Progress:

Work continues on completing a Lower Athabasca region Biodiversity Management Framework. The framework proposes a suite of terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity indicators that would be monitored, evaluated, and reported on an ongoing basis to help assess whether biodiversity objectives are being achieved.

In 2022, the province-wide data layer for the interior habitat indicator was published on GeoDiscover Alberta (<https://geodiscover.alberta.ca>) and the Open Government portal (<https://open.alberta.ca>), together with a detailed technical report. The Government of Alberta also made progress developing a landscape connectivity indicator, and an aquatic and terrestrial habitat indicator. The province-wide data layers for landscape connectivity, and aquatic and terrestrial habitat indicators will be published in 2023. Biodiversity indicator data and supporting methodology are being made available to communicate current and past conditions of a suite of complementary biodiversity indicators to inform and enable the management of cumulative effects of development on terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity.

19. Develop a landscape management plan for public lands in the Green Area

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas – due 2013, in progress

Description:

A Lower Athabasca region landscape management plan for public land would incorporate strategies and management actions to reduce the extent and duration of human footprint to achieve biodiversity outcomes and objectives for the region and support Indigenous Peoples' values.

Progress:

Sub-regional planning initiatives taking place in the region will inform and form part of landscape management planning.

The Government of Alberta is implementing the Moose Lake Access Management Plan, which includes a 10-kilometre zone adjacent to Fort McKay First Nation's Moose Lake reserves and was approved on February 8, 2021. Implementation activities in 2022 include developing an operational plan to restore legacy seismic lines, funding to support airshed monitoring and Fort McKay First Nation community-based monitoring, and preliminary work to develop a groundwater/surface water interaction model.

Other sub-regional planning initiatives taking place in the region include the Cold Lake and Wandering River Sub-regional Plans. The Cold Lake Sub-regional Plan was released in April 2022 and provides overarching policy direction for various land-uses across the sub-region. Implementation is ongoing and regulatory details are expected to be complete in early 2024. The Wandering River Sub-regional Plan is in development and expected to continue into 2023.

20. Complete a tailings management framework

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Lower Athabasca Region Tailings Management Framework for the Mineable Athabasca Oil Sands provides direction to manage fluid tailings volumes during and after mine operations to reduce liability and environmental risk resulting from the accumulation of fluid tailings on the landscape.

Progress:

The Tailings Management Framework was completed in 2015. The Government of Alberta continues to work with industry, Indigenous communities and organizations, and other impacted parties to advance implementation of priority initiatives of the framework, focusing on the treatment and potential release of mine water.

Alberta Energy Regulator's Directive 085: Fluid Tailings Management for Oil Sands Mining Projects requires operators to submit plans to indicate how they will meet the requirements of the Tailings Management Framework. Revised tailings management plans are required every five years. Several operators submitted updated plans to the Alberta Energy Regulator in 2022.

The Tailings Management Framework enables release of treated mine process-affected water to the environment subject to supplementary regulatory requirements. Maintenance of aquatic ecosystem health in the downstream receiving environment will require a robust, considered, and well-informed management approach designed with the input of multiple affected parties. Alberta Environment and Protected Areas is working with industry, Indigenous communities and organizations, and other partners to update the regulatory system and support a science-based approach to the management of oil sands mine water that appropriately addresses aquatic ecosystem and human health.

The Oil Sands Mine Water Science Team is focused on filling gaps related to informing supplementary regulatory guidance for treatment and potential release of oil sands mine water, and is made up of technical experts from academia, Indigenous communities, industry, and federal and provincial governments. Several technical reports are in development to address these gaps.

Policy work on tailings reclamation in 2022 focused on criteria and indicator development for terrestrial (uplands and wetlands) landform reclamation certification. The Alberta Energy Regulator continued to develop and release industry performance reports that provide data on in-deposit performance about operators' tailings treatment technologies or new technology pilots being conducted. The Alberta Energy Regulator continues to work with oil sands mine operators to assess new technologies for reducing fluid tailings volumes.

21. Continue to implement the progressive reclamation strategy

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas – complete and in implementation

Description:

To increase the pace of reclaiming oil sands mines, the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan adopted a progressive reclamation strategy. This strategy includes a suite of initiatives and tools to improve financial security and environmental performance within the oil sands mining sector. It has three key components: an updated reclamation security policy, enhanced reclamation reporting and clarification of the reclamation certification program.

Progress:

Work in 2022 continued on the following initiatives:

- **Updated Reclamation Security policy:** The Mine Financial Security Program was introduced in 2011 and collects financial security from oil sands and coal mine operators to protect the public from mine reclamation liabilities associated with project closure. The Government of Alberta reviewed the program in 2022 to ensure appropriate funds are being collected to cover mine reclamation liabilities, as part of continuous program improvement. The review focused on the program's asset calculation, reporting requirements, security requirements when planned reclamation is not completed, and the timing of security payments during mine life. Mine operators and Indigenous communities and organizations were engaged during the review to gain their input regarding program options.
- **Enhanced Reclamation Reporting:** Updated information on oil sands mine disturbance and reclamation was received from mine operators through the Reclamation Information System in 2022. All oil sands mines have submitted disturbance and reclamation footprint data annually through the Reclamation Information System since 2009. Updated data is published on the Oil Sands Information Portal.
- **Reclamation Certification Program:** Government of Alberta staff continued collaborating with the Alberta Energy Regulator in 2022 to update the preliminary criteria and indicators framework for reclamation certification of oil sands mines.

22. Continue to implement the Air Quality Management Framework for the Lower Athabasca Region

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Lower Athabasca Region Air Quality Management Framework is designed to proactively manage the cumulative effects of human activity on ambient air quality within the region by setting ambient air-quality triggers and limits for nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and sulphur dioxide (SO₂). It was developed as part of the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan to complement existing provincial environmental policy, legislation, and regulation, and to help achieve desired regional objectives. It complements existing management systems such as industrial emissions requirements.

Progress:

The Government of Alberta and regulators continued to use the framework to manage cumulative effects of human activity on air quality in the region. Annual reports provide information on the status of ambient environmental conditions and biennial reports provide information on the progress of management responses relative to the framework. Reporting is ongoing and can be found on the Alberta government's open data portal at <https://open.alberta.ca/publications>.

Since the framework was implemented in 2012, no limits have been exceeded for this framework; however, triggers have been crossed at some monitoring stations. As part of the management response, two detailed investigations of SO₂ for the Athabasca oil sands region were conducted in 2018 and 2022, including some modelling work, to better understand key emission sources and the influence of meteorological and topographical conditions near the stations where triggers have been crossed. Management actions include the requirement for specific operational and pollution control improvements of industrial facilities in the area. The levels of SO₂ in the ambient air will continue to be monitored to ensure the concentrations measured at the monitoring stations fall below the trigger values.

23. Continue to implement the Surface Water Quality Management Framework for the Lower Athabasca River

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Lower Athabasca Region Surface Water Quality Management Framework for the Lower Athabasca River supports monitoring and management of long term, cumulative changes in ambient surface water quality within the Lower Athabasca River. It was developed as part of the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan to complement existing provincial environmental policy, legislation, and regulation, and to help achieve desired regional objectives. It complements existing management systems such as those involving spill reporting or drinking water surveillance.

Progress:

The Government of Alberta and regulators continued to use the framework to manage cumulative effects of human activity on surface water quality in the Lower Athabasca River. Annual reports provide information on the status of ambient environmental conditions and biennial reports provide information on progress of management responses relative to the framework. Reporting is ongoing and can be found on the Alberta government's open data portal at <https://open.alberta.ca/publications>.

No limits have been exceeded for this framework to date; however, proactive triggers were crossed for three parameters in 2021 (i.e., lithium, sulphate and uranium). The proactive triggers for these indicators have previously been crossed and these indicators represent three of 11 indicators currently under investigation. A key focus of the ongoing investigation is the identification of key influences on water quality in the Athabasca River, particularly through the assessment of spatial variation and trends in surface water quality along the Athabasca River and within the contributing sub-watersheds. Acknowledging the potential for water quality changes to originate upstream of the Lower Athabasca region and noting the December 2022 release of the Surface Water Quality Management Framework for the Upper Athabasca River, the investigation has considered the entire Athabasca River Basin. Forums hosted by Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils have provided a venue to engage with key parties on the preliminary results of the investigation. A technical report is in preparation that describes the investigation and identifies any additional analyses that may be needed. Further opportunities for engagement will continue to be sought to support any further investigation and the development of any potential mitigation measures.

24. Complete and implement the Groundwater Management Framework for the Lower Athabasca Region

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas – due 2014, in progress

Description:

The Lower Athabasca Region Groundwater Management Framework helps protect groundwater resources from contamination and over-use in three management areas: North Athabasca Oil Sands; South Athabasca Oil Sands; and Cold Lake – Beaver River areas.

Progress:

Characterization of the groundwater regime and regional groundwater monitoring is continuing under the Oil Sands Monitoring Program. In collaboration with the Alberta Geological Survey of the Alberta Energy Regulator, the Government of Alberta is evaluating the potential use of groundwater models to support the development of indicators and thresholds for the management of cumulative effects of development to groundwater in the oil sands area.

In 2022, a guidance document that outlines a consistent overall structure for new and amended groundwater management frameworks continued to be developed. The document describes a suite of approaches for managing cumulative effects of development on groundwater resources in each region. This work will guide the development of a groundwater management approach in the Lower Athabasca region.

25. Complete an updated Surface Water Quantity Management Framework for the Lower Athabasca River

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Lower Athabasca Region Surface Water Quantity Management Framework focuses on managing water use by the mineable oil sands sector and seeks to establish an appropriate balance between water needed for environmental protection, community, and industry needs. The framework includes weekly management triggers and water withdrawal limits. The framework is built upon a foundation of continuous improvement, employing a series of adaptive management indicators and triggers that enable ongoing testing of assumptions around climate change, upstream water use, and industrial development in the basin.

Progress:

The Surface Water Quantity Management Framework was completed in 2015 and is being implemented. Annual reports provide information on the status of ambient environmental conditions and progress of management responses relative to the framework. The Lower Athabasca Region Surface Water Quantity Management Framework and annual reports can be found on the Alberta government's open data portal at <https://open.alberta.ca/publications>.

Water Management Agreements for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 periods have been submitted to the Alberta Energy Regulator, Alberta Environment and Protected Areas, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada by oil sands mine operators. These agreements specify water allocations of individual mine operators under various stream flow conditions to ensure cumulative water withdrawal limits under the framework are not exceeded.

In 2022, Alberta Environment and Parks released the Operational Policy: Lower Athabasca River Weekly Flows (<https://open.alberta.ca/publications/operational-policy-lower-athabasca-river-weekly-flows>). This operational policy provides additional information on the process for the determination, communication, and application of weekly flows that is used in the implementation of the Lower Athabasca Region Surface Water Quantity Management Framework for the Lower Athabasca River weekly management triggers and water withdrawal limits.

The Athabasca River Conditions and Use website (<http://environment.alberta.ca/apps/OSEM/>) supports reporting of weekly management triggers and water withdrawal limits under the framework.

Provincial outcome: people-friendly communities with ample recreational and cultural opportunities

26. Use CRISP to augment and facilitate planning where oil sands development causes growth pressures

Alberta Energy and Minerals – complete

Description:

The Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Plan (CRISP) for the Athabasca Oil Sands Area (2011) was a long-term flexible and integrated approach to planning for growth in the Athabasca Oil Sands Area intended to complement similar plans for the Cold Lake (2012) and Peace River oil sands areas. The decreased pace of oil sands development and evolving government priorities resulted in deferral of the Peace River CRISP.

Progress:

Policy and programming required to manage any growth pressures associated with oil sands development continue to be evaluated on an ongoing basis.

27. Continue to ensure opportunities for future routes and siting for pipeline gateways, transmission corridors, utility and electrical transmission corridors are maintained

Alberta Energy and Minerals and Alberta Transportation and Economic Corridors – complete and in implementation

Description:

Ensuring opportunities for future routes and siting for pipeline gateways, transportation corridors, and utility and electrical transmission corridors helps plan the land base available for development while facilitating population, economic growth, and efficient use of the land.

Progress:

At the strategic level, Canada's Premiers agreed to begin exploring the concept of pan-Canadian economic corridors to enhance the existing connections between provinces and territories at the 2019 Council of the Federation (COF) summer meeting. To that end, Alberta Energy and Minerals led a provincial/territorial working group to foster discussion and develop a report for Premiers. The report was provided to the COF Secretariat in fall 2021 to determine next steps.

Alberta is interested in pursuing cross-jurisdictional corridors for a variety of products, including oil and gas, hydrogen, electricity, and new mineral production. There are significant benefits of a western energy corridor, which would allow Alberta resources to reach new markets in Europe and Asia. Designated corridors could also reduce future opposition to projects by aiming to set aside lands for economic purposes before a specific project is contemplated.

Alberta is monitoring several proposed corridor projects, including the Port of Churchill, the First Peoples Pipeline, and the Western Energy Corridor, all of which are at the conceptual stage with no private sector applications submitted to federal or provincial regulatory. All corridor projects, including connections with ports in British Columbia and to ports eastwards in Churchill, Manitoba, have their own benefits and challenges that must be taken into consideration and require extensive studies and analysis. There are also unique challenges to building cross-jurisdictional infrastructure, including regulations for pipelines crossing multiple provincial boundaries, the cost of new pipe or rail, especially over challenging terrain, and emissions reductions policies.

28. Continue work on critical economic linkages to markets

Alberta Transportation and Economic Corridors and Alberta Jobs, Economy and Trade – complete and in implementation

Description:

Critical economic linkages to markets include connecting to Asia-Pacific markets through the Mackenzie Delta, connecting Fort McMurray to the Northwest Territories and northern British Columbia (via Highway 686 from Fort McMurray to Red Earth Creek), connecting Fort McMurray to Lac La Biche and the Alberta Industrial Heartland (via Highways 881 and 831), and connection to La Loche, Saskatchewan from Highway 881.

Progress:

Several planning studies and projects to identify and implement improvements for highway safety, efficiency and the future expansion are underway or complete, such as:

- Highway 881 Planning Study for re-alignment around Gregoire Lake remains underway;
- Highway 881 Corridor Management Planning Study from Lac La Biche to Highway 63 is complete and design is underway;
- Highway 63 Planning Study for twinning of Highway 63 from south of Mildred Lake to the Athabasca River was completed in 2021;
- Highway 63 Corridor Planning and Access Study in Fort McMurray Urban Development Sub Region (UDSR) remains underway;
- a Cost Benefit Analysis study for the East Clearwater Road was completed; and
- proposed planning study recommending an alignment for extending Highway 813 from Wabasca to proposed Highway 686 is identified.

In preparation for construction, the design for improvements to Highway 881 between Lac La Biche and Anzac is currently underway and will include passing lanes, safety rest areas, and intersection improvements.

29. Designate new provincial recreation areas to address the growing demand for recreational opportunities

Alberta Forestry and Parks – delayed

Description:

To address growing demand for recreational opportunities in the region and provide a secure land base to support tourism development for both residents and visitors, the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan provides for nine new Provincial Recreation Areas.

Progress:

Designation of new Provincial Recreation Areas under the *Provincial Parks Act* has been delayed. These areas include Andrew Lake Provincial Recreation Area, Christina Crossing Provincial Recreation Area, Clyde Lake Provincial Recreation Area, Cowper Lake Provincial Recreation Area, Gregoire Lake Provincial Recreation Area, Slave River Provincial Recreation Area, Crow Lake Provincial Recreation Area, Goodwin Lake Provincial Recreation Area and Winefred Lake Provincial Recreation Area.

30. Create public land areas for recreation and tourism that contain unique features or settings

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas and Alberta Forestry and Parks – delayed

Description:

New public land areas for recreation and tourism in the region contain unique features, scenery, or settings to address the growing demand for recreational opportunities and provide an attractive land base for tourism investment. To optimize the recreation and tourism potential for both residents and visitors, the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan provides for five new public land areas for recreation and tourism development: Lake Athabasca, Richardson, Athabasca River, Clearwater River, and House River.

Progress:

New public land areas for recreation and tourism have not yet been established. The Government of Alberta is working to identify suitable locations that advance outdoor recreation and tourism, and where tourism development and investment opportunities could be directed.

The government and Travel Alberta are currently working together such that policies and initiatives align to advance Alberta's strategic outcomes, including the establishment of new public land areas for recreation and tourism.

31. Develop the regional parks plan for the Lower Athabasca

Alberta Forestry and Parks – due 2013, in progress

Description:

The Regional Parks Plan provides management direction to achieve the integrated recreation and conservation mandate of the Alberta Provincial Parks Program. The Regional Parks Plan summarizes current recreation and conservation values on a site-by-site basis, provides broad, future-focused management direction of those values, and identifies where further planning is required. It also provides Albertans with better information about the values of each park as well as the challenges faced in managing these values for current and future generations.

Progress:

A draft Regional Parks Plan for the Lower Athabasca region was developed in 2015. Final approval and release of this plan was put on hold in 2015. Content that was developed for a draft Regional Parks Plan is being incorporated into other initiatives, plans and guidance for management of parks in the region.

32. Develop the Lower Athabasca Regional Trail System Plan

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas and Alberta Forestry and Parks – in progress

Description:

The Lower Athabasca Regional Trail System Plan will evaluate existing trails and locate designated, sustainable land-based trails for various motorized and non-motorized trail users, water-based trails and routes, and potential associated activity areas. It will link communities, tourism destinations and other park and open space features. The plan's objective is to lay a framework for an enhanced recreation and tourism-based trail system that will create opportunities for greater physical activity and enjoyment of the outdoors by all Albertans.

Progress:

Developing the Lower Athabasca Regional Trail System Plan was put on hold in 2017. Considerations for recreational trails will occur during sub-regional and/or trail management planning across the Lower Athabasca region.

Under the Crown Land Vision released in 2020, the newly created *Trails Act* allows for the designation of both motorized and non-motorized trails on public lands. Trail management plans are required prior to designating new provincial trails, and they must be mapped, protected and kept in good repair. This work supports the development and management of broader trail networks, minimizes the impacts on environmental sensitivities, and increases collaboration with recreation partnerships. Where there are opportunities to enhance recreation in the region, this supports a coordinated approach to enhancing existing trails and associated infrastructure or developing new trails identified in trail management plans.

33. Continue to collect regional data including completion of recreation and tourism inventory, a scenic resource assessment inventory, and a regional recreational demand and satisfaction survey

Tourism and Sport – complete and in implementation

Description:

Data in the form of a recreation and tourism resource inventory that is dependent upon the completion of a scenic resource assessment inventory, and a regional recreational demand and satisfaction survey, is fundamental to informing recreation and tourism planning. This strategy assures the ongoing collection and analysis of relevant data to inform planning and help prioritize product, service, and infrastructure development.

Progress:

Data from the recreation and tourism resource inventory has been used in the creation of the Cold Lake Sub-regional Plan and will be used for the other caribou sub-regions that overlap the Lower Athabasca region.

In 2022, data from the recreation and tourism resource inventories was used to identify high-value land bases as part of the Wandering River sub-regional planning process and culminated in a draft of potential recreation and tourism areas for designation and future development.

Also in 2022, data from the recreation and tourism resource inventories were used to inform the MD of Bonnyville/City of Cold Lake Intermunicipal Trails Tourism Master Plan steering committee and their planning process, which encompasses a portion of the Lakeland region.

34. Continue to consult with Indigenous Peoples in a meaningful way when government decisions may adversely affect the continued exercise of their constitutionally protected rights

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas, Alberta Forestry and Parks, Alberta Energy and Minerals, Alberta Indigenous Relations, and Alberta Tourism and Sport – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan reaffirms Alberta's commitment to honour the constitutionally protected Treaty and Aboriginal rights of Indigenous Peoples. It also seeks opportunities to engage with Indigenous communities and organizations by inviting them to share traditional knowledge to inform land and natural resource planning.

Progress:

The Government of Alberta is committed to partnering with Alberta's Indigenous Peoples in pursuit of reconciliation, inclusion and opportunity. Alberta will continue to work with Indigenous Peoples.

The Government of Alberta continues to be committed to working with First Nations, Métis Settlements and Métis organizations on implementing the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan, and on:

- developing a Biodiversity Management Framework;
- sub-regional planning that supports caribou recovery;
- implementing the Moose Lake Access Management Plan approved by the Alberta government in 2021; and
- cooperative management approaches for managing the Ronald Lake bison herd and Wildland Provincial Parks.

Efforts to work with Indigenous Peoples remains a priority of Government of Alberta.

A co-operative management program that involves 23 participating Indigenous communities and organizations was initiated in spring of 2018 for the Richardson Wildland Provincial Park, Birch Mountains Wildland Provincial Park, Birch River Wildland Provincial Park, Kazan Wildland Provincial Park and Dillon River Wildland Provincial Park. In 2022, work continued on establishing a co-operative management board to advance the development of management plans for each of the wildland provincial parks that are anticipated to be drafted in 2024.

In 2019, following months of collaborative discussions with Indigenous Peoples, industry, and other partners, the Government of Alberta created the Kitaskino Nuwenënë Wildland Provincial Park. Initially, the park covered an area of 161,880 hectares. In 2022, the Government of Alberta expanded the Kitaskino Nuwenënë Wildland, adding over 152,000 hectares. This was made possible by the collaboration of Indigenous communities and organizations, industry partners and the Government of Alberta. The Kitaskino Nuwenënë Wildland now covers 314,501 hectares.

Kitaskino Nuwenënë Wildland supports Indigenous Peoples' traditional activities, including the exercise of Treaty rights.

35. Continue to invite First Nations expressing an interest in the Richardson Backcountry to be involved in a sub-regional initiative called the First Nations Richardson Backcountry Stewardship Initiative (Richardson Initiative)

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas, Alberta Forestry and Parks, Alberta Energy and Minerals, Alberta Indigenous Relations, and Alberta Tourism and Sport – complete and in implementation

Description:

The Richardson Initiative was originally set up as a discussion forum for the Government of Alberta and local First Nations who expressed an interest in the Richardson Backcountry. The discussion forum was intended to address specific issues identified in the Richardson Backcountry area, such as impacts to Treaty rights, fish and wildlife management, access management, economic and business opportunities, as well as the management of new Wildland Provincial Parks and the Richardson public land area for recreation and tourism.

Progress:

Planning initiatives are underway for the Richardson Backcountry to include certain issues of interest and concern that were intended to be addressed under the First Nations-Richardson Backcountry Stewardship Initiative. For example, the Government of Alberta is proceeding with a co-operative management process for five northeast wildland provincial parks, one of which is the Richardson Wildland Provincial Park. Additionally, a sub-regional plan for the Richardson planning area will be developed.

Cross Reference Table

Over time, responsibility on behalf of the Government of Alberta, for leading a particular strategy or developing a particular supporting indicator may have changed as ministry mandates evolved. The table below lists the ministries responsible for the strategies listed in Table 2 of the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan and the ministry name at the time of publication of this report.

LEAD MINISTRY TITLES

Responsible Ministry in LARP	Ministry name as of report publication
Aboriginal Relations	Indigenous Relations
Energy	Energy and Minerals
Culture	Arts, Culture and Status of Women
Enterprise and Advanced Education	Jobs, Economy and Trade; and Advanced Education
Environment and Sustainable Resource Development	Environment and Protected Areas
Human Services	Jobs, Economy and Trade
Tourism, Parks and Recreation	Forestry and Parks; and Tourism and Sport
Transportation	Transportation and Economic Corridors