

The Nechako Watershed Council: *Lessons from a Grassroots Initiative*

by John Curry, MCIP, and Katherine Nightingale

Freshwater resources in Northern B.C. may be abundant, but decisions affecting these resources cannot be considered routine or easily made. Debate often arises over the effects of water diversion projects, and multiple users of any river system must be given due consideration. The resulting dilemma is how to accommodate the diverse interests and views of affected communities, residents and stakeholders.

The protracted debate over Alcan's proposed Kemano Completion Project heightened community awareness of the Nechako River system and emphasized the need for a new type of discussion framework. Formed in June 1998, the Nechako Watershed Council (NWC) provides the necessary forum for the many users of the river to participate in open discussion. A hallmark of the NWC is its dedication to openness and transparency in all communications. Its other guiding principles are inclusive,

cooperative, adaptive, informed, oriented towards solutions and partnerships, and based on respect, recognition and accountability.

The NWC is instructive for its grassroots origins and use of consensus-based decision-making principles, as well as for the innovative research that went into the formation of the council. Other lessons learned so far include the importance of an initial champion (the Fraser Basin Council), the striving for inclusiveness, and the cultivation of good faith and a willingness to share. There is also a fundamental value placed on education and information as bases for reaching consensus. The NWC is a form of social learning experiment in progress – one well worth monitoring by planners across Canada.

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