

**Investigating Consensus-Seeking Partnerships in Water Governance:**

**A Case Study of Southern Alberta**

by

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## *ABSTRACT*

Growing demand for public involvement in environmental governance combined with recognition that top-down approaches often are not well suited to dealing with local concerns has led to increased use of collaborative approaches. The consensus-seeking partnership is becoming a common tool in the landscape of collaborative water governance. These arrangements typically are used to provide advice on water management to policy makers. Partnership models based on consensus are grounded in a number of assumptions, including cooperation amongst multi-stakeholder participants, fair and high quality decision outcomes, and commitment to implement the results produced during the consensus seeking process.

Conflicting research on the consensus model and its use as a collaborative decision-making tool indicates that these assumptions are difficult to achieve. This thesis investigates these assumptions through a study of the outcomes of consensus in collaborative advisory partnerships and the procedures necessary for ensuring success with the consensus partnership model. Data were derived from analysis of documents and interviews with study participants involved in water partnerships in Southern Alberta. The research revealed that a number of conditions are needed in consensus-based approaches to avoid negative outcomes such as lowest common denominator decisions. While the analysis focuses on experiences in Alberta, the lessons learned are broadly transferable and provide practitioners in water management a more accurate representation of the use of consensus in collaborative water partnerships.

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## *CHAPTER ONE*

### *INTRODUCTION*

#### *1.1 Problem Context*

The quality and quantity of freshwater available for human use is of fundamental importance to the quality of human life; water is necessary for drinking and sanitation, economic development, food production, and the maintenance of natural ecosystems and the services that they provide. However, the landscape of water governance is changing. At a time when even relatively water-rich countries such as Canada are feeling pressure on water allocation demands (de Loë and Kreutzwiser 2006, 11), there has been growing recognition that the top-down centralized governance that has characterized much of past decision-making is inappropriate for managing natural resources (Innes and Booher 2004). The Dublin Principles for Water recommend meaningful decentralization of governance to the lowest appropriate level (Rogers and Hall 2003). Simultaneously, calls for affected stakeholders to be involved in decision-making are common (Gleick 2000). This growing acceptance of the need for a collaborative process in governance (Ansell and Gash 2008; Margerum 2007; Margerum 2008; Margerum and Whitall 2004; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000) has informed water governance approaches both in Canada and abroad.

The trend towards more collaborative approaches to water governance has prompted a proliferation of collaborative watershed governance bodies (Bonnell and Koontz 2007; Koehler and Koontz 2008), and with them, interest in understanding how to ensure effective collaborative governance. The literature on collaborative

governance contains numerous studies on topics such as public participation, ensuring watershed-based management of land and water resources, strengthening collaborative capacity and increasing partnerships across different levels of government and society. A key concern is the fact that a transition from traditional governance to a more collaborative form “involves a reshaping of the roles of state and non-state actors, and is accompanied by new perspectives on the environment, on society, and on relationships between social and ecological systems” (de Loë, *et al.* 2009, 28). How collaborative governance can best be pursued is an area of research that can increase the probability of success for the growing number of collaborative organizations, such as partnerships.

Collaborative decision-making is one area that requires a re-shaping of perspectives. Consensus-based approaches are common in collaborations (Innes and Booher 1999), although the goal of consensus has both supporters and opponents in the collaborative governance literature. Promoters argue that consensus is more likely to result in higher quality, more creative and lasting decisions (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Innes and Booher 1999). Because consensus is thought to protect the interests of smaller groups, because all stakeholders aim to come to a mutually acceptable decision, there is no tyranny of the majority (Blomquist and Schlager 2005). Affeltranger and Otte (2003) note that decisions based on consensus are more widely known and accepted by the community. Mascarenhas and Scarce (2004) conclude that consensus decision-making is a requirement for legitimacy in collaborative public planning processes.

In contrast, others have suggested that pre-existing pressures, such as divisions in stakeholder groups or reluctance to change the status quo, can prevent or limit the effectiveness of a consensus-based approach to collaborative decision-making (Sapountzaki and Wassenhoven 2005; Waage 2003). Furthermore, some researchers argue that consensus decision-making may produce weak, lowest common denominator outcomes or result in a decision stalemate (Ansell and Gash 2008; Blomquist and Schlager 2005). At the same time, it has been argued that while consensus decision-making theoretically allows all participants a voice, it may not eliminate power imbalances among stakeholders (Ansell and Gash 2008; Van Veen, *et al.* 2003). Indeed, Coglianesi (1999) suggests that consensus-building does not ensure better decisions and actually may increase conflict. Coglianesi and Allen (2004) go as far to state “The only common sense approach to consensus may be simply not to rely on it as the basis for making important policy decisions affecting society and the environment” (Coglianesi and Allen 2004, 23).

Inconsistencies in the literature about the use of the consensus model are mirrored in challenges that have been reported with consensus as an objective in decision-making processes. The *Water for Life* framework, the Province of Alberta’s collaborative water management strategy, encourages water partnerships in the province to use consensus as their decision-making objective (Alberta Environment 2005). However, difficulties with consensus have been documented: a report prepared by the Alberta Water Council and published in early 2008 summarizes many of the challenges that those working in collaborative organizations within *Water for Life* have described. One such challenge relates to decision-making: “Even

though there is general support for the concept of a partnership model, inherent difficulties were mentioned. These included the difficulty of achieving consensus when working with multiple stakeholder interests” (Alberta Water Council 2008g, 29).

The widespread use of the consensus model as a decision-making objective in water partnerships in Alberta presents a research opportunity for increasing our understanding of its use in collaborative partnerships, and an opportunity to assess the claims made by previous researchers investigating consensus. Learning from the cases in which collaborative efforts are being incorporated into decision-making is necessary for increasing our understanding of how to effectively transition to more collaborative forms of water governance. A study evaluating consensus as a decision-making objective and investigating how to increase the likelihood of success with consensus will contribute to the growing body of literature on collaborative water governance and will provide insight on the strengths and weaknesses of this particular approach to governance.

### ***1.2 Purpose and Objectives***

The purpose of this research is to evaluate consensus as a decision-making objective in collaborative advisory groups involved in water governance. This broad purpose leads to three interrelated research objectives:

1. To develop a theoretical foundation for evaluating the use of consensus as a decision-making objective in collaborative settings.

2. To use the framework to evaluate the use of consensus decision-making for collaborative water governance in Alberta.
3. To make recommendations regarding collaborative processes aiming to use consensus to provide policy advice.

### ***1.3 Organization of Thesis***

This thesis consists of six chapters. Following this introduction, the second chapter presents an overview of literature that is pertinent to this study and its objectives. The third chapter discusses the approaches used to achieve the study's three objectives. Next, a detailed explanation of the case study setting is presented. The final two chapters consist of a presentation of the results (Chapter Five), and a discussion of the significance of the results and their practical and scholarly contributions (Chapter Six).

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several bodies of literature were consulted in the literature review that provided the theoretical foundation for this study of collaborative decision-making. Literature addressing water governance, collaboration and decision-making is reviewed and presented in this chapter.

**2.1 Water Governance**

Governance and government are terms that have often been used interchangeably (Turton, *et al.* 2007). However, governance is a much more inclusive term, one that has a broader scope than solely government (Rogers and Hall 2003). The concept of governance is intentionally broad in that it includes all actors that influence decision-making. Water governance, in this light, can be considered as the “decision-making processes through which water is managed” (de Loë and Kreutzwiser 2006, 87). In essence, water governance encompasses the range of systems implemented to manage water resources – all the water-related institutions, laws, stakeholders, structures, principles and norms, as well as the relationships between these components. The definition provided by de Loë and Kreutzwiser (2006) also highlights the difference between governance and management. Management involves “planning, implementing and measuring policy objectives defined by the governors” (Hoover, *et al.* 2007, 3). Hence, management refers to direct actions taken at a lower level to implement the policies decided upon by governing bodies.

Increased attention to water governance is significant as it emphasizes that many of the challenges characterizing contemporary water problems are not caused by a lack of scientific knowledge, but by poor governance (de Loë and Kreutzwiser 2006; United Nations World Water Assessment Programme 2003). The Global Water Partnership concluded at the Second World Water forum that “the water crisis is mainly a crisis of governance” (Global Water Partnership 2000, 16). It is for these reasons that a broad definition of water governance, one that includes all the actors who influence decision-making should be used. Responsibility for addressing governance challenges does not lie only with governments (de Loë and Kreutzwiser 2006). In reality, effective governance depends on a plethora of additional components, including institutions, market forces, civil society and the private sector (Pahl-Wostl, *et al.* 2007; Rogers and Hall 2003).

As increased attention has been paid to the importance of effective governance, there has been growing recognition that the top-down centralized governance that has characterized much of past decision-making is inappropriate for managing natural resources (Innes and Booher 2004). Similarly, demands for greater stakeholder participation have increased (Koontz and Johnson 2004). Moreover, the Dublin Principles for Water advise that “water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners, and policy makers at all levels” (Gonzalez-Villarreal and Solanes 1999, 6). Consequently, there has been growing acceptance of the need for a collaborative process in environmental governance (Ansell and Gash 2008; Margerum 2007; Margerum 2008; Margerum and Whitall 2004; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000).

## ***2.2 Collaboration***

Ensuring effective water governance is crucial, and a substantial body of literature has been developed to address various aspects of an emerging water governance paradigm: collaborative governance. Much of the literature on collaborative governance converges with deliberative democracy theory (Connick and Innes 2003; Parkins and Mitchell 2005), which criticizes limited democratic participation and emphasizes the importance of debate, personal reflection and informed public opinion (Parkins and Mitchell 2005). For instance, Habermas, one of the key authors in the deliberative democracy tradition, emphasized that discussions on critical normative questions should be extended to actors beyond traditional political decision-makers (Ferree, *et al.* 2002). The growing emphasis on collaborative approaches in natural resources signifies a “deliberative turn in natural resource management” (Parkins and Mitchell 2005, 537) and has shifted emphasis towards the importance of process in collaborative governance (Neef 2009).

However, distinctions can be made between the natural resource literature and deliberative democratic theory. Whereas deliberative democratic theory values public participation “as an opportunity for public debate, personal reflection, and informed public opinion” (Parkins and Mitchell 2005, 532) regardless of its role in political decision-making, the natural resources management literature focuses on multi-stakeholder involvement and shared control as a method of increasing the quality of decisions (Parkins and Mitchell 2005). It is from this focus that much of the literature on collaborative governance in natural resources management has emerged (Parkins and Mitchell 2005), and it is this literature that informs the arguments on

collaborative governance explored in this thesis. The literature reviewed includes a diverse range of perspectives, and is heavily empirical. It reflects the context of natural resources management, particularly water management, as well as land-use planning, and is based primarily on experiences in the North American context.

Based on this literature, collaboration refers to the involvement of a broad spectrum of stakeholders, representing organizations, interest groups and other participants with a stake in the outcome (Margerum 2008). The potential benefits of collaborative decision-making in environmental governance are well-documented. A collaborative approach can serve as a vehicle for finding solutions to conflicts arising from increased competition for natural resources (Margerum and Whitall 2004). Collaboration can bring together information from a variety of sources, thereby expanding the knowledge base, creating valuable information exchanges, developing a more holistic understanding of problems and potentially leading to better decisions (Beierle and Konisky 2001; Imperial 2005; Margerum and Whitall 2004; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000).

Collaboration amongst organizations can contribute to reduced duplication by multiple groups conducting similar work, as non-collaborating agencies may have overlapping responsibilities and objectives that could be combined (Margerum and Whitall 2004). Engaging all stakeholders in the process of decision-making will likely foster improved understanding and acceptance of the solutions reached (Margerum 2008), increased legitimacy in decision-making (Pahl-Wostl, *et al.* 2007), better relationships among key decision-makers (Beierle and Konisky 2001), and a climate of cooperation that will aid in addressing future challenges (Innes and

Booher 2004; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). Connick and Innes (2003) showed through an investigation into water policy-making in California that even when collaborative efforts have modest short-term benefits, they set in motion a cascade of positive second and third order changes. These documented benefits of collaboration have influenced water governance approaches both in Canada and abroad, and have prompted an increase in the prevalence of structures and processes for collaboration.

### **2.2.1 Structures and Processes for Collaboration**

#### *Advisory Committees*

Advisory committees are a common tool for increasing collaboration in environmental policy-making (Koontz 2005). Advisory committees can take on a variety of forms, although they are typically created by a public agency when policy-makers wish to consider outside opinions before making decisions on environmental issues (Koontz 2005; Vasseur, *et al.* 1997). Advisory committees are usually created to examine, evaluate and make recommendations on a specific project or program (Leach, *et al.* 2002), and committee members are typically selected by the convener of the committee (Chess and Purcell 1999; Leach, *et al.* 2002). The committee may consist of interest group members, technical experts, or public agencies (Leach, *et al.* 2002). Typically, advisory committees do not have authority to make decisions, and their influence on the outcome of the specific issue may vary (Beierle and Konisky 2001; Koontz 2005).

#### *Partnerships*

Partnerships are another common approach to increasing the level of collaboration in environmental policy-making (Leach, *et al.* 2002). Broadly, a partnership refers to a

“shared understanding by more than one party” (Plummer and FitzGibbon 2004, 64), and includes a pooling of resources for shared benefit (Plummer and FitzGibbon 2004). In contrast to advisory committees, partnerships often involve a wide range of stakeholders, including local citizens, representatives from private interest or advocacy groups, industry, or local, provincial or federal government agencies (Leach, *et al.* 2002), and can be self-initiated or convened by public agencies (Koontz 2005). Members of partnerships may not have similar beliefs or opinions, and hence, should also be distinguished from interest groups, whose members may have more common interests. Also unlike advisory committees, partnerships usually work to reach agreement on multiple issues of a common theme (such as water) (Koontz 2005; Leach, *et al.* 2002), rather than a specific issue. Furthermore, partnerships may also undertake educational and research activities in addition to their work on recommendations for planning and policy (Moore and Koontz 2003). However, like advisory committees, partnerships are usually not granted policy-making authority, and instead, members are expected to work together to provide advice to decision-makers (Koontz 2005). While there are a variety of forms that a partnership may take, watershed management partnerships are increasingly common in Canada and abroad, and will be explored here.

Watershed management partnerships are collaborative organizations that have seen increasing popularity (Blomquist and Schlager 2005). Watershed management partnerships typically involve the decentralization of decision-making from larger governing bodies, as well as the integration of all stakeholders, agencies and organizations operating within a given watershed (Blomquist and Schlager 2005).

Many researchers acknowledge that effective watershed collaborations involves not only cooperation among existing organizations, but also meaningful participation of interest groups and all those influenced by decision-making (Ansell and Gash 2008; Bonnell and Koontz 2007; Margerum 2008). Local citizens, in particular, are seen as essential participants in these partnerships as they can provide vital area-specific information (Koehler and Koontz 2008).

Operating at the scale of the watershed is a crucial requirement of a watershed management partnership. A watershed is defined as “the area of land that catches precipitation and drains it into a larger body of water such as a marsh, stream, river or lake” (Alberta Environment 2005, 3). Blomquist and Schlager (2005) explain that watershed boundaries are ‘natural’, as opposed to ‘human-created’, and consequently, watersheds usually span political and geographic boundaries. This has resulted in water governance having traditionally been separated into a variety of different organizations (often formed according to geographic location, and program function), which can limit each agency’s abilities to achieve its objectives (Imperial 2005). Hence, human-created boundaries have left a legacy of numerous distinct decision-making bodies within a particular watershed, many of which are non-cooperative and have competing interests. Moreover, decision-making bodies with political boundaries rather than hydraulic ones can create conflicts among stakeholders protecting interests within their respective political boundaries. Watershed-scale organizations would “bring together all the stakeholders and produce integrated watershed management” (Blomquist and Schlager 2005, 101),

ensuring that interactive watershed components are governed collectively and necessitating cooperation among traditionally competing water organizations.

Watershed-level governance does present challenges. Watershed size can vary considerably. Watersheds are often nested within larger watersheds, requiring a degree of choice in determining where watersheds begin and end and requiring a hierarchy of plans at different scales (Blomquist and Schlager 2005). Moreover, humans have been modifying landscapes, rerouting waterways, and transporting water for centuries, adding a human component to the watershed that is not directly addressed when drawing watershed boundaries according to natural limits (Blomquist and Schlager 2005). Governance at the level of the watershed may be ineffective if no meaningful social scale exists at the level of the watershed through which successful governance can be enabled (Ferreyra, *et al.* 2008). Tension can arise between those considered to be experts relative to holders of local knowledge (Cortner and Moote 1999). A history of disagreement among collaborative groups or people is another source of tension (Ansell and Gash 2008).

Despite these challenges, watershed partnerships are very common, particularly in the United States, Australia, and Canada (Leach and Pelkey 2001). Leach *et al.* (2002) identified over 150 watershed partnerships in California alone. Most of these partnerships are consensus-seeking (Leach, *et al.* 2002), and many involve government on a regular basis. In a study of over 200 watershed partnerships in the United States, Clark *et al.* (2005) found that 68% of respondents from the partnerships indicated the presence of state agency personnel, while 53% confirmed the presence of members from federal agencies. Watershed partnerships also exist in

Canada. Alberta, for instance, has created a series of local, regional and provincial partnerships through its *Water for Life* strategy, including watershed management partnerships (titled Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils), all of which are expected to operate by consensus decision-making. Alberta has also enabled collaboration in water management through the creation of a provincial water advisory committee.

### *Typology of Collaborative Partnerships*

Collaborative partnerships can take on multiple forms, varying not only according to activity focus or institutional setting, but also according to population, size, problem significance, geographical scale, legal basis and authority (Margerum 2008; Selin 1999). Efforts have been made to develop a typology of partnerships based on such characteristics. Moore and Koontz (2003) developed a typology based on membership, in which the authors differentiate among citizen-based, agency-based and mixed partnerships. Similarly, Bidwell and Ryan (2006) suggest a classification of partnerships based on organizational affiliation. Bruns (2003) provides a typology for partnerships in which he describes options for increasing citizen participation in decision-making based on Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein 1969), as well as other developed citizen participation spectrums. Although these typologies are useful in distinguishing between partnerships, the varying legality and authority of collaborative partnerships merits acknowledgement.

First, certain partnerships can be differentiated from others based on the existence of a legal mandate. Alberta's Regional Advisory Councils, for instance, have mandates in the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* to create regional plans; their

mandates are specified in the Act (Government of Alberta 2009a). However, no such legal mandate exists for the province's Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils. Second, partnerships can be distinguished based on authority accorded to the decisions, plans or recommendations produced in the partnership. While it is rare that collaborative partnerships are granted authority to enact policy – most groups provide strictly advice (Koontz 2005) – varying levels of authority in partnerships exist, and should be acknowledged. For instance, recommendations made in partnerships can be strictly for advice, with no mechanism for enforcing action on the decisions. Although Oregon's watershed councils have a mandate outlined in state law, the councils are non-regulatory in nature, and the plans developed and priorities identified are strictly voluntary (Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board 2007). Alternatively, decisions can go for approval or ratification by policy-makers, ensuring that the decisions will at least be considered. Ontario's Source Protection Committees, which are created by regulations made under the *Clean Water Act*, must prepare and submit a source protection plan for Ministerial approval (Government of Ontario 2006). Furthermore, partnership decisions can be allocated even greater authority if they have a regulatory power in their own right. For instance, Washington State's watershed planning groups are mandated to develop watershed plans. The State is required by law to implement the recommendations of the groups (Ryan and Klug 2005). Hence, a broad spectrum of authority in water partnerships exists.

### ***2.3 Decision-Making***

As the prevalence of collaborative approaches to water management increases, it is necessary to understand under what conditions they are likely to succeed, and what procedures should be followed to ensure the highest possible chance of success.

Understanding decision-making is crucial for increasing our understanding of effective governance. Many partnerships aim to come to decisions through consensus (Innes and Booher 1999), an approach encouraged by Habermas when discussing deliberative democratic theory (Dryzek 2000). Consensus is, at its most fundamental, “group solidarity in sentiment and belief” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2010). In line with this, the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy defines a consensus decision-making process for partnerships to be one “in which all those who have a stake in the outcome aim to reach agreement on actions and outcomes ... consensus is reached if all participants are willing to live with ‘the total package’” (Cormick, *et al.* 1996, 4). Collaborative partnerships aiming to come to decision through consensus will be referred to hereafter as consensus-seeking partnerships.

Potential benefits of aiming to make decisions by consensus are well described in the collaborative governance literature. Researchers describing positive outcomes of consensus decision-making cite greater fairness and higher decision quality. For instance, the literature on consensus in partnerships claims that consensus decision-making allows all participants a voice, levels the playing field, and encourages participants to work together as equals (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Davis 2008; Round Tables on the Environment and Economy in Canada 1993). These outcomes would

increase the fairness of the decision-making process for participants, as there would be no tyranny of the majority and all those involved would be working together as equals. Some also argue that consensus decision-making contributes to a deeper understanding of different stakeholder values and provides a wealth of shared knowledge (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Innes and Booher 1999). Others suggest that the approach is more likely to result in higher quality, more creative and lasting decisions (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Innes and Booher 1999), and that consensus creates greater individual ownership and commitment (Schmoldt and Peterson 2000). Consensus decision-making, it is claimed, protects the interests of smaller groups. Because all stakeholders aim to come to a mutually acceptable decision, there is no tyranny of the majority (Blomquist and Schlager 2005). Consensus is thought to increase transparency because decisions based on consensus are more widely known and accepted by the community (Affeltranger and Otte 2003).

Some researchers argue that the use of consensus contributes to learning and leads to increased social capital. Based on a study of the San Francisco Estuary Project, Connick and Innes (2003) argue that learning and change can occur in participants, as well as in people outside the consensus-seeking partnership. At the same time, it has been suggested that participants become more receptive towards the views of other stakeholders (Innes and Booher 1999). Consensus decision-making is said to enhance social capital – which includes civic and personal relationships, trust, and social networks (Brandes, *et al.* 2005; Imperial and Hennessey 2000; Leach, *et al.* 2002) – because consensus increases trust among participants and builds positive relationships (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Innes and Booher 1999). Although consensus

decision-making is time-consuming (Kenney 2000; Leach, *et al.* 2002), some researchers argue that consensus decreases the time needed to gain action on issues since commitment to the decisions is created in the consensus process (Irvin and Stansbury 2004).

Despite these benefits, some researchers remain skeptical of the benefits and desirability of consensus decision-making. Contrary to those claiming that consensus decision-making increases the quality of decisions, some researchers suggest that consensus decision-making can produce weak outcomes in the form of lowest common denominator decisions or result in a decision stalemate (Ansell and Gash 2008; Blomquist and Schlager 2005). Consensus decision-making can be disrupted by a single uncooperative participant (Griffin 1999), which can also lead to stalemate. Furthermore, Sabatier *et al.* (2005) raise concerns that a collaborative decision-making process may not produce implementable decisions from a political or legal standpoint.

Even though it is commonly suggested that consensus decision-making allows all participants a voice and encourages participants to work together as equals, some authors also suggest that power imbalances remain among stakeholders (Ansell and Gash 2008; Van Veen, *et al.* 2003), and that pre-existing imbalances may prevent equitable decision-making in an otherwise inclusive process (Sherwill, *et al.* 2007). These arguments suggest that even when consensus decision-making is used, the process may not be as fair as indicated by the researchers who argue that consensus levels the playing field among participants. Furthermore, as the process can require a large time commitment (Cormick, *et al.* 1996), consensus may not necessarily lead to

productive decision-making (Kenney 2000). As well, due to the large time commitments required of participants, volunteer burn-out may occur (Curtis, *et al.* 2002). Although some authors claim that social capital is gained, Coglianesi (1999) argues that consensus decision-making may increase conflict, and should be avoided by those aiming to engage stakeholders in policy discussions.

Although these challenges provide definite obstacles to decision-making through consensus, striving for consensus is considered an integral goal of many collaborative partnerships. Various publications identifying principles, steps, and strategies of consensus decision-making exist. For instance, the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, in its publication *Guiding Principles of Consensus Processes*, identified ten principles that are fundamental to consensus (Cormick, *et al.* 1996). These guiding principles include incentives for participation, the involvement of all affected stakeholders, adequate process flexibility, access to information, and acceptance of diverse values, interests and knowledge (Cormick, *et al.* 1996). The Colorado Institute of Public Policy (2006) emphasized the importance of finding common ground through identifying beliefs and values associated with water – an important step in addressing the challenges posed in water governance today through consensus-based processes. Many stakeholders come into discussions already advocating for a particular solution; thus, identifying common values and understanding assumptions can foster agreement and, possibly, creative solutions (Colorado Institute of Public Policy 2006). Hence, a focus on values is central to a consensus decision-making process (Colorado Institute of Public Policy 2006; Cormick, *et al.* 1996; McDaniels, *et al.* 1999).

While documents like *Guiding Principles of Consensus Processes* can provide some information on successful consensus decision-making, ‘guiding principles’ may not capture the necessary contextual nuances or practical considerations that may exist. A number of other pieces of literature on how to design collaborative consensus-seeking organizations can be found. However, like the outcomes of consensus-based process, these are often contradictory. Contradictions relate to both structure, defined as the “set of characteristics that can be used to describe a particular partnership” (Bidwell and Ryan 2006, 830), and process, namely the activities and interactions among participants (Bressers and Kuks 2003).

The collaborative governance literature also outlines a number of factors contributing to the success or failure of collaborative partnerships, related to membership, level of involvement of agencies, flexibility, facilitation, level of decision-making authority, access to information, and resources (Bonnell and Koontz 2007; Brandes, *et al.* 2005; Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Davis 2008; Griffin 1999; Gunton, *et al.* 2007; Hooper, *et al.* 1999; Innes and Booher 1999; Leach and Pelkey 2001; Leach and Sabatier 2003; Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004; Moore and Koontz 2003; Robson and Kant 2007; Young 2002). However, the reviewed literature is not always consistent in its recommendations on these issues. With regard to membership, a number of studies recommend that the membership of collaborative decision making bodies should be broad and inclusive, and that all relevant stakeholders should be represented (Davis 2008; Innes and Booher 1999; Robson and Kant 2007). However, other studies conclude that a diverse membership may create problems (Leach and

Pelkey 2001) and suggest, instead, that membership be restricted to those in the directly affected community (Young 2002).

Participants in a study by Davis (2008) argue that partnerships ought to be independent of government to avoid process manipulation, but Koontz and Moore (2003) suggest that partnerships may benefit from a mix of private citizens and public representatives. Some argue that the partnership design ought to be flexible, where participants are allowed to design objectives, rules, etc. (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Davis 2008; Innes and Booher 1999). In contrast, Bonnell and Koontz (2007) suggest that too much flexibility may lead to frustration, and that a clear purpose is necessary. Participants from Davis' (2008) study indicated that professional facilitation helps partnerships, while a study by Leach and Sabatier (2003) suggested that higher levels of agreement will be reached using an unpaid facilitator.

Contradictions in the literature also exist on appropriate levels of authority for decision-making in partnerships. Some researchers suggest formal mechanisms for enforcing decisions (Brandes, *et al.* 2005; Hooper, *et al.* 1999), while others indicate that moral authority can be sufficient for gaining action on plans or recommendations (Imperial and Hennessey 2000).

Extensive literature also exists on the processes that should be followed in partnerships, for instance, on consensus-building and decision-making. Even if those involved in consensus-building were to follow all the steps recommended in *Guiding Principles of Consensus Processes* (Cormick, *et al.* 1996), there are likely to be instances where partnerships simply will not come to consensus (Ansell and Gash 2008; Blomquist and Schlager 2005; Innes and Booher 1999). It is not clear from the

literature how consensus-seeking partnerships should proceed when unanimous agreement cannot be found. Schuett *et al.* (2001) stress that deliberations should continue until a unanimous decision is found; however, Pratkanis and Turner (1996) suggest that minority reports ought to be written in the case of an impasse. Also with regard to process, a number of researchers cite the need for engaged and committed participants (Gunton, *et al.* 2007; Leach and Pelkey 2001), and for government support (Davis 2008; Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004; Robson and Kant 2007). Equal opportunity to participate in the process is also identified as an important factor contributing to success (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Davis 2008).

Notably, the collaborative governance literature on outcomes of consensus and how to make partnerships effective often fails to acknowledge the varying levels of legality and authority, such as the difference between the use of consensus in an advisory capacity or in actual policy decisions. This is particularly important given the broad spectrum of legality and authority that can exist in partnerships. As some partnerships have greater authority and legal standing than others, this distinction is crucial, and thus this context must be noted when conducting an evaluation.

#### ***2.4 Implications for Governance***

The consensus-seeking partnership is becoming an increasingly common tool in collaborative water governance. It is used most frequently to provide advice to decision-makers who have the authority to implement (or not) the advice they receive (Koontz 2005). Hundreds of consensus-seeking water partnerships have been convened, many by public agencies, and participants from different sectors and

backgrounds are asked to cooperate to reach agreement on recommendations for plans and policies. It is clear from the popularity of the partnership approach that policy-makers and other organizers feel that the use of partnerships will produce sound, fair decisions that are reflective of the wealth of shared knowledge in the group. As shown in Section 2.3, this view is supported by some of the relevant literature. However, studies by other researchers indicate that many of the principles upon which consensus-seeking partnerships are being established – such as the promise of better decisions or the ability of a broad range of participants to cooperate and reach consensus – may not be well founded. Hence, in choosing to employ a consensus-based decision-making process, conveners are making a number of assumptions, including the following:

- A multi-stakeholder group of participants will be willing to cooperate
- The members of the group will be able to come to a unanimous decision
- The process and the decision will be fair for all participants, even in cases where power differentials may exist
- High quality outcomes will be produced, and lowest common denominator decisions will be avoided
- Partnerships granted only advisory capacity will be effective in gaining buy-in and ensuring acceptance and action on the decisions made

As is evidenced by the conflicting research on consensus and its use as a collaborative decision-making tool detailed in Section 2.3, these assumptions – which are commonplace in real-world processes – may not be supportable. As

consensus-seeking partnerships are becoming increasingly common tools to improve collaboration in environmental decision-making, investigating these assumptions through a detailed study on consensus in collaborative advisory partnerships is warranted.

### ***2.5 Evaluative Framework***

The collaborative governance literature that was reviewed in this study, while containing numerous conflicting positions on critical issues related to consensus, allows for the formation of an evaluative framework based on these arguments. This framework is divided into two tables. Table 1 describes the outcomes emerging from the use of consensus decision-making suggested by the collaborative governance literature reviewed here, and Table 2 details the factors from the literature on collaboration that have been suggested to contribute to successful consensus-seeking partnerships. These outcomes and factors are presented as normative statements or testable propositions. In most cases, contradictory arguments evident in the literature are identified in the tables.

### ***2.6 Summary***

Effective governance is crucial for ensuring that water is managed wisely. This reflects the fact that many water problems are rooted in weak or ineffective governance processes. There has been increasing recognition in the environmental management literature that centralized decision-making strategies are inadequately equipped to appropriately manage water. As dissatisfaction with top-down decision-making and demand for public participation both increase, there has been extensive

devolution of water management to lower levels, coupled with an increase in collaborative approaches to water governance. Advisory groups and partnerships are now common in water governance. As collaborative approaches are increasingly prevalent, ensuring effective collaboration among stakeholders is necessary.

Collaboration can have many benefits, but it also presents challenges. Experience shows that collaborative processes can be more time-consuming and may be more likely to involve conflict. Decision-making in real-world collaborative governance processes typically is based on consensus. Many decisions in water governance have important consequences. Thus, arriving at a consensus in a collaborative setting is often difficult. While there have been studies from the collaborative governance literature detailing appropriate steps and strategies to increase the likelihood of success in consensus decision-making – including identifying the underlying values which determine stakeholders’ positions – the literature on the outcomes and recommended structures and processes associated with collaborative decision-making contains many contradictions. Thus, the assumptions upon which consensus-seeking partnerships are built may not be appropriate or realistic.

**Table 1: Criteria for Evaluating Outcomes of a Consensus-Seeking Partnership**

Outcome Parameter	Outcome sub-parameters as identified in the literature	
Fairness	<b>Argument #1:</b> Greater fairness is gained	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Playing field among participants is leveled (Davis 2008)</li> <li>• Encourages participants to work together as equals (Round Tables on the Environment and Economy in Canada 1993)</li> </ul>
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Greater fairness may not be gained	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power imbalances among participants (Ansell and Gash 2008; Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004; Van Veen, <i>et al.</i> 2003)</li> <li>• Process can be disrupted by uncooperative participants (Griffin 1999)</li> </ul>
Decision Quality	<b>Argument #1:</b> Better decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creative ideas and innovative strategies are produced (Innes and Booher 1999)</li> <li>• Individual ownership and commitment created (Schmoldt and Peterson 2000), and a higher likelihood of action is gained (Cormick, <i>et al.</i> 1996; Innes and Booher 1999)</li> <li>• Information is pooled, resulting in a better understanding of issues (Cormick, <i>et al.</i> 1996; Innes and Booher 1999)</li> </ul>
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Weak or unproductive decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preoccupation with achieving consensus, which may take away from decision-making itself (Coglianese 1999; Gregory, <i>et al.</i> 2001)</li> <li>• Occurrence of stalemate (Coglianese 1999)</li> <li>• Lowest common denominator decisions (Ansell and Gash 2008; Blomquist and Schlager 2005)</li> </ul>
Learning and change	<b>Argument:</b> Learning and change occurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning and changes in attitudes and behaviours in participants (Connick and Innes 2003)</li> <li>• Learning and change beyond original stakeholders (Connick and Innes 2003)</li> </ul>
Social Capital	<b>Argument:</b> Social capital can be built	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust is gained (Connick and Innes 2003; Innes and Booher 1999)</li> <li>• Positive relationships are built (Cormick, <i>et al.</i> 1996; Innes and Booher 1999)</li> </ul>
Resource Use	<b>Argument #1:</b> Resource requirements too large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long time commitment and non-productive decision-making (Kenney 2000; Wakeman III 1997)</li> <li>• Volunteer burn-out (Curtis, <i>et al.</i> 2002)</li> </ul>
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Process is worth the time or money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus may be worth the additional cost due to the increased speed of action on decisions (Irvin and Stansbury 2004)</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Criteria for Evaluating Factors Contributing to Successful Consensus-Seeking Partnerships**

<b>Partnership Design Component</b>	<b>Sub-Component</b>	<b>Factors contributing to success as identified in the literature</b>	
<b>Structure</b>	Membership	<b>Argument #1:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All relevant stakeholders should be represented (Davis 2008; Innes and Booher 1999; Robson and Kant 2007)</li> <li>Processes should be inclusive (Cormick, <i>et al.</i> 1996)</li> </ul>
		<b>Argument #2:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Membership should be small (diverse membership may create problems) (Leach and Pelkey 2001)</li> <li>Membership should be restricted to those in the affected community (Young 2002)</li> </ul>
	Government involvement	<b>Argument #1:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should be independent of government (Davis 2008)</li> </ul>
		<b>Argument #2:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should have a mix of private citizens and public representatives (Moore and Koontz 2003)</li> </ul>
	Facilitation	<b>Argument #1:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should have disinterested, unpaid facilitator (Leach and Sabatier 2003)</li> </ul>
		<b>Argument #2:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should have professional facilitation (Davis 2008)</li> </ul>
	Level of flexibility	<b>Argument #1:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should be self-organizing; participants should be allowed to design objectives, rules, etc. (Cormick, <i>et al.</i> 1996; Innes and Booher 1999)</li> </ul>
		<b>Argument #2:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should have defined objectives (too much flexibility may lead to frustration) (Bonnell and Koontz 2007)</li> </ul>
	Authority	<b>Argument #1:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal mechanism for enforcing decisions should be in place (Brandes, <i>et al.</i> 2005; Hooper, <i>et al.</i> 1999)</li> </ul>
		<b>Argument #2:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should be advisory, as moral authority can be sufficient (Imperial and Hennessey 2000; Margerum 1999)</li> </ul>

	Information	<b>Argument:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should have access to high quality information</li> <li>• Should agree on what information will be used as basis for decisions (Bentrup 2001; Innes 1998)</li> </ul>
	Resources	<b>Argument:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership should have adequate funding (Leach and Pelkey 2001)</li> </ul>
<b>Process</b>	Consensus definition	<b>Argument #1:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision should require 100% agreement (Schuett, <i>et al.</i> 2001)</li> <li>• No minority reports should be used (SPIDR 1997)</li> </ul>
		<b>Argument #2:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minority reports should be used when 100% agreement cannot be found (Pratkanis and Turner 1996)</li> </ul>
	Commitment	<b>Argument:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants should be committed and engaged in the process (Gunton, <i>et al.</i> 2007; Leach and Pelkey 2001)</li> <li>• Government should support the partnership (Davis 2008; Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004; Robson and Kant 2007)</li> </ul>
	Equity	<b>Argument:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There should be equal opportunity for all participants in process (Cormick, <i>et al.</i> 1996; Davis 2008)</li> </ul>

## ***CHAPTER THREE***

### ***METHODOLOGY***

The overall purpose of this research is to evaluate consensus as a decision-making objective in collaborative advisory groups in water governance. Consensus-based approaches are common in multi-stakeholder collaborations (Innes and Booher 1999), and while many studies explore collaborative natural resource management organizations, research that specifically examines decision-making in consensus-seeking partnerships in water governance is less common. While proponents of consensus decision-making cite greater fairness and higher quality decision making as outcomes of the process (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Innes and Booher 1999), some researchers argue that entrenched inequities may prevent equitable decision-making (Sherwill, *et al.* 2007), while others warn of lowest common denominator outcomes and decision stalemate (Ansell and Gash 2008; Blomquist and Schlager 2005). The inconsistencies in the literature on consensus as an objective of the decision-making process in partnerships provides a research opportunity that will be explored in this thesis. Hence, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of governance literature by investigating a case in which efforts are being made to move towards greater collaboration using consensus-seeking partnerships.

#### ***3.1 Research Approach***

To achieve the three objectives listed in Section 1.2, an in-depth analysis is required to allow for sufficient understanding of detail and context. Qualitative methods – specifically the case study approach – have been chosen for this study. Mason (2002)

explains that qualitative methods “celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity” (Mason 2002, 1). A case study approach requires that the researcher focus his or her study on understanding a specific setting (Eisenhardt 1989), and a case study “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individual life cycles, small group behavior, organizational and managerial processes” (Yin 2008, 4). Conley and Moote (2003) explain that in collaborative natural resource management, process evaluation requires that researchers become exceptionally familiar with the details of the collaborative organization, indicating that case study research is an appropriate strategy for exploring collaborative decision-making. However, due to the level of depth required in case study analysis, the generalizability of the results is limited (Conley and Moote 2003). It is for this reason that the recommendations generated in this study may only be applicable to consensus-seeking partnerships.

Although the case study is a common approach to investigating issues in water governance, some researchers have suggested that case study methods are not ideal for studies of collaborative water management. For instance, Sabatier, *et al.* (2005) argue that studies of one or two cases on collaborative water processes rarely make reference to previous literature, and often rely on subjective methods of data acquisition (Sabatier, *et al.* 2005). Sabatier *et al.* (2005) argue that such studies often have a sampling bias in which only the views of partnership coordinators are included (who are more likely to have a positive view of the partnership), and that only 25% of the studies on collaborative partnerships make reference to a body of literature.

These concerns are legitimate. However, steps were taken in this research to address these concerns. Specifically, partnership members, past participants and knowledgeable outsiders were selected to participate, and the thesis makes frequent reference to arguments from previous studies in collaborative water governance. Furthermore, due to the level of detail required to sufficiently investigate decision-making, a case study approach was needed to achieve this study's objectives, and steps were taken to address the concerns raised by some researchers about this approach to studying collaborative water management.

This case study seeks to evaluate consensus as a decision-making objective in consensus-seeking partnerships by verifying whether the outcomes and recommended structure and process as described in the collaborative environmental governance literature reviewed in the thesis are supported by empirical evidence from the case study. It seeks to provide additional complexity to our understanding of collaborative decision-making.

### ***3.2 Case Study Selection***

Stake (1995) explains that case study selection can be either intrinsic or instrumental. An intrinsic case study is chosen when the researcher needs to explore a particular case; for instance, if he or she is required to complete a program evaluation (Stake 1995). In contrast, an instrumental case study is completed when the researcher has chosen to explore a research question or wishes to gain insight into a particular phenomenon (Stake 1995). In this case, an instrumental case study was completed, as

the case was chosen to gain a greater understanding of consensus-seeking partnerships in water governance.

Southern Alberta was chosen as the location for the study based on three criteria, all of which are necessary for achieving this study's intended objectives. The criteria are:

1. The existence of collaborative partnerships involved in the water governance landscape.
2. The use of consensus as the objective of the decision-making process.
3. Partnerships' decisions are used to provide advice to policy makers.

The province of Alberta implemented a new water management strategy in 2003, entitled *Water for Life*. The strategy is highly collaborative and involves a number of partnerships, making Alberta an appropriate case study location for this research. *Water for Life* was designed through extensive public consultation between November 2001 and June 2002 (Alberta Environment 2003), which provided the provincial government with a general set of principles to be incorporated into the strategy. The strategy emphasizes that stakeholders should participate in developing solutions to water-related issues (Alberta Water Council 2007b), and hence, partnerships have been developed at the provincial, regional, and local levels (Alberta Environment 2003). These multi-level partnerships are designed to promote collaboration in decision-making, as well as to facilitate implementation and monitoring of the various water management programs (Alberta Environment 2003).

Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils (WPACs) are partners at the regional level. These councils provide recommendations on watershed management to water and land use to policy-makers, create forums for stakeholder discussion and information presentation, and investigate issues at the watershed level (Alberta Environment 2005). The Alberta Water Council, a collaborative partnership comprised of governments, industry representatives and non-governmental organizations, is the province's partner at the provincial level. The Alberta Water Council (AWC) is tasked with implementing, monitoring, and providing on-going advice to the Government of Alberta in order to ensure that goals and objectives of the *Water for Life* strategy are being addressed (Alberta Environment 2005). The *Water for Life* framework encourages that consensus decision-making is used in all partnerships, and emphasizes its importance in WPACs and in the AWC (Alberta Environment 2005).

The *Water for Life* partnerships, specifically the WPACs and the AWC, are appropriate collaborative partnerships through which to examine consensus decision-making. Individuals from both types of partnerships were sought in the data collection process. The Bow River Basin Council is the most established Watershed Planning and Advisory Council, and, at the time of study design, the only WPAC to have published a Watershed Management Plan. Hence, the majority of WPAC representation in this study was chosen from the Bow River Basin Council, in order to ensure the greatest level of experience and understanding of the WPAC partnership.

### ***3.3 Data Collection***

Triangulation of information is an important component of case study research, as it increases the validity of the study (Creswell 1998). Therefore, three data sources were used in this study: key informant interviews, documents, and personal observations. Personal interviews were used to provide a rich and contextual understanding of the partnership experience. A document review was completed to serve as a verification of the information obtained during the key informant interviews and method of gaining a greater contextual understanding. Further context and empirical evidence were provided by personal observations.

#### **3.3.1 Key Informant Interviews**

Interviews are useful in evaluating processes, as the level of detail that can be extracted is far greater than what is possible with a survey (Innes and Booher 1999). Twenty-six semi-structured interviews were completed with key informants involved with or knowledgeable about the Bow River Basin Council, other WPACs in Southern Alberta, or the Alberta Water Council – 23 in person and 3 by phone. One interviewee declined to be audio-recorded, and one interview involved two interviewees.

A purposeful sampling strategy was used, whereby participants were recruited based on their knowledge and/or involvement in the water partnerships. The Bow River Basin Council Board of Directors, as published in the publically-available *Bow Basin Watershed Management Plan Phase 1: Water Quality* (Bow River Basin Council 2008), and the Alberta Water Council membership list, as published on its website, served as initial sources of contacts. Approximately half of interviews were

confirmed in advance of field work; additionally, a number of participants recommended participants during their interview. Most interviews were conducted in Calgary, although trips were made to other areas when necessary, including Edmonton and Lethbridge. Table 3 characterizes the involvement of the key informants. Overlap may exist as a number of participants were involved with, for instance, both the BRBC and the AWC.

**Table 3: Involvement of Key Informants**

<b>Key Informants</b>	<b>BRBC</b>	<b>Other WPAC</b>	<b>AWC</b>	<b>Other</b>
Provincial Government	1	2	2	4
Municipal Government	0	0	1	0
Environmental	3	1	3	2
Licensees	2	0	2	0
Industrial	4	0	3	0
Academic	0	1	0	1
General Public	2	0	1	0

Other = Key informant is not directly involved with either a WPAC or the AWC, but is familiar with the partnership model in Alberta and/or the WPAC or AWC experience.

Most interviews were 45 minutes to an hour in length, although a small number of interviews were well over an hour. The maximum interview length was two hours and six minutes. Interviews followed a semi-structured format: the questions were open-ended, encouraging the key informant to discuss the topics at length (Innes and Booher 1999). This structure allows flexibility and encourages interviewees to elaborate on details that would not be possible with a questionnaire (Stake 1995).

The questions asked were based on an interview guide developed to explore the research objectives, based on the literature presented in Chapter Two. Participants' views of the consensus process, its outcomes and the factors contributing to its success or failure were explored during the interviews, as well as impressions of the partnership model more generally in Southern Alberta. Some questions asked of participants related directly to the research objectives (e.g., "What kinds of outcomes are reasonable to expect from consensus-based decision-making processes? What kinds of outcomes are not reasonable to expect?"). Other questions were asked to explore participants' perceptions of the consensus-seeking partnership model in a broader sense and to encourage wide-ranging discussion on the topic ("e.g., "Do you feel that the partnership model is an effective model for governance? How could the partnership model become more effective?"). Participants' perceptions are a key tool in designing processes that are acceptable to participants (Dalton 2006). A number of interview guides were created to ensure that the questions asked were specific to the informant's expertise. These guides are presented in Appendix A.

The University of Waterloo's Office of Research Ethics provided permission to contact participants. Once the study was approved by the Office of Research Ethics, a recruitment letter was sent to potential participants. Confirmed participants were sent further information, detailing the research purpose, as well as their rights as a participant and information on how to withdraw or obtain further information. Written consent, including consent to be audio-recorded, was obtained prior to beginning each interview.

### **3.3.2 Document Analysis**

A review of documents is important to add context and to support (or refute) information obtained during the key informant interviews. Forty-eight documents were reviewed, including government documents, non-governmental reports, newsletters, meeting minutes, annual reports and press releases (see Appendix B). Most documents are available online, although some were obtained from interviewees during the data collection period.

### **3.3.3 Personal Observations**

Personal observations were also made during the data collection period, and recorded in a notebook as well as through digital photographs. These include observations made while traveling in Alberta, which included visits in Calgary, Strathmore, Canmore, Banff National Park, Drumheller, Red Deer, Edmonton, and Lethbridge. Furthermore, notes were taken while attending the Bow River Basin Council Annual Forum on June 11, 2009, and during a Waterlution residential workshop entitled “Where we’ve been and where we’re going: Water and Agriculture in Southern Alberta” in Waterton Lakes National Park from June 19-21, 2009. This workshop included guided ranch tours and featured presentation by representatives of Cows & Fish, the Southwestern Alberta Conservation Partnership, Alberta Environment, the Oldman Watershed Council, and Blood Tribe Land Management. These experiences were instrumental in providing additional insight into the landscape of water governance in Alberta.

### *3.4 Data Analysis*

The analysis of the data obtained during the data collection period was guided by the evaluative framework presented in Chapter Two. This framework was created using literature on consensus decision-making processes in environmental settings, and guided the evaluation of decision-making in the context of consensus-seeking partnerships. Specifically, this framework provided the foundation for an evaluation of the extent to which the outcomes of consensus-based processes described in the literature and the factors that contribute to successful consensus-seeking partnerships are verified by a case study.

The literature on the use of consensus decision-making in collaborative partnerships and the evaluative framework presented in Chapter Two established key research questions that formed the basis of an evaluation of consensus as a decision-making objective. These research questions are as follows:

1. To what extent are the outcomes of consensus as described in the literature encouraging or opposing the use of consensus as an objective of the decision-making process in collaborative partnerships supported by a case study in Southern Alberta?
2. To what extent are the criteria as described in the literature outlining the necessary factors for producing successful consensus-seeking partnerships supported by a case study in Southern Alberta?

The data analysis was guided by the evaluative framework and the research questions described above. Stake (1995) explains that analysis of case studies can be made through direct interpretation or an aggregation of instances. Direct

interpretation is used in intrinsic case studies, when the time for a full analysis of categorized data is limited. However, when a formal analysis is needed, the researcher looks for “an aggregation of instances until something can be said about them” (Stake 1995, 74). This approach, which was used in this study, requires the researcher to seek “a collection of instances from the data, hoping that issue-relevant meanings will emerge” (Creswell 1998, 154). Directed content analysis was used to identify recurring instances in the data.

Content analysis is a method of interpreting the context of text through a systematic coding process of identifying patterns (Berg 2007). The process allows for large amounts of text to be categorized into categories that represent similar meanings (Weber 1990). Directed content analysis differs from traditional content analysis in that a pre-existing coding framework exists, although flexibility exists for new themes to emerge. This strategy is most appropriate when a phenomenon exists that could benefit from further research. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), “the goal of a directed approach to content analysis is to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1281).

In a directed content analysis, passages are highlighted and coded into pre-existing categories, in this case, determined by the evaluative framework. Whenever a collection of instances emerges that cannot be categorized into the existing framework, the researcher will determine if a new category should be created, or a sub-category of an existing code. This is consistent with coding procedures for directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

Hence, in this analysis, the transcribed interview data, documents, and personal observations were coded according to the existing evaluative framework, using NVivo 8 software. For instance, when a statement was made in an interview that is relevant to one of the categories established in the evaluative framework, it was highlighted and categorized. NVivo 8 allowed for a systematic and organized coding process, in which the codes for each category could be easily accessed and reviewed for accuracy. Research question 1 was coded according to the framework in Table 1 while research question 2 was coded according to the framework in Table 2. The aggregation of codes provided the basis for evaluation, from which minimal, moderate, or strong evidence of the arguments described in the evaluative framework were made; the basis for characterizing evidence as minimal, moderate or strong is described below. This is consistent with results of a directed content analysis, in which supporting or non-supporting evidence of existing theory is found (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Table 4 provides an example of this analytical process in the evaluation of the outcome fairness.

**Table 4: Example Analysis for *Fairness* as an Outcome of Consensus-Seeking Partnerships**

<b>Outcome Parameter: Fairness</b>		
<b>Outcome Sub-parameters</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>	<b>Results</b>
Argument #1: Playing field among participants is leveled (Davis 2008)	<b>Interviews:</b> Issues related to leveling the playing field and the fairness of the consensus groups were mentioned in 9 interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 participants noted that using consensus as a decision-making process in advisory groups avoids winners and losers by making all participants equals, and the Alberta Water Council has indicated that equality among participants is crucial.</li> <li>• 7 participants noted that there are power or resource imbalances which can persist among participants, some of which addressed the challenge of ensuring that all participants have the same level of knowledge. One participant noted that “the way things are in Alberta is if you’re with oil and gas or if you’re with irrigation, you have a trump card”.</li> </ul> <p><b>Conclusion:</b> Minimal evidence that the playing field among participants was leveled. Moderate evidence that imbalances may exist among participants.</p>
Argument #2: Power imbalances among participants (Ansell and Gash 2008; Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004; Van Veen, <i>et al.</i> 2003)	<b>Documents:</b> The Alberta Water Council notes that fairness among participants is a guiding philosophy; the BRBC indicates that some participants felt their views weren’t addressed.	
	<b>Personal observations:</b> A sense of frustration regarding the inclusion of all views in discussion on the part of some smaller groups was observed.	
Argument #1: Participants are encouraged to work together as equals (Round Tables on the Environment and Economy in Canada 1993)	<b>Interviews:</b> Issues related to participants working together as equals were mentioned in 15 interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9 participants noted that using a consensus process promotes working together and the idea of working towards a greater good.</li> <li>• 5 interviewees noted that some participants believe that they can get more out of the process by not cooperating and using the process to filibuster change. 2 interviewees also noted that participants never let go of vested interests.</li> </ul> <p><b>Conclusion:</b> Minimal evidence that all participants are encouraged to work together as equals.</p>
Argument #2: Uncooperative participants can disrupt the process (Griffin 1999)	<b>Documents:</b> Minority reports were produced by two parties who would not sign off on the final report in an AWC working group.	
	<b>Personal observations:</b> A sense from some participants that particular groups are more important.	
<b>Overall conclusion:</b> Minimal evidence to suggest that increased fairness necessarily results from using a consensus-based process in collaborative advisory groups.		

A similar analytical process was completed to answer each of the research questions that emerged from the evaluative framework. To answer research question 1, conclusions were made evaluating the level of ‘minimal/moderate/strong’ evidence for each of the outcomes described in the evaluative framework (Table 1). To answer research question 2, conclusions were made evaluating the level of ‘minimal/moderate/strong’ support for the importance of each of the factors necessary for the success of consensus-seeking partnerships, as described in Table 2.

The strength of the evidence, i.e. the designation of ‘minimal/moderate/strong’, was determined initially by the number of participants expressing a view that supports the argument in question, and the relative weight of the participants expressing a contradictory view. The evidence was deemed to be

- ‘minimal’ if little or no data could be found from the interviews to support an argument, or if greater or similar weight was found to support a refuting argument,
- ‘moderate’ if some data was found from the interviews to support an argument, with little refuting data, or if significant data was found to support an argument, with some refuting data,
- ‘strong’ if significant data was found to support an argument, with little or no refuting data.

Evidence from the documents and personal observations was used to strengthen a designation, determined initially by the interview data, or to reduce the designation if contradictory evidence was found from these sources. Hence, while the level of

evidence was determined primarily by the number of participants supporting or refuting the argument in question, strict designations based on numbers were avoided. This allowed a designation of ‘minimal’, ‘moderate’ or ‘strong’ to be based loosely on the number of participants who supported that view and the relative number of participants who opposed it. At the same time, it allowed for flexibility to take into account additional considerations, such as the strength of an argument presented by a particular participant, a participant’s unique point of view, and evidence provided by documents and personal observations.

Determining the strength of the evidence requires a certain amount of intuition and judgment from the researcher; comparing numbers of participants who agreed with each argument does not necessarily capture the strength of the evidence. However, the number of participants supporting and refuting each argument is detailed in Chapter Five, and quotations from the interviews and documents are used where appropriate. Furthermore, summary tables are provided at the end of each results section, and samples will be provided on how the designation of ‘minimal’, ‘moderate’ or ‘strong’ was determined. This allows the reader to understand to the greatest extent possible how the strength of the evidence was determined and permits the reader to draw his or her own conclusions based on the data, thereby increasing confidence of the results. The results produced by this data analysis are presented in Chapter Five.

### *3.5 Data Verification*

Data verification is a crucial component of all qualitative research, particularly the case study (Creswell 1998; Stake 1995). Stake (1995) details two methods of increasing the validity of case study research: triangulation and member checking. Both were used in this study. In triangulation, the researcher seeks to verify the data by searching for convergence of information (Creswell 1998). Data source triangulation was recommended by Denzin (2009) as a process whereby the researcher uses multiple data sources. As highlighted in Section 3.3, three data sources were used in this study: key informant interviews, documents, and personal observations.

In member checking, a data verification process suggested by Stake (1995), the researcher allows participants to examine the notes or transcripts in which their words are captured. In this study, completed interview transcripts were sent to participants prior to data analysis, and participants were encouraged to verify the transcription and provide feedback. When comments were received, appropriate changes were made. This is consistent with the procedures of member checking (Stake 1995).

Additional steps were also taken to ensure coding reliability. Codes and categories were continually checked and reviewed for accuracy throughout the data analysis. Furthermore, raw coding data was provided to two research supervisors to be reviewed for accuracy and consistency. These steps, as well as data source triangulation and member checking, serve to increase the validity of this study's findings.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**CASE STUDY CONTEXT**

This chapter provides contextual information of the case study location. Three major elements are discussed: the socio-economic, political and environmental context of Alberta, the provincial legislative and policy context, and Alberta's *Water for Life* strategy. Familiarity with place-specific information is crucial for gaining a broad understanding of the province and necessary for conducting an evaluation of decision-making in Albertan water partnerships. Each contextual element is described in detail.

***4.1 Socio-Economic, Political and Environmental Context***

**4.1.1 Socio-economic Context**

The socio-economic context of Alberta is shifting. Alberta is an increasingly urban province, with over 82% of the population living in urban centres by 2006 (Statistics Canada 2008). As of October 2009, Alberta's population was 3,703,979 people, which represents a 2.26% increase between October 1, 2008 and October 1, 2009. This population growth is the highest of any Canadian province (Alberta Finance and Enterprise 2009b).

The large increase in population has been associated with the growth in the oil industry, with the highest net interprovincial migrant numbers occurring in 2006, when 46,000 people came to Alberta from other regions of Canada (Alberta Finance and Enterprise 2009a). Although the global economic downturn of 2008 resulted in a contraction of Alberta's economy by 0.2% during that year, the province boasts an

average annual GDP growth of 3.8% per year during the last five years, higher than any other Canadian province (Government of Alberta 2009b).

Approximately one in every 13 jobs in Alberta is directly related to energy (Government of Alberta 2010b); Alberta considers itself to be Canada's energy province (Government of Alberta 2010a). The energy sector is crucial to Alberta's economy, representing 27.2% of the province's \$258.9 billion GDP in 2008. Crude petroleum represents nearly half of the value of Alberta's total exports, while an additional 30% consists of gas and gas liquid exports. Combined, these two energy exports were worth over \$92 billion in 2008 (Government of Alberta 2009b).

While the agricultural sector represented only 1.9% of Alberta's GDP in 2008, agriculture is highly valued in the province, and accounted for 21.9% of the value of the Canadian agricultural industry in that year (Government of Alberta 2009b). Over 30% of the province's land – approximately 51 million acres – is used for crop and livestock production (Government of Alberta 2009b), 1.63 million of which are irrigated (Government of Alberta 2010d).

#### **4.1.2 Political Context**

Modern provincial politics in Alberta have been dominated by the right-of-centre Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta, which has had a majority government in the province since 1971. The dominance of the right of centre ideology in Alberta is mimicked in federal politics, where the Conservative Party of Canada won 27 out of 28 possible Parliament seats from Alberta in the 2008 General Election (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2008). Although attention is currently being paid to the

recently emerged Wildrose Alliance provincial party, the dominance of centre-right ideology remains in the province.

#### **4.1.3 Environmental Context**

The geography of Alberta is diverse, and the province's landscape consists of mountains, foothills, plains, wetlands and badlands. The Rocky Mountains are often associated with Alberta, and attract tourists from all over the world (Government of Alberta 2010c). Alberta has seven main river basins: Milk, South Saskatchewan, North Saskatchewan, Beaver, Athabasca, Peace/Slave, and Hay. The South Saskatchewan basin originates from the Rocky Mountains and is usually split into four sub-basins – the Oldman, the Bow, the Red Deer, and the South Saskatchewan sub-basin. The South Saskatchewan River Basin contains the urban centres of Calgary, Lethbridge, Red Deer and Medicine Hat (Alberta Environment 2010a).

The Bow River Basin is the most densely populated basin in Alberta, with 1,009,865 residents (2001 data), and an average annual discharge in the basin of 9,280,000 dam<sup>3</sup> (Water Matters 2010b). In contrast, the Athabasca River Basin is home to approximately 154,000 residents, with a mean annual discharge of 20,860,000 dam<sup>3</sup> (Water Matters 2010a), a discharge level that is almost fifteen times higher, per resident, than that of the Bow River Basin. Hence, while the volume of water originating from snowmelt and precipitation in the Rocky Mountains is significant, the discharge is unevenly distributed throughout the province, with some of the largest flows running through the least densely populated regions. This unevenness has resulted in water scarcity concerns, particularly in the south where an approved water management plan for the South Saskatchewan River Basin resulted

in the closure of the basin to new allocations until the province decides how to distribute remaining unallocated resources (Alberta Environment 2007a).

#### ***4.2 Legislative and Policy Context***

Legislation pertinent to water management in Alberta dates to the 19th century. In order to attract settlers to the prairies after the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Canadian federal government passed the *Northwest Irrigation Act* in 1894, transferring ownership of water to the Dominion of Canada (Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development 2002). This provided the legislative context for the first-in-time, first-in-right (FITFIR) priority allocation system, whereby water is allocated in priority according to the seniority of licenses, which is determined by the date the license is issued (Alberta Environment 2010b). The Province of Alberta passed the *Irrigation Districts Act* in 1915 so that land-owners could organize into local cooperatives to provide water for irrigation (Bow River Basin Council 2002a).

In 1930, the Government of Canada transferred ownership of water to the Province of Alberta through the *Natural Resource Transfer Act*. Following this, Alberta passed the *Water Resources Act* in 1931, which maintained the prior allocation system established under the Northwest Irrigation Act of 1894. Alberta's *Water Resources Act* was replaced in 1999 by the *Water Act*, which regulates water allocation and other water-related matters in the province (Bow River Basin Council 2002a). The Minister of Environment is responsible for implementation of the *Water Act*. Sections 7 and 9 of the *Water Act* provide guidelines for management plans developed by parties outside Alberta Environment, including non-governmental

organizations (Government of Alberta 2009c). The FITFIR allocation system was maintained in the *Water Act*, although it is now possible to apply for a transfer of a water license from one owner to another and from one parcel of land to another, if such transfers are provided for in an approved water management plan. Importantly, *Water for Life* partnerships, such as Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils, are not mentioned in the *Water Act*. Instead, these exist under provincial policy (see Section 4.3).

The Irrigation District Act, passed in 2000, provides information on governance for the thirteen irrigation districts in the province (Government of Alberta 2000). The management of water resources in Alberta will also be influenced by the newly-created *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* (ALSA), passed in 2009. The Act creates the legal authority to implement the Land-use Framework, through which seven planning regions have been established. Regional plans developed under the Act by Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) will become provincial policy, pending government approval, and will hold regulatory authority (Government of Alberta 2009a). It is not clear how the planning conducted by the province's Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils (WPACs) will relate to that of RACs. The *Water Act* was amended in 2009 to include a provision that the Minister or Director must act in accordance with any applicable ALSA regional plans (Government of Alberta 2009c).

### ***4.3 Water for Life***

In 2003 the Province of Alberta released *Water for Life*, the provincial government's water management strategy. The plan was developed in response to concerns for the future of the resource in Alberta related to increasing demand for water from population growth, agricultural and industrial uses combined with fluctuating and uncertain supply (Alberta Environment 2003). *Water for Life* was designed through extensive public consultation between November 2001 and June 2002 (Alberta Environment 2003). Thus, it provided the provincial government with a general set of principles to be incorporated into plans. The collaborative nature of the strategy is evident in the goals of the *Water for Life* strategy, the recommended scale of management, and the emphasis on stakeholder involvement.

*Water for Life's* three main objectives are ensuring safe drinking water, healthy aquatic ecosystems, and sufficient water supplies for the economy (Alberta Environment 2003). The province emphasizes that water is best managed at the level of watersheds, and that management activities must integrate the management of water supply, use, and quality (Alberta Environment 2005). Moreover, the Government of Alberta recognizes that all Albertans have a stake in water, and thus the strategy emphasizes that all stakeholders should participate in developing solutions to water-related issues (Alberta Environment 2003; Alberta Water Council 2007b).

To enable participation, partnerships have been developed at the provincial, regional, and local levels (Alberta Environment 2003). These multi-level partnerships are designed to promote collaboration in decision-making, as well as to

facilitate the implementation and monitoring of the various water management programs (Alberta Environment 2003).

- Locally, volunteer-based organizations – *Watershed Stewardship Groups* – promote watershed stewardship at the local level, provide information and local knowledge, and raise awareness (Alberta Environment 2005).
- *Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils* (WPACs) are partners at the regional level, and provide recommendations to policy-makers on appropriate actions in the watershed, create forums for stakeholder discussion and information presentation, and investigate issues at the watershed level (Alberta Environment 2005).
- The *Alberta Water Council* (AWC) is the province’s partner at the provincial level, and is a multi-stakeholder group comprised of governments, industry, and non-government organizations. The Alberta Water Council is tasked with implementing, monitoring, and providing on-going advice to the Government of Alberta in order to ensure that goals and objectives of the *Water for Life* strategy are being addressed (Alberta Environment 2005).

WPACs and the AWC are described in more detail in Section 4.3.1 and 4.3.2.

*Water for Life* encourages consensus decision-making in all partnerships, but places particular emphasis on the need for consensus in the context of Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils and the Alberta Water Council (Alberta Environment 2005). In order to receive support from the Government of Alberta, the use of consensus decision-making in Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils is

required (Alberta Environment 2005). The emphasis on consensus decision-making in Alberta's *Water for Life* partnerships demonstrates their appropriateness as a focus for evaluating the role of consensus in collaborative decision-making.

#### **4.3.1 Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils**

According to Alberta Environment (2003), Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils (WPACs) were established to involve community members and other stakeholders in the management of the water in their basin. WPACs are multi-stakeholder organizations tasked with developing reports on the state of their watershed, followed by a detailed watershed management plan. Through developing watershed management plans, WPACs are expected to provide guidance on water management to local and provincial governments, as well as other decision-makers (Alberta Environment 2003). Although some policy-makers may be directly involved with the creation of a watershed management plan (for instance, if decision-makers from municipal government are members of the WPAC), the recommendations are strictly advisory and participants are under no obligation to act on them. Furthermore, the watershed management plans are used to provide advice to decision-makers who are not directly involved in the creation of the plan, such as policy-makers in the provincial government.

The creation of WPACs in the northern regions of the province is on-going. However, there are four established WPACs in the South Saskatchewan River Basin: the Red Deer River Watershed Alliance, the Bow River Basin Council, the Oldman Watershed Council, and the South East Alberta Watershed Alliance. Although members of any WPAC in Southern Alberta could provide insights on collaborative

consensus-based decision making, the long-established Bow River Basin Council (BRBC) was the only WPAC to have completed both a state of the watershed report, *Nurture, Renew, Protect: The 2005 Report on the State of the Basin*, and a watershed management plan, the *Bow Basin Watershed Management Plan Phase One – Water Quality* (Bow River Basin Council 2005; Bow River Basin Council 2008a) at the time of study design. The Red Deer Watershed Alliance released its State of the Watershed Report in April 2009, and intends to hold workshops to begin the process of developing a watershed management plan for the basin in 2010. The Oldman Watershed Council aims to complete the State of the Watershed Report for the Oldman River Basin in the spring of 2010, and the South East Alberta Watershed Alliance began developing its State of the Watershed Report in 2009.

Because they produced a State of the Basin Report in 2005 and a Watershed Management Plan in 2008, participants of the BRBC were in an optimal position to comment on the experience of decision-making in WPACs and their role in collaborative water governance in the province. Hence, the majority of WPAC participants contacted were associated or familiar with the case of the BRBC, although key members expected to provide additional insights from other WPACs in Southern Alberta were also recruited.

As described in Section 4.1.3, the Bow River Basin is a sub-basin of the South Saskatchewan River Basin (see Figure 1). The Bow River supplies the basin's drinking and domestic water, as well as all water used for electrical generation, industrial and agricultural use (Bow River Basin Council 2005). However, over

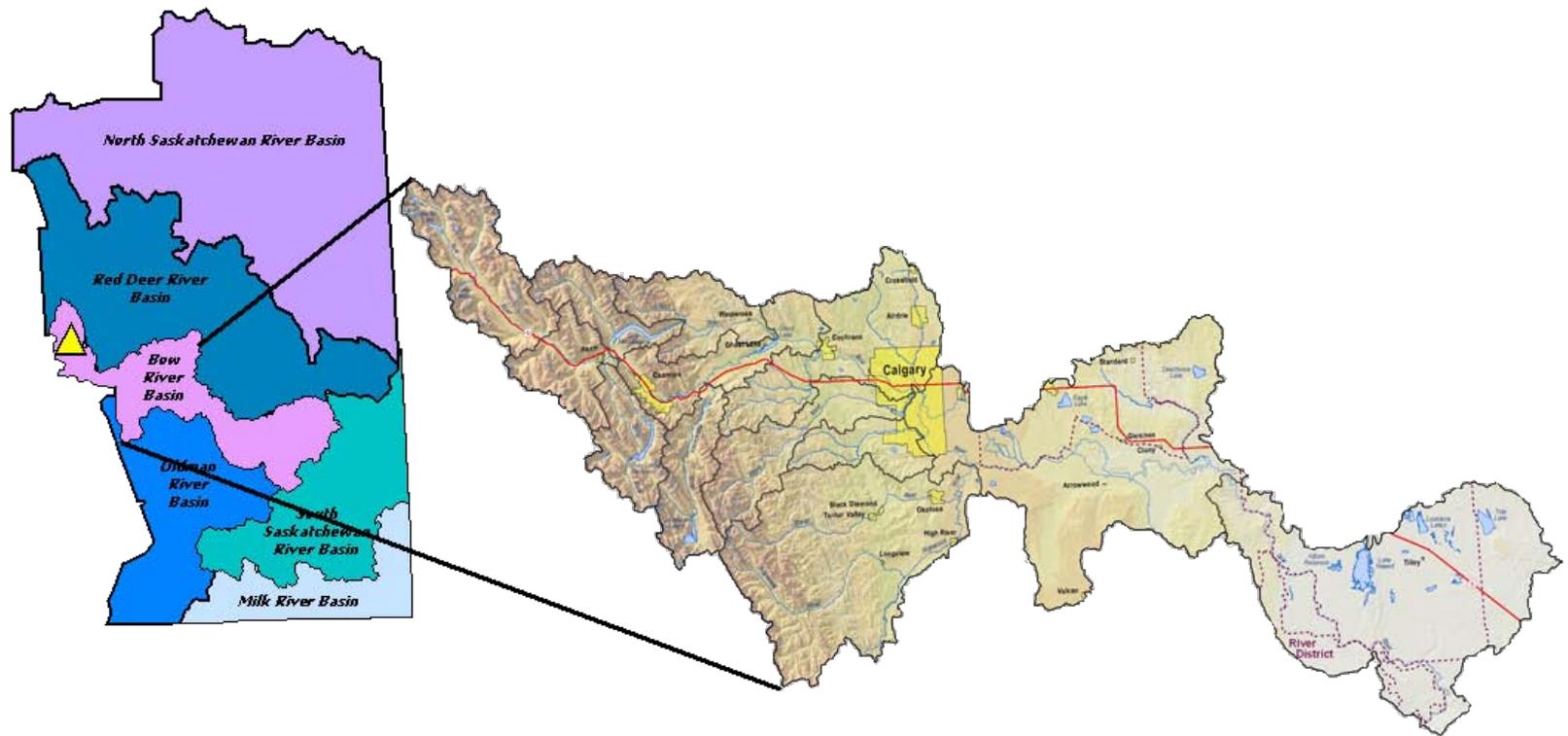
three-quarters of allocated water in the Bow are destined for irrigation (Bow River Basin Council 2005).

The BRBC, which existed prior to *Water for Life*, became the basin's Watershed Planning and Advisory Council in 2003. Formed in 1991, the Bow River Basin Water Quality Taskforce was established by the then Environment Minister Ralph Klein in response to heightened concerns about water quality (Bow River Basin Council 2003). The taskforce produced *Preserving our Lifeline: Report on the State of the Bow River* in 1994, a report that identified areas where improvement was needed (Bow River Basin Council 1994). Since 1991, the BRBC has undergone a number of organizational changes, including registering as a charitable organization (rather than a taskforce appointed by ministerial order).

Today, the BRBC is the province's designated Watershed Planning and Advisory Council for the Bow River Basin, and works with participants from local, provincial and federal governments, environmental groups, First Nation communities (the Stoney Nakoda, Tsuu T'ina, Eden Valley, and Siksika Nations all lie within the Bow River Basin), irrigation districts, industry, academia, and the general public (Bow River Basin Council 2008). The BRBC asserts its dedication to "conducting activities for the improvement and protection of the waters of the Bow River Basin" (Bow River Basin Council 2010, 1), and has produced a number of documents since the 1994 report on the state of the basin, including *The Guidebook to Water Management* (Bow River Basin Council 2002a), *Protecting Riparian Areas: Creative Approaches to Subdivision Development in the Bow Basin* (Bow River Basin Council 2002b), *Nurture, Renew, Protect: The 2005 Report on the State of the*

*Basin* (Bow River Basin Council 2005), and the *Bow Basin Watershed Management Plan Phase One: Water Quality* (Bow River Basin Council 2008).

Figure 1: The Bow River Basin (Alberta Sustainable Resource Development 2009; Bow River Basin Council 2009a)



### **4.3.2 Alberta Water Council**

In *Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability*, Alberta Environment (2003) pledged to create a provincial water council to oversee the implementation of *Water for Life* and to provide policy advice to government. In response to this, the Alberta Water Council (AWC) was established in 2004 and registered as a not-for-profit society in 2007 (Alberta Water Council 2010a).

The AWC is a multi-stakeholder partnership consisting of 24 representatives chosen by the member organizations of the Council. Member organizations belong to one of four categories: Industry, Non-Governmental Organization, Government (non-provincial), and Government of Alberta and Provincial Authorities. Usually a director and an alternate director are chosen to represent each member organization, and the Council meets quarterly (Alberta Water Council 2010b). Stakeholder support is available to members, in the form of honoraria and/or reimbursement of expenses (Alberta Water Council 2009a).

Since its establishment in 2004, the Alberta Water Council has completed a number of projects, including research reports, reports on the implementation progress of *Water for Life*, and project team reports. The Council provides policy advice on emerging water-related issues in the province, and project teams are often created in order to provide advice and recommendations on a specific topic. Most recently, project teams have released reports on *Provincial Ecological Criteria for Healthy Aquatic Ecosystems* (Alberta Water Council 2009d), *Recommendations for Improving Alberta's Water Allocation Transfer System* (Alberta Water Council

2009e), and *Recommended Projects to Advance the Goal of Healthy Aquatic Ecosystems* (Alberta Water Council 2009f).

In accordance with the recommendations in *Enabling Partnerships: A framework in support of Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability* (Alberta Environment 2005), the Alberta Water Council is a consensus-seeking partnership. Due to its decision-making, multi-stakeholder structure, and mandate to provide policy advice to decision-makers, members of the Alberta Water Council were also recruited in this study to comment on the use of collaborative consensus-based processes for providing advice to decision-makers.

## ***CHAPTER FIVE***

### ***RESULTS***

The results that emerged from the data analysis described in Chapter Three are presented in this chapter. The results are organized into three sections. Section 5.1 will detail the results which provided the basis for an evaluation of outcomes, addressing the arguments detailed in Table 1 and answering Research Question 1. Section 5.2 will detail the results which provided the basis for an evaluation of process and structure components, addressing the arguments detailed in Table 2 and answering Research Question 2. This will be followed by a brief summary of the results in Section 5.3. As described in Chapter Three, the evaluative conclusions were drawn based on data provided by key informant interviews, documents and personal observations, with emphasis placed on the information obtained in key informant interviews.

#### ***5.1 Outcomes of the Consensus Process***

Understanding the outcomes of consensus decision-making in partnerships is crucial for an evaluation of this model of collaborative governance. Hence, it is important to determine whether or not the potential outcomes of consensus as identified in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two actually emerge. Section 5.1 addresses Research Question 1: To what extent are the outcomes of consensus as described in the literature encouraging or opposing the use of consensus as an objective of the decision-making process in collaborative partnerships supported by a case study in Southern Alberta?

### **5.1.1 Fairness**

Increased fairness is an oft-cited outcome of consensus decision-making. Researchers encouraging the use of consensus decision-making in collaborative partnerships claim that adhering to consensus decision-making levels the playing field among participants; protects the voices of minorities; and encourages participants to work together as equals (Davis 2008; Round Tables on the Environment and Economy in Canada 1993). However, some researchers have indicated that this is not always the case because power imbalances can exist, and the process may be disrupted by uncooperative participants (Ansell and Gash 2008; Griffin 1999; Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004; Van Veen, *et al.* 2003).

Issues related to leveling the playing field and the fairness of the consensus groups were mentioned in nine interviews. Two people, both provincial government employees, believed that using consensus as a decision-making objective in partnerships avoids winners and losers and makes all participants equal. One explained “Basically what happens is once you go to a consensus-based decision-making, you have to give up power. Each participant is an equal”. Nonetheless, evidence from the interviews – most notably from those in the environmental sector – strongly suggests that in reality, using consensus decision-making does not necessarily level the playing field amongst participants.

Seven participants indicated that power, knowledge or resource imbalances can persist among participants and detract from fairness. Three participants indicated that some industries carry greater political weight or that the opinions of participants

representing certain groups are valued more highly than others. One participant from outside government who wished to remain anonymous noted the following:

It's clear to me that our perspective, our essential interest ... is not valued. I mean, if they had been, then specific proposals we've been bringing to the table would have been actually discussed and negotiated. ... But we've been advancing them, and it's almost like it goes in, and then [the group] comes up with something that has nothing to do with it. So they've ignored what we've had to say. Now if industry comes forward, which they have, with 'here's what we think', it gets discussed, negotiated, it gets battered around, people are trying to figure it out.

This power imbalance was also reflected in the Bow River Basin Council's 2007 Annual Report, where it was acknowledged, "some issues or concerns identified by BRBC members have been ignored in the decision-making process" (Bow River Basin Council 2007, 7). No other documentation was found that made reference to levels of fairness experienced by participants in the partnerships.

Five interviewees noted the challenge of ensuring that all the participants around the table have equal or sufficient knowledge. One participant explained that ensuring that "everyone has the same information, and everyone's ideas are reflective of the same common understanding... it just doesn't happen". Furthermore, three participants noted that there can be significant imbalances in access to resources, which can affect the fairness of the process. According to these interviewees, this particularly affects those in the environmental community. One participant noted, "Sometimes they will get an honorarium, but the honorarium is something like, \$100/day, maybe \$150/day... So it's uneven sometimes because you might have somebody from the oil and gas industry sitting next to you who's on a six-figure salary", indicating that those whose salary covers their participation in collaborative partnerships are better compensated than members of the environmental community

or others whose only compensation may be the daily honorarium and who may have to take a day of work to participate. Similarly, a second participant from the environmental community explained that

There's an inequity in that irrigation agriculture can hire an executive director and pay that guy very, very well, to make sure that nothing happens at these things, nothing untoward happens. Whereas you, you're volunteering for a small watershed basin council, you're struggling to read the Goddamn minutes from the last meeting in time for the next one. And they've got paid help, with sophisticated public relations advice that is designed to make sure that they make this thing work well. The oil industry does this all the time.

Some evidence existed to support the argument that the use of a consensus decision-making format encourages participants to work together as equals. Eight participants indicated that the process encourages them to consider the greater good and the idea of working together towards a common goal. One interviewee explained that "I think it makes us aware, as a committee, that ... we don't have the right to speak as an individual, we are to produce something that's good for the whole community. Whether it's in a small area of the city, or the city as a whole, we have to have a bigger picture. And I think consensus helps us keep that bigger picture in mind". Similarly, a second participant noted that "Nobody is in this for themselves; it's about the greater good".

However, six interview subjects noted that some participants in consensus-seeking partnerships may not be willing to cooperate or may believe that they can get more out of the process by not cooperating. For instance, one interviewee explained "there are certain organizations that have figured out that they can utilize this consensus-based process to get concessions from all the other people, but then at the end of the day ... just present their own point of view separately". Frustration at the

lack of cooperation on the part of some collaborative participants was also expressed by one interviewee while referring to participation on the Alberta Water Council Wetland Policy and Project Team, a committee formed by the Alberta Water Council to write recommendations for a new wetlands policy. The interviewee suggested that participants with nothing to gain from a new wetlands policy intentionally delayed the process:

And there's no doubt in my mind that the oil sands group, I mean, they have nothing to gain from the Wetlands Policy being adopted, the current status quo is very helpful to them... And so there were delays. ... And it was always done in a surreptitious manner, where it... there would be a report, and everybody would seem to agree, and then last minute someone would come in and say, 'Oh, we didn't agree to that'. And, you know, we knew they had agreed, because we were very excited we had finally reached agreement. It was like you took a step forward and three steps back, a step forward and three steps back.

This concern regarding coming to consensus on the Wetlands Policy and Project Team was also reflected in the final output: two letters of non-consensus were written, one by Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers and the other by the Alberta Chamber of Resources (Alberta Water Council 2008c). The evidence that some participants may not be willing to compromise provides minimal evidence to support the argument that all participants are encouraged to work together for the greater good.

In summary, there is minimal evidence to indicate that using consensus decision-making levels the playing field, as well as minimal evidence to indicate that it encourages all participants to work cooperatively. Although some participants did indicate they felt encouraged to work towards the greater good, many expressed frustration at uncooperative partnership members.

### 5.1.2 Decision Quality

A number of researchers have suggested that adhering to a consensus as a decision-making objective increases the quality of the final decision: creative ideas and innovative strategies are produced, and pooled information results in a better understanding of issues (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Innes and Booher 1999). As well, it has been cited that consensus creates a high level of individual ownership of the decision, resulting in increased commitment and likelihood of action on the decision (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Schmoldt and Peterson 2000). However, other researchers have indicated that consensus may reduce the quality of the decision through the creation of lowest common denominator decisions (Ansell and Gash 2008; Blomquist and Schlager 2005). Furthermore, stalemate can occur, along with a preoccupation with achieving consensus, which may create unproductive decision-making (Coglianese 1999; Gregory, *et al.* 2001).

Two documents from the Alberta Water Council suggested that a consensus process results in creative and innovative solutions, claiming “successful consensus decision-making often leads to more innovative solutions” (Alberta Water Council 2007b, 2), and “the multi-stakeholder, consensus based approach has yielded innovative and creative solutions to difficult problems” (Alberta Water Council 2008b, 5). However, only one interview subject volunteered that the use of consensus increased the level of innovation in decision-making or produced creative strategies, stating, “I honestly, truly, absolutely believe that you get more innovation – more innovative solutions to problems”.

Twelve participants indicated that the use of consensus created a greater understanding of issues through pooled information and the combined knowledge of all participants. One interviewee noted that a consensus-seeking partnership allows participants to “see other points of view, see the bigger picture, hopefully make a better informed decision”, and another stated that

By going through this and brining in these diverse talents and strengths, you end up with something that’s better than what you could have done if they’d have just let you do it by yourself without any limitations. It’s too complex; it requires too much knowledge in too many areas.

The ability of the consensus decision-making to produce a broad understanding of issues was also noted in a handout produced for workshops of the Alberta Water Council, which states, “the diversity of participants in a consensus process enables you to harness knowledge and resources not otherwise available. No one person or organization has a complete perspective or all the resources” (Alberta Water Council 2009b, 5).

In contrast, two participants expressed concern over the quality of the decisions produced by consensus or suggested that the process would result in lowest common denominator solutions, and five participants noted that consensus processes are at risk for stalemate when dealing with contentious issues. One such participant explained, “The solutions that come out are the lowest common denominator solutions”. However, five other participants explicitly indicated that they do not believe that the consensus process in collaborative partnerships produces lowest common-denominator solutions, a view that is also reflected in the handout for Alberta Water Council workshops, which states that “consensus is not compromise and does not cater to the lowest common denominator” (Alberta Water Council

2009b, 1). Moreover, two documents produced in consensus-seeking partnerships contained controversial recommendations which would not be considered lowest common denominator, such as the decision to close all sub-basins of the South Saskatchewan River Basin to further allocation requests in accordance with the recommendation in the approved Water Management Plan for the South Saskatchewan River Basin.

A large number of participants discussed the impact of consensus decision-making on creating buy-in. Thirteen interview subjects noted that the process creates commitment and individual ownership of the decisions, indicating that the solutions are more likely to result in action among the participants around the table. One participant explained that “If you don’t go through these consensus models, I don’t know how you’re going to get the ground level buy-in that you need to have from all the different stakeholders”, while another explained that Alberta Environment has created an internal Implementation Committee to work on recommendations from the Bow River Basin Council’s Watershed Management Plan, and that the City of Calgary passed a motion to create an implementation plan for all of their recommendations.

The view that buy-in and commitment to action is created was also indicated in three documents, including the Alberta Water Council 2008 Annual Report, which claimed that the consensus process resulted in broader support of the outcomes (Alberta Water Council 2008b), and in *“What We Heard”*: *Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops*, which states that “workshop participants seemed mostly confident that partners who have agreed to

participate in the watershed management planning process will, for the most part, willingly accept any obligation to support consensus WPAC decisions” (Alberta Water Council 2008a, 11).

However, seven participants indicated that with consensus-seeking partnerships, it can be a significant challenge for participants who need to gain approval from the stakeholders or organization they represent. For instance, one interviewee stated

[Participants] are not trained to get buy-in at their organization level. So that’s often where it starts to fail ... because they’ve been sitting and listening for all, everybody’s perspectives and points of view for sometimes years, and then they go back and in a five minute presentation to their council and their organization, they’re trying to get buy-in, and that’s hard.

These results indicate that while consensus may be successful in creating buy-in from the participants at the table, it may produce challenges for members who must gain approval from the organizations they represent.

In summary, moderate evidence from interviews, documents and personal observation was found to support the idea that consensus decision-making increases the quality of the decision itself, while minimal evidence exists to support the argument that consensus decision-making produces lowest common denominator solutions. The increase in decision quality is due primarily to consensus creating a broader understanding of issues, as opposed to fostering innovation, of which there is minimal evidence. Although strong evidence exists to support the argument that buy-in is created among participants, challenges may arise when participants representing organizations or agencies return to their stakeholders to gain approval.

### 5.1.3 Learning and Change

While evaluating the outcomes of decision quality and fairness relate specifically to the solutions realized through collaborative processes, the outcomes of a consensus process can be broader in context. Connick and Innes (2003) suggest that learning and changes in attitudes and behaviours amongst those in collaborative processes, as well as learning amongst external stakeholders, are outcomes of consensus-seeking partnerships. While no literature was found that specifically suggests that learning and change will not occur, Connick and Innes (2003) recommend investigating this topic when evaluating the outcomes of a collaborative water partnership.

When discussing learning and change with interview participants, it became clear that this outcome has been reflected in the experience of those involved with the Bow River Basin Council and the Alberta Water Council. Ten participants indicated that the partnership has allowed them to learn about issues beyond their expertise. For instance, one participant explained, “through talk and deliberation and negotiation, everyone learns something. So they’re in a different place than when they came in the door”, while another noted that “hopefully you’re able to both influence and be influenced by views that you, going in, may not think have any validity”. Furthermore, six of these ten participants specifically indicated that attitudes and opinions amongst participants can change. One such participant explained

[Consensus decision-making] helps people get past the... I call it that ‘false upfront persona’ ... It’s kind of false to assume that if you’re sitting across the table wearing a suit and representing business that you don’t care for the environment. And it’s also false to think that if you’re an environmentalist sitting across the table ... that [you] don’t care about the economy, for example. But when they start working together they find out

that they do; they're trying to come up with options that meet environmental needs, economic needs, and so on. So I find the consensus process is able to break down a lot of those barriers, misconceptions, myths about people.

Learning and change in participants was also evident in personal observation – most participants were broadly aware of issues related to water, even beyond the scope of their professional expertise.

No claims can be made about learning and change beyond participants of consensus-seeking partnerships because all those interviewed were in some way involved in the partnerships. Nonetheless, five interviewees indicated that the collaborative process has resulted in learning and change beyond those directly involved through raising the profile of water issues. One participant explained that collaborative participants “begin to talk to others, who talk to others, who talk to others... and that’s why in Alberta, you will see water being discussed on the news, in the newspaper, in all sorts of places regularly. Five years ago, that would not have happened”. The raised profile of water was also supported by one reviewed document, a report entitled *Alberta’s Water Management System Policy Issues and Gaps* (Alberta Water Council 2007a).

In summary, moderate evidence was found through the interviews, document review and personal observation to support the claim that learning and changes in attitudes or behaviours occurs due to consensus-seeking partnerships. A number of participants indicated that they learned, and some specified that their opinions and attitudes changed. While no claims of learning in people outside *Water for Life* partnerships can be made, moderate evidence was found to support the claim that the collaborative partnerships have raised the profile of water.

#### **5.1.4 Social Capital**

Similar to evaluating outcomes of learning and change, researchers posit that social capital can be gained through consensus-seeking partnerships. Some researchers suggest that trust is gained and that positive relationships are built (Connick and Innes 2003; Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Innes and Booher 1999).

Nine participants from this study indicated that relationships are formed amongst participants in the partnerships. One interviewee explained that “it works great and it builds relationships for after, you know, when you’re out in the other world”. Only one participant indicated that relationships may not be built, noting that sometimes people just don’t get along. Furthermore, six participants indicated that the process builds trust amongst participants. One participant explained that “trust was definitely gained”.

The increase in social capital was also supported by personal observation. Generally, participants spoke very highly of each other. Notably, one interviewee from a dominantly environmental background asked me to send his regards to another interviewee in another industry with whom he participated in a partnership. It was clear that many participants had developed positive and trusting relationships. In summary, moderate evidence was found through the interview process and personal observation to support the idea that social capital in the form of relationships and trust among participants is gained through the use of consensus-seeking partnerships.

#### **5.1.5 Resource Use**

The use of resources is an easily observable outcome of using consensus-seeking partnerships. What is interesting is the debate over whether the use of resources

through the process is worthwhile. Some argue that consensus decision-making requires an extremely long time commitment, which may result in non-productive decision-making or volunteer burn out (Curtis, *et al.* 2002; Kenney 2000; Wakeman III 1997). However, other researchers posit that consensus is worth the additional time and resources; Irvin and Stansbury (2004) suggest that a consensus decision-making is worth the additional cost due to the increased ease of gaining action on decisions.

The evidence from this case study indicates that significant resources are used in consensus-seeking partnerships: 16 participants explained that collaborative partnerships are time-consuming or costly. One interviewee explained, “The collaborative process is hard work. It takes a lot of time”, while another indicated that “it’s not a rapid-reaction process”. Requiring significant time for consensus was also supported by the report *Strengthening Partnerships: A Shared Governance Framework for Water for Life Collaborative Partnerships*, which explains that “Achieving consensus can be a challenging and lengthy process. *Water for Life* partnerships should understand that consensus is not likely achieved by gathering for a ‘show of hands’ on a single occasion” (Alberta Water Council 2008e, 12).

Of the 16 participants indicating that the time and resource requirements are significant, eight explicitly indicated that they felt that the time and resource use required in consensus-seeking partnerships was a weakness of the process. One participant explained, “The process is so long, that’s the weakness of it”. However, it is crucial to note that while the eight participants expressed frustration with the time

requirements, none indicated that they felt that consensus decision-making should not be used due to this weakness.

Volunteer burnout was cited as a possible outcome in eight interviews. One person from the BRBC explained, “There’s a limit to how much you can expect to get done from a voluntary workforce. And we’re pushing them pretty hard. And we’re going to hit the wall at some point”, while another noted that “the weakness is that the process takes so darn long that along the way people burn out and lose interest”. Volunteer burnout was also supported by personal observation; while some members of the BRBC and the AWC have been participating for years, others indicated that they needed breaks from the partnerships.

Concern regarding volunteer burnout was also mentioned in two documents. The BRBC 2007 Annual Report states that “concern was expressed that volunteer fatigue may compromise the effectiveness of the BRBC by impacting continuity of operations” (Bow River Basin Council 2007, 7), and the report entitled “*What We Heard*”: *Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops* states that “volunteers were subject to burn-out since their WPAC commitments extended into private time” (Alberta Water Council 2008a, 9). In contrast, only one participant specifically indicated that consensus can increase the speed of gaining action on decisions, although, as documented in Section 5.1.2, a number of participants indicated that consensus can create buy-in and increase the likelihood of gaining action, thereby implying that the speed may be increased.

In summary, strong evidence indicated that significant time and resources are used in consensus-seeking partnerships and moderate evidence indicated that

volunteer burnout may result from participation in the partnerships. Although eight participants felt that the large time requirements are a weakness of the process, none indicated that they felt that consensus decision-making should not be used due to this weakness, providing moderate support that the process is worth the resources.

### **5.1.6 Summary**

Evaluation of the outcomes of consensus decision-making in collaborative partnerships is necessary for gaining a greater understanding of the partnership model and for verifying the outcomes predicted in the collaborative governance literature. The strength of the evidence for each argument is detailed and summarized in Table 5, and the implications of these findings will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the strength of the evidence was not based strictly on the number of participants who supported the argument in question. Additional considerations, such as a participant's unique point of view, the strength of opposing evidence, or evidence from the documents and personal observations, were also taken into account. For instance, moderate evidence was found in this section that indicated that volunteer burn-out can result from consensus-seeking partnerships. This was based on the fact that eight participants indicated volunteer burn-out was an issue, as did two documents and personal observations. In comparison, although eight participants indicated that consensus encourages them to work towards the greater good, six said some partnership members are unwilling to compromise, which was also reflected in two non-consensus reports from the Alberta Water Council. Hence, the evidence that all partnership participants will be willing to

cooperate and work towards the greater good was deemed to be minimal, based on the strength of the opposing evidence from the interviews and the documents. Table 5 summarizes the results of Section 5.1.

**Table 5: Summary of Findings for Evaluation of Outcomes of a Consensus-Seeking Partnership**

Outcome Parameter	Argument	Evaluation	
		Overall Support	Evidence
Fairness	<p><b>Argument #1:</b> Greater fairness is gained</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Playing field is leveled</li> <li>• Participants are encouraged to work together</li> </ul>	Minimal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two participants indicated consensus makes participants equals; however, seven interviewees indicated otherwise, and one document noted that some BRBC participants felt their concerns have been ignored → <b>Minimal</b></li> <li>• Eight participants indicated that consensus encourages them to work towards the greater good; however, six said some partnership members are unwilling to compromise → <b>Minimal</b></li> </ul>
	<p><b>Argument #2:</b> Greater fairness may not be gained</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power imbalances exist</li> <li>• Uncooperative participants may disrupt the process</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seven participants indicated that power, knowledge or resource imbalances persist, and one document indicated that some BRBC participants felt their concerns have ignored → <b>Moderate</b></li> <li>• Six participants indicated some partnership members are unwilling to compromise, and two letters of non-consensus were produced in the AWC Wetlands Policy Project Team → <b>Moderate</b></li> <li>• An overall sense from some participants that particular groups are more important than others and frustration at uncooperative members was observed</li> </ul>
Decision Quality	<p><b>Argument #1:</b> Better decision-making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creative ideas and innovative strategies are produced</li> <li>• Buy-in and commitment created</li> <li>• A better understanding of issues is produced</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One participant indicated greater innovation in consensus decision-making, as did two documents → <b>Minimal</b></li> <li>• 13 participants noted that the process creates commitment and individual ownership of the decisions, as did three documents → <b>Strong</b></li> <li>• 12 participants indicated a greater understanding of issues through pooled information and combined knowledge, as did one document → <b>Strong</b></li> </ul>

Outcome Parameter	Argument	Evaluation	
		Overall Support	Evidence
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Weak or unproductive decision-making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lowest common denominator decisions</li> <li>• Stalemate</li> </ul>	Minimal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two participants suggested that the process would result in lowest common denominator solutions; however, five participants disagreed and three documents refuted lowest common denominator outcomes → <b>Minimal</b></li> <li>• Five participants noted that consensus processes are at risk for stalemate when dealing with very contentious issues → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
Learning and change	<b>Argument:</b> Learning and change occurs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning and changes in attitudes and behaviours in participants</li> <li>• Learning and change beyond original stakeholders</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ten participants indicated that the partnership has allowed them to learn about issues beyond their expertise, supported by two documents and personal observation → <b>Strong</b></li> <li>• Six participants indicated that attitudes and opinions changed → <b>Moderate</b></li> <li>• Five interviewees indicated that the collaborative process has raised the profile of water issues, also supported by one document → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
Social Capital	<b>Argument:</b> Social capital can be built <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust is gained</li> <li>• Relationships are built</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nine participants indicated that relationships are formed, also supported by personal observation; however, one participant indicated that people may not get along → <b>Moderate</b></li> <li>• Six participants indicated that the process builds trust amongst participants → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
Resource Use	<b>Argument #1:</b> Resource requirements too large <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long time commitment</li> <li>• Volunteer burn-out</li> </ul>	Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 16 participants and one document indicated that collaborative partnerships are time-consuming or costly, eight participants of which specifically indicated that it was a weakness of the process → <b>Strong</b></li> <li>• Eight participants indicated volunteer burn-out was an issue, as well as 2 documents and personal observation → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Process is worth the time or money <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus may be worth the additional cost and time</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No participants indicated that the process wasn't worth the time or resources, despite the number of participants indicating the requirements are large → <b>Strong</b></li> <li>• One participant indicated that consensus can decrease time needed due to the created buy-in → <b>Minimal</b></li> </ul>

## ***5.2 Factors Contributing to Successful Use of the Consensus Model***

Section 5.1 presented the results of the outcomes of the use of a consensus decision-making in partnerships, and was evaluated based on a framework derived from the reviewed literature on collaborative governance and consensus in partnerships. The evaluative framework was also developed to evaluate the factors contributing to the success of consensus-seeking partnerships. Gaining a greater understanding of recommended structure and process components of consensus-seeking partnerships is crucial for increasing our understanding of this form of collaborative governance. Section 5.2 evaluates the extent to which the necessary factors for producing successful consensus-seeking partnerships outlined in the literature are confirmed in the case study in Southern Alberta.

### **5.2.1 Structural Components**

#### *Membership*

Deciding the scale of membership is a crucial step in designing consensus-seeking partnerships. One can have an inclusive process, where all relevant stakeholders are represented (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Innes and Booher 1999; Robson and Kant 2007), or one can restrict the partnership to a smaller membership, since it has been suggested that a diverse membership may create problems (Leach and Pelkey 2001).

During the interviews, 14 participants noted the importance of ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are present in the partnership discussions. One participant explained that organizers of partnerships must “make sure that anybody that is truly an affected party is at the table”, and another mentioned the need for having “all the stakeholders present. Not just informed by email, but present, at a discussion”. One

interviewee also explained that all stakeholders must be represented from the beginning of the partnership, “because once you get a year into the process, and a stakeholder hasn’t been there, it’s really hard to go back and pretend that they’ve been invited all along”. This view was also expressed in six documents, including *Strengthening Partnerships: A Shared Governance Framework for Water for Life Collaborative Partnerships* (Alberta Water Council 2008e) and “*What We Heard*”: *Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops*, which states that “participants also raised the importance of shareholders participating in the process – that the consensus of a non-representative body was not a real consensus” (Alberta Water Council 2008a, 12). Also supporting this position, a summary of next steps from the BRBC states that “it may prove difficult getting certain groups to the table but you must keep trying” (Bow River Basin Council 2008c, 11).

Four participants explicitly indicated the need for an inclusive process, which was also supported in three documents: *Enabling Partnerships: A Framework in Support of Water for Life: Alberta’s Strategy for Sustainability* (Alberta Environment 2005), *Recommendations for Watershed Management Planning Framework for Alberta* (Alberta Water Council 2008d), and *Towards Environmental Sustainability: Proposed Regulatory Framework for Managing Environmental Cumulative Effects* (Alberta Environment 2007b). In contrast, no participants indicated that a large membership creates problems or that partnership size should be restricted.

The importance of having all relevant stakeholders represented was also supported by the concerns expressed over challenges involving engaging First

Nations groups in water partnerships, which were discussed by seven interview subjects. As one participant of the BRBC explained, “There are two different fellas engaging [First Nations], having them come regularly, routinely, but it’s extremely difficult. They’re very busy, and their method of business is not a corporate style, 9-5, Wednesday afternoon, Wednesday morning, quarterly meeting. They just don’t work that way. There are some challenges and issues with that”. Another participant noted, “I think in some of the processes that I’ve been involved in here, for example, we’ve found it very, very difficult in the Southern Region to engage the aboriginal community in the process”.

The challenges engaging First Nations in collaborative water partnerships was also reflected in minutes from three recent BRBC meetings. The minutes from a November 2008 meeting read “First Nations Communication: To be left on agenda until some momentum towards this can be made” (Bow River Basin Council 2008b, 3). The issue of engaging First Nations was discussed at the February 2009 Meeting (Bow River Basin Council 2009c), and the minutes from an April 2009 meeting read “Tsu T’ina has been included and invited to participate but due to legal advice the council has not been extensively involved” (Bow River Basin Council 2009b, 3). It was observed that, as of June 2009, no First Nations representative holds a position on the BRBC Board of Directors, which remains the case according to the most recent BRBC quarterly newsletter (Bow River Basin Council 2009d).

The Alberta Water Council appears to have had more success engaging First Nations groups in the process. Métis Settlements do currently have a Director and an Alternate Director on the Alberta Water Council (Alberta Water Council 2010a). As

well, First Nations participation in partnerships was noted in the discussions that the Alberta Water Council Wetland Policy Project Team conducted for the Wetlands Policy Project, which states that “The WPPT hosted a series of meetings with Aboriginal representatives to gather their input on the a [sic] recommended Provincial Wetland Policy and its Implementation Plan. Five meetings were led by Henry Arcand, an independent consultant contracted by Alberta Environment. Meetings were held between February and April 2006 in three different communities, with discussions including representatives of each of Treaty 6, Treaty 7, Treaty 8, and the Métis Nation of Alberta” (Alberta Water Council 2008f, 5).

In summary, strong evidence from the interviews and document review was found to support the argument that an inclusive process that is broadly representative is necessary for successful consensus-seeking partnerships. This was also supported by interview subjects who expressed concerns over challenges engaging First Nations, an important stakeholder in water decisions in the Bow River Basin. No evidence was found to support the need for smaller, restricted levels of partnership involvement.

#### *Government Involvement*

Determining the level of government involvement in partnerships can be challenging. Some research indicates that collaborative processes may benefit from being independent of government (e.g., Davis 2008), while others suggest a mix of private citizens and public representatives (e.g., Moore and Koontz 2003).

Six participants indicated that it is important for government to be involved in the discussion (four of whom were not provincial government employees). One

interviewee explained that “There have been some questions of whether government should be on the Board of Directors of WPACs and things like that, and my view is absolutely yes”. This view was also reflected in four documents (none of which are government reports), including *Shared Governance in Watersheds Factsheet* (Water Matters 2008) and the handout on consensus-building for Alberta Water Council workshops (Alberta Water Council 2009b). In the *Shared Governance in Watersheds Factsheet*, it is stated that “relevant government bodies must be involved and consistent in their representation and participation” (Water Matters 2008, 5), and the handout on consensus building explained that “Decision-makers (whether they be regulators, executive managers, owners of companies or ‘the boss’) must be part of the process. Without them, the process would lack credibility and there would be little or no authority to implement agreements” (Alberta Water Council 2009b, 3).

In contrast, three participants expressed concern over involving government in partnerships or indicated that government could not be an equal partner around the decision-making table. One participant explained, “That’s sort of what we’re struggling with right now, how the partnership work is doing. So whether government should be at the table, or whether government should be external, like an ex-officio officer of the Board, or something like that. Because there’s potential conflict of interests”. However, no documentation, from the Government of Alberta, nor any of the partnerships or ENGOs was found to support the statement that government should not be at the table. Hence, moderate evidence was found to support the argument that relevant government bodies should be active and participating members of partnerships and in the consensus.

### *Level of flexibility*

Designing consensus-based partnerships requires an understanding of flexibility. Groups can be self-organizing, allowing participants to design objectives and rules (Cormick, *et al.* 1996; Innes and Booher 1999). However, partnerships can also be more highly structured, with a clearly defined purpose and objectives (Bonnell and Koontz 2007).

In this study, four participants indicated in the interviews that flexibility is needed, especially with regard to allowing participants to design the process and avoid formalized methods. This was also reflected in the handout on consensus-building for Alberta Water Council workshops, which states that “Participants play a role in designing the process by crafting ground rules (‘how we will behave’) developing terms of reference, having input to the budget, and specifying rules of engagement (who will participate, how, when, etc)” (Alberta Water Council 2009b, 4). This was also documented through personal observation, as a number of participants expressed frustration with past processes in which they felt they didn’t enjoy the procedures (such as the use of ‘clicker boxes’).

However, six participants expressed the need for clearly defined roles in partnerships. One participant explained that, with regard to a partnership, one must “make their mandate and role very clear”, while another explained that “there needs to be clarity around roles and responsibilities”. Concern over clarity in roles and responsibilities was also shown by the seven interview subjects who indicated that a lack of clarity was an issue with *Water for Life* partnerships. When discussing WPACs, one participant noted, “I don’t think there’s clarity about what their

mandate is”, while another explained that “I’m not sure everybody understands what the role of the WPAC is. I’m not sure the government knows what role they want the WPACs to play entirely”.

The need for clearly defined roles and responsibilities was also evidenced in six documents, including *Alberta’s Water Management System Policy Issues and Gaps*, which states, “WPACs need a clear definition of their role and responsibilities” (Alberta Water Council 2007a, 23). *Recommendations for Renewal of Water for Life* notes that “While many of the partnerships have been established, roles, responsibilities, and relationships are only vaguely outlined in the document *Enabling Partnerships*” (Alberta Wilderness Association, *et al.* 2007, 17). *Strengthening Partnerships: A Shared Governance Framework for Water for Life Collaborative Partnerships* states that “participants felt that without a clearly defined and articulated role for government within *Water for Life*, it was difficult for them to determine the appropriate roles for WPACs and WSGs” (Alberta Water Council 2008e, 11), and a recent report published by the Canadian Institute of Resources Law explains that “WPACs seem to have little provincial direction as to what they must actually accomplish” (Wenig 2010, 27).

Hence, while moderate support was found to indicate that there should be some process flexibility in partnerships, strong support was found to indicate that partnerships ought to have clearly defined overall roles and responsibilities. This support was provided by both the interviews and document review.

### *Facilitation*

Given the contentious nature of many issues in water management, partnerships may benefit from facilitation. While some researchers have indicated that professional facilitation is desirable (Davis 2008), others have suggested that an unpaid facilitator is preferred (Leach and Sabatier 2003).

Six participants explained that having a neutral, unbiased outside facilitator is helpful for consensus-seeking partnerships, particularly at the start of consensus-building. One interviewee explained that “Sometimes ... when you start getting into some rough issues, the nitty gritty, it’s helpful for them to bring in a facilitator and help them work through some stuff”, while another participant said that “You definitely need a third party facilitator”. This was also supported by the handout on consensus decision-making for the Alberta Water Council, which states “Participants must have the support of a skilled facilitator or mediator (a third party neutral)” (Alberta Water Council 2009b, 4). Although two documents indicated that hiring a professional facilitator is helpful, no interview subjects indicated that it is important that the facilitation be professional.

On the other hand, two participants indicated that they did not support the use of outside facilitation. One interviewee explained that if someone is going to be involved, “[it] had better be somebody that the community, the water community, already knows and trusts”. However, no evidence from the document review or personal observations was found to support the argument that outside facilitation is undesirable. Furthermore, participants spoke highly of the unbiased facilitation in the consensus-seeking partnerships that they have been involved in, indicating that a

neutral party was helpful to the process. In summary, moderate evidence was found to support the argument that neutral facilitation is helpful in aiding partnerships with consensus decision-making, although minimal indication was given as to whether it mattered if facilitators are paid or unpaid.

### *Authority*

While consensus-seeking partnerships are a widely used tool for increasing collaboration in decision-making, the actual influence of the various partnerships on policy-making can vary widely, as detailed in Chapter Two. Exploring an appropriate level of authority for consensus-seeking partnerships is warranted. While some researchers advocate for a formal mechanism for enforcing decisions (Hooper, *et al.* 1999; Leach and Pelkey 2001), other results suggest that an advisory capacity and moral authority are sufficient (Imperial and Hennessey 2000).

When questioned about appropriate levels of authority, 14 participants (10 of whom are not members of a government organization) indicated that they did not believe that partnerships should have regulated decision-making authority. One participant, speaking in regard to the BRBC, said “I’m perfectly content with being an advisory committee, and I’m satisfied that we can coalesce a very formidable pool of expertise and come up with very good advice”. Similarly, when asked if they thought that collaborative partnerships should have a stronger role than advisory, one participant explained, “No, I don’t. I very strongly believe that government has to govern in the end, they absolutely need to seek advice and I think the WPAC is a wonderful way to do that”.

While four of the 14 participants did not explain why they believed that partnerships should not have more formal authority, three indicated that the advisory capacity engages people more in the process and two expressed concern that a stronger role would mean that the partnership could not be as ambitious in its recommendations or would need to be “politically correct”. A further three participants explained that partnerships are not equipped for that scale of responsibility, and another three indicated that, as most partnerships are not elected bodies, they should not have a role in regulation.

On a similar note, 14 participants indicated their belief that government should always be the final decision-maker, providing additional weight to the argument that partnerships should not have a formal method of enforcing decisions. One interviewee stated, “it’s always advisory because government always has the final say; it’s a democracy and they were elected to do that”, while another explained that “I think at the end of it, ultimately, there is a strong role for government, and government has to do what they believe is right”. The view that government should have the final decision and that partnerships should not have formal mechanisms for enforcing decisions was also expressed in *“What We Heard”: Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops*, which states that “participants emphasized again that WPACs cannot assume a regulatory or assurance function in addition to planning; this must remain the responsibility of government” (Alberta Water Council 2008a, 14).

While no participants or documents explicitly indicated that partnerships should have formal mechanisms for enforcing decisions, seven interview subjects indicated

that the partnerships or recommendations produced should be given more formal recognition; for instance, through allowing the recommendations to go for approval in Cabinet or through enshrining a mandate in legislation (which was specifically recommended by four participants). Neither the AWC nor WPACs are supported by any legislation: as one participant explained, “we had *Water for Life* come in as public policy that had no legislation to support it”. Similarly, another interview subject said “I do feel that there would be a lot more commitment to it and involvement in the WPAC process if they were instituted in the law, in the *Water Act*”. Two documents mentioned this issue, including *Alberta’s Water Management System Policy Issues and Gaps*, which states that “WPAC approach under *Water for Life* is an asset, but needs to have a legislative framework rather than a government policy framework where no department in particular is in charge of making sure the work gets done” (Alberta Water Council 2007a, 20).

Furthermore, three interview subjects highlighted the need for policy-makers to follow-up with recommendations, either by agreeing to act on them or by explaining the reasoning if the recommendations are not going to be followed. As one participant explained, “they have to commit to the outcome. They can’t just... they need to come back to the table at some point and, say if there’s been a glitch, explain why”. Hence, this indication that policy-makers should not be able to simply ignore recommendations adds additional weight to the argument that a legislated mandate would be helpful for partnerships aiming to provide advice to policy-makers, ensuring that decisions will not be ignored.

In summary, strong evidence was found to suggest that formal decision-making power should not be transferred to the partnership and that final decisions should lie with the elected government. However, moderate support was also found to suggest that partnerships would benefit from having their role formally recognized, such as enshrined in legislation. As described in the typology of collaborative partnerships addressed in Chapter Two, legislated mandates are available for a number of partnerships, although not those in *Water for Life*. This would also ensure that policy-makers follow-up with recommendations produced by partnerships (and hence, cannot simply ignore them), the importance of which was stressed by three interviewees.

### *Information*

When designing the framework for evaluating the factors necessary for producing successful consensus-seeking partnerships, the need for good information upon which to base decisions was mentioned by a number of researchers. In particular, the importance of high quality information was suggested, as well as the need to reach agreement on the information upon which decisions will be based (Bentrup 2001; Innes 1998)..

Ten participants indicated that the availability of adequate scientific information is crucial. One such participant explained that “I think we can make very good decisions with the right information; it’s very important to have science”. The need for scientific information for successful partnerships was also indicated in four documents, including *Water for Life: A Renewal*, which states that scientific

information is necessary for partnerships to fulfill their mandates (Alberta Environment 2008).

Furthermore, three participants indicated that agreeing on the information sources that will be used for decision-making is important in consensus-seeking partnerships, a statement that is also supported by the handout produced for workshops of the Alberta Water Council (Alberta Water Council 2009b). As well, while only three participants explicitly indicated the need for agreement on what information will be used to base decisions, it was noted that partnership members sometimes disagreed on necessary actions due to disparities in the information they were using. One participant explained, “Agreeing on information, basically, agreeing on what information is going to be used is a very important thing. And you’ll often spend a while doing that; if it’s a huge project you might spend 2 or 3 months calling the information, listening to different people, and agreeing on a common information base. Because often, that’s at the heart of the conflict”.

Also relevant to the need for scientific information were comments related to decision-making and water. Seven participants noted that water is a passionate topic for many people, and that decision-making can be very emotional. One interviewee explained “water is an emotional issue, so ... decisions need to be based on fact”. The emotional aspect of water adds additional weight to the importance of scientific information, allowing decision-making to be based on (or informed by) fact to the highest extent possible.

In summary, strong evidence exists to support the argument that consensus-seeking partnerships require good scientific information for decision-making and

moderate evidence that participants should agree on common information. This is especially important for water resource decision-making, as water can be a passionate and emotional issue, increasing the importance of having good information on which to base decisions.

### *Resources*

Access to sufficient resources for consensus-seeking partnerships has been said to be a crucial factor contributing to success (Leach and Pelkey 2001). While this statement may seem evident, participants in this study discussed not only the importance of financial resources, but also resources related to capacity building. Nine participants indicated that sufficient financial resources are crucial for ensuring successful partnerships, and six explained that training must be provided to participants on consensus. As one person highlighted “As new people come in, they absolutely need to be briefed and trained in the consensus process. I know that’s not happening, people are joining the Council and, I’m not even sure, I think they’re given a briefing binder, but they’re not really walked through or given any kind of skill development to work in a consensus process”. One participant indicated that without training on consensus, partnership members may revert to a majority vote because it is what they are used to.

The importance of resources was also strengthened by the nine interview subjects who voiced the concern over a lack of resources available to partnerships. One interviewee explained that “WPACs need to be better funded; they need to be better staffed”. Furthermore, it was noted that “Resources right now have become extremely critical to me, because what I’m seeing right now in the process that’s

being set-up right now to use to consensus model – they’re not being resourced. Absolutely not being resourced, and some of them are falling apart”. Furthermore, observations from the Bow River Basin Council Annual Forum indicated the importance of adequate resources: it was announced that the BRBC is the first WPAC to have secured sustained funding (Bennett 2009).

The importance of resources was also highlighted in six documents, including the *Review of Implementation Progress of Water For Life, 2006-2008*, which states “*Water for Life* partnerships require many types of resources: staff, technical support, data and information, communication, volunteers, and funding” (Alberta Water Council 2009g, 3). The *Recommendations for Renewal of Water for Life* notes, “On the surface, it appears funding for the *Water for Life* strategy is sufficient. However, a closer look reveals that the vast majority of spending is for capital improvements for wastewater and water supply systems. A more accurate financial picture suggests that key *Water for Life* programs (including its key partners such as Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils) are significantly under funded” (Alberta Wilderness Association, *et al.* 2007, 23). “*What We Heard*”: *Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops* states that “WPACs feel that they have not been granted sufficient resources to enable them to deliver on expectations” (Alberta Water Council 2008a, 6). Overall, six documents expressed the importance of financial resources and four highlighted the need for training or capacity-building for consensus. Hence, strong evidence was found from interviews, documents review, and personal observation to indicate the importance of

financial resources in partnerships, as well as moderate support that training on consensus is needed.

### **5.2.2 Process Components**

#### *Consensus Definition*

When using consensus as a decision-making objective, clear guidelines on how consensus is going to be used as a decision-making objective are necessary. While some authors indicate that 100% agreement by all should be found before a decision is made (e.g., Schuett, *et al.* 2001; SPIDR 1997), others suggest that writing minority reports when 100% agreement cannot be found is a reasonable alternative in cases without unanimous agreement (Pratkanis and Turner 1996).

Sixteen participants discussed this issue. Of these, two participants indicated that unanimous agreement should be found when using consensus in partnerships. One participant explained, “I think it’s not acceptable that somebody is opposed to the decision; if somebody is opposed to that decision, you need to revisit it”. This opinion was also expressed in the *“What We Heard”*: *Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops*, which states that “several participants noted that if a consensus cannot be achieved that the partnership will have failed – achieving consensus on state of the watershed reports and watershed management plans are really the litmus test of shared governance” (Alberta Water Council 2008a, 12). This view was also supported by the handout produced for workshops of the Alberta Water Council, which states that “consensus requires unanimity in that everyone at the table must agree with the outcome (the agreements or solutions that have been reached)” (Alberta Water Council 2009b, 1).

While waiting for unanimous agreement was suggested by two interviewees and the two documents noted above, 14 other participants indicated that – while consensus-building is valuable – decisions should go forward after sufficient negotiation, even if unanimous support has not been found. This can be done in the form of minority reports, which can be written by the dissenting parties. Requiring full consensus was deemed by one interviewee to be “a recipe for paralysis”, and he explained that requiring 100% agreement can be detrimental to the partnership:

If you adhere too strongly to a pure definition of consensus and that, you’ll end up with a group just fracturing or not being able to accomplish anything. But in striving to achieve consensus and coming to a looser definition of consensus, it is extremely powerful in pulling in divergent opinions and evolving different outlooks, and coming to an understanding of what may work within the group. You may get enough buy in on public and political levels to actually get something done.

This view was also supported by five documents, including comments from parties involved in “*What We Heard*”: *Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops*: “participants agreed that a WPAC should not be held hostage by a recalcitrant party that is not committed to achieving a consensus decision” (Alberta Water Council 2008a, 11).

In summary, strong evidence was found in this study to support the argument that consensus-seeking partnerships should adhere to a looser definition of consensus than unanimous agreement. While two participants indicated that decisions should be revisited until all parties agree, 14 indicated that this is not advisable, many suggesting minority reports for dissenting views as an alternate strategy.

### *Commitment*

When designing the framework for evaluating the factors necessary for producing successful consensus-seeking partnerships, the need for commitment from participants was mentioned by a number of researchers (e.g., Gunton, *et al.* 2007). Twelve participants from this study took this view, explaining that commitment from all parties is necessary for successful partnerships. While discussing commitment, participants explained the importance of committing to the process of consensus decision-making: “It’s really important that the folks that come to sit at the table and participate are committed to working in a consensus process”. Another stated “you can’t have a stakeholder consensus building, or collaborative process, where people feel free to get up and walk out”. Other participants explained that commitment to acting on the decisions produced is a critical factor in the success of consensus-seeking partnerships: “What’s necessary to make them work is that everyone, at the end of the day, is committed to adopting the recommendations that are developed through the consensus process”. Two documents also highlighted the importance of commitment on the part of all participating parties.

In particular, six participants singled out government commitment as being crucial. One interview subject explained, “I think that government commitment to me is very high on the list”. The importance of government commitment was also highlighted by the seven participants who noted a lack of commitment to *Water for Life* partnerships from the Government of Alberta. One participant noted “In the last little while I’ve seen a slightening [sic] of commitment on the part of Alberta Environment to consensus”. One interviewee explained

So the government... basically, we're being promised that these other people are partners, players, and we saw, I mean, how blatant can it be? The *Land-use Framework* comes out, and watersheds aren't mentioned, watershed groups aren't mentioned, the word WPAC does not appear anywhere in the documents... So it's very frustrating that the government tells us one thing and continues to do business at a whole other level with their other stakeholders over here. So I'm a little bitter right now, I guess I'm a little... I feel left out in the cold a little bit. I thought we were putting all our chickens in this basket here, and we're rolling all this other stuff out over here, and *Water for Life* is getting forgotten about a little bit.

Furthermore, a few study participants expressed frustration at the provincial government's lack of action on a new provincial wetlands policy. As was explained in Section 5.1.1, a committee formed by the Alberta Water Council in 2005 wrote recommendations for a new wetlands policy, which was submitted to the provincial government in September 2008. Currently, no action has been taken on the part of government to use any of the advice provided in the report. In reference to this, one participant explained that "things get recommended, there's a Wetlands Policy that's been recommended for a good long time now – no action on it". One interviewee suggested that the provincial government may have begun using collaboration as a tactic to delay making decisions altogether:

The reality is, I think the government is largely using it as an excuse to not do anything anymore. They're forever seeking input from stakeholders and getting advice from the Water Council and other groups, and then they do nothing with the advice, they don't make any decisions. I think we're seeing a terrible backlog of decisions that need to be made that are simply not being acted on by government anymore, because they have this crutch of being able to say 'Oh we need to consult more, we need to take advice into consideration, we need to go out and see what the people think'... And too often nothing is happening. That's becoming a glaring issue.

The importance of government commitment was also highlighted in four documents, including *Strengthening Partnerships: A Shared Governance Framework for Water for Life Collaborative Partnerships*, which states, "for shared governance to be

successful, the Government of Alberta must lead by example and be the most committed partner at the table” (Alberta Water Council 2008e, 9).

Additional weight can be added to the importance of commitment by the evidence that was found indicating that commitment provides an incentive to participants. Seven interviewees explained that commitment to act on the consensus decisions gives members an incentive to complete the consensus-building process. As one participant noted, “If there’s a strong commitment to implementation, you’ll get more commitment from the people at the table: more commitment to work, and more commitment to fighting through the issues.” Another interviewee explained that “If you’re part of this, and you know that at the end of the day these things are actually going to happen, you take it more seriously”.

In summary, strong evidence was found that complete commitment on the part of all participating parties is a crucial component of successful consensus-seeking partnerships. Furthermore, six participants specifically highlighted the importance of government commitment, providing moderate support for the importance of demonstrated commitment from participating agencies.

### *Equity*

The importance of equity among participants has, like commitment, been noted as an important component of consensus-seeking partnerships (e.g., Cormick, *et al.* 1996). In this study, seven participants indicated that equity amongst all participants in a consensus-seeking partnership is necessary. As one government employee explained, “All [participants] should be given equal status”. Furthermore, one participant explained that “a collaborative process that does not offer equitable opportunities for

all participants is an intentionally failed collaborative arrangement”. The importance of equal opportunity was also noted in two documents, including a second handout produced for consensus-building for the Alberta Water Council: “All participants must have the opportunity to be fully engaged in all aspects of the process. This means opportunity to speak and to be heard, as well as equal access to information (technical, scientific, policy, minutes, reports, etc)” (Alberta Water Council 2009c, 2).

While equal opportunity in consensus-building was mentioned as an important factor in successful consensus-seeking partnerships, the importance of equity for participants – not just with regard to discussions around the negotiating table, but equity in access to information and funding – was brought up by some participants when discussing fairness (see Section 5.1.1). In this case, equitable processes contribute to fairness, hence, the observation that a number of participants felt that consensus decision-making did not ensure fairness provides additional weight to the argument that equity amongst participants is needed. Some interviewees, particularly those who identified with the environmental field, seemed disenchanted with consensus-seeking partnerships due to the lack of equity.

While fewer participants mentioned this issue than what was the case with other themes, one can posit that primarily the participants who felt that equitable opportunities were not presented to them would broach equity as an important factor. In summary, moderate evidence was found to indicate that equitable opportunities to participate and in participants’ access to resources is crucial for consensus-seeking partnerships.

### **5.2.3 Additional Considerations**

This study based the evaluation of the factors contributing to the success of consensus-seeking partnerships on the framework derived from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. While the framework guided the evaluation of the factors mentioned above (Sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2), three additional themes emerged from the interviews as factors contributing to successful partnerships which were not accounted for in the evaluative framework: managed expectations, deadlines, and a respectful negotiation approach. The evidence for the emergence of these themes will be discussed in forthcoming sections.

#### *Managing Expectations*

The importance of managing expectations in consensus-seeking partnerships – a process component – emerged as a theme for successful consensus-seeking partnerships. Seven participants indicated that problems can arise when expectations of the partnership are not aligned with reality. One participant explained that “I think some people have a false expectation that the WPAC will be able to undertake more action than it really can ... So its false expectations going on that I think would be ... you know... keep people from being satisfied with it. Those that have a realistic expectation, I think, come out saying this is okay”.

Although no documents were found addressing the issue of expectations, little research was found examining the expectations of participants in *Water for Life*. Hence, this issue has not been addressed sufficiently in Alberta. Despite the lack of personal observation or evidence from the document review indicating the importance of managing expectations, the comments by the seven participants

outlining its importance indicates moderate evidence that managing expectations is an important step in successful consensus-seeking partnerships.

### *Realistic Deadlines*

The importance of deadlines for consensus building emerged as an important structural component in successful consensus-based processes. Seven participants expressed the importance of deadlines for consensus building. One interviewee explained that “it has to end ... So there are going to be points where you have to identify what has the group agreed on [and] what they have not agreed on”.

The importance of deadlines for consensus decision-making was also emphasized in two documents, including *Strengthening Partnerships: A Shared Governance Framework for Water for Life Collaborative Partnerships*, which states, “Among the ground rules necessary to achieve consensus is a deadline for decision. Partners cannot be allowed to stall progress simply by opposing a decision indefinitely” (Alberta Water Council 2008e, 12). This can also be linked to the results that showed that consensus-seeking partnerships should not require complete unanimity for decisions to move forward – a date should be set as a deadline, and negotiations should continue until that point.

One interview subject did indicate that timelines would be detrimental to partnerships, suggesting participants may feel pushed to reach a decision if a deadline exists. However, moderate evidence exists to indicate that deadlines are a helpful component of consensus-building processes, and realistic deadlines should avoid pressure being placed on participants to reach agreement prematurely. As one participant stated, “it can’t just go on forever”. In summary, moderate evidence was

found to suggest the importance of deadlines for consensus decision-making in partnerships.

### *Negotiation Approach*

A number of issues related to the negotiation approach in consensus-building partnerships arose as factors determining the success of consensus-seeking partnerships. These process components include the following: having respectful, open discussions; building trust among participants; and pursuing interest-based negotiations.

Eight participants indicated that having respectful and open discussions are crucial in consensus building. As one participant explained, “We set our expectations, as one would typically, that every idea is a good one, every idea will be researched and the results brought back for decision-making. So we set ourselves [up] so that I couldn’t say to you, ‘Oh jeeppers that’s a dumb one’”. Another participant indicated the importance of “generating options without judgment”. The importance of having respectful and open discussions was also addressed in two documents, including *Wetlands Policy Team Terms of Reference*, which states “Members will operate in a considerate, respectful, fair and transparent manner” (Alberta Water Council 2005, 1).

Ten participants emphasized the importance of building trust among participants. As one interviewee noted, “people need to know each other and learn to trust each other”, while another explained that partnership participants must “built sufficient trust – through the process – in one and other so that you’re completely without blame”. The importance of building trust was also emphasized in the Alberta

Water Council *Shared Governance & Watershed Project Planning Team Terms of Reference*, which explains that successful consensus decision-making “requires a high level of trust and collaboration” (Alberta Water Council 2007b, 2).

The need for interest-based negotiations – where participants discuss their primary interests rather than focus on their positions – arose in five interviews, consistent with recommendations from the Colorado Institute of Public Policy (2006). One participant explained, “Actually, what I want to know is their interest. I can’t negotiate around somebody’s position, but I can negotiate around somebody’s interest”. A second participant noted that

A lot of times you don’t really understand what the specific interests of the other person or stakeholder group has until you really cut through all the stuff. You know, sometimes it’s several months of argument and debate to actually get to what is the core issue here. Because you’ve got all this other stuff around it and you’ve got to strip all of that away, and the other person didn’t really even know it either until you kind of get to that thing. And this is what I’m really trying to protect. This is what I’m really trying to achieve.

The importance of shifting from positions to interests was also brought up in two documents, including “*What We Heard*”: *Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops*: “consensus decision-making is, as defined by AWC, a long-term process that could take a year or more to achieve and that involves the negotiation of interests rather than the defense of positions” (Alberta Water Council 2008a, 12).

In summary, moderate evidence was found to indicate that the negotiation approach is crucial to successful consensus-building processes. Study participants and a document review revealed that respectful and open discussions, trust-building

among participants and shifting from positions to interests contribute to the successful use of consensus decision-making in partnerships.

#### **5.2.4 Summary**

Gaining a greater understanding of the factors contributing to successful collaborative partnerships – specifically consensus-seeking partnerships – is crucial for increasing understanding of collaborative governance. Section 5.2 provided additional clarity to the following question: to what extent are the criteria as described in the literature outlining the necessary factors for producing successful consensus-seeking partnerships supported by a case study in Southern Alberta? The findings from this analysis are detailed and summarized in Table 6. The implications of these results will be addressed in Chapter Six.

As previously noted, the strength of the evidence was not based strictly on the number of participants who supported the argument in question. Additional considerations were also taken into account. To illustrate with regard to structure, minimal evidence was found to support the argument that government should not be involved in consensus-seeking partnerships: although three participants expressed concern over involving government in partnerships or indicated government could not be an equal partner around the decision-making table, this view was not reflected in any reviewed documents or personal observations. In comparison, while only three participants indicated that agreeing on a common information base is important in consensus-seeking partnerships, support for this argument was found in a document and through personal observation. Due to this additional weight, the strength of the evidence was deemed to be moderate. Hence, the additional weight added by the

document support and personal observation strengthened the designation, despite the argument having been supported by the same number of participants as an argument with minimal evidence. Table 5 summarizes the results of Section 5.2.

**Table 6: Summary of Findings for Evaluation of Process and Structure Components**

Component	Argument	Evaluation	
		Overall Support	Evidence
Membership	<b>Argument #1:</b> Broad membership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All relevant stakeholders should be represented</li> <li>• Processes should be inclusive</li> </ul>	Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14 participants noted the importance of ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are present in the partnership discussions, as well as six documents → <b>Strong</b></li> <li>• Four participants specifically mentioned the need for an inclusive process, as did three documents → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Restricted membership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership should be small</li> <li>• Membership should be restricted to those in the affected community</li> </ul>	Minimal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No evidence found</li> </ul>
Government Involvement	<b>Argument #1:</b> Independent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership should be independent of government</li> </ul>	Minimal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three participants expressed concern over involving government in partnerships or indicated government could not be an equal partner around the decision-making table → <b>Minimal</b></li> </ul>
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Involved <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership should have a mix of private citizens and public representatives</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Six participants indicated that it is important for government to be involved in the discussions and consensus, also supported by four (non-governmental) documents → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
Facilitation	<b>Argument #1:</b> Unpaid <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership should have disinterested, unpaid facilitator</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No evidence from the interviews distinguished between having unpaid or professional facilitation, although two documents recommended hiring professional facilitation → <b>Minimal</b></li> <li>• Six participants explained that having a neutral outside person is helpful for consensus-seeking partnerships (paid or unpaid), a view that was also reflected in one document; however, two participants disagreed → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Professional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership should have professional facilitation</li> </ul>		

Level of Flexibility	<b>Argument #1:</b> Self-organizing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants should be allowed to design objectives, rules, etc.</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Four participants indicated that flexibility in partnerships is needed, which was also supported by one document and personal observation → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Less flexibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should have defined objectives</li> </ul>	Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Six participants expressed the need for clearly defined roles or objectives in partnerships, as did six documents. Seven participants also indicated that the roles of <i>Water for Life</i> partnerships are not clear → <b>Strong</b></li> </ul>
Authority	<b>Argument #1:</b> Enforceable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal mechanism for enforcing decisions should be in place</li> </ul>	Minimal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No participants or documents explicitly indicated that partnerships should have formal mechanisms for enforcing decisions → <b>Minimal</b></li> <li>However, seven interviewees indicated that the groups or recommendations should be given more formal recognition, which was also supported by two documents → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
	<b>Argument #2:</b> Advisory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should be advisory; moral authority can be sufficient</li> </ul>	Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>14 participants indicated partnerships should not have regulated decision-making authority, supported by one document → <b>Strong</b></li> </ul>
Information	<b>Argument:</b> Information necessary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Should have access to high quality information needed</li> <li>Should have agreement on information</li> </ul>	Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ten participants indicated that the availability of adequate scientific information is crucial, also supported by four documents → <b>Strong</b></li> <li>Three participants indicated that agreeing on a common information base is important in consensus-seeking partnerships, as did one document and personal observation → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
Resources	<b>Argument:</b> Sufficient Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should have adequate funding</li> </ul>	Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nine participants indicated that sufficient financial resources are crucial for successful partnerships, as did six documents and personal observation → <b>Strong</b></li> <li>Six participants explained that training must be provided on consensus building, as did four documents → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
Consensus Definition	<b>Argument #1:</b> Unanimous agreement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision should require 100% agreement</li> <li>No minority reports should be used</li> </ul>	Minimal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two participants indicated that unanimous agreement should be found when using consensus in partnerships, with supporting evidence in two documents → <b>Minimal</b></li> <li>No participants specifically indicated that minority reports should not be used → <b>Minimal</b></li> </ul>

	<p><b>Argument #2:</b> Looser definition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Minority reports should be used when 100% agreement cannot be found</li> </ul>	Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>14 participants indicated that decisions should go forward after sufficient negotiation, even if unanimous support has not been found, as did five documents → <b>Strong</b></li> </ul>
Commitment	<p><b>Argument:</b> Commitment necessary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants should be committed and engaged in the process</li> <li>Government should support the partnership</li> </ul>	Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12 participants explained that commitment from all parties is necessary, as did two documents → <b>Strong</b></li> <li>Six participants highlighted government commitment as crucial, as did four documents → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
Equity	<p><b>Argument:</b> Equity needed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Should be equal opportunity for participants in process</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seven participants indicated that equity amongst all participants is necessary, as did two documents → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>

Additional Components:

Expectations	<p><b>Argument:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing expectations is necessary</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seven participants indicated that problems can arise when expectations of the partnership are not aligned with reality → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
Deadlines	<p><b>Argument:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnership should have realistic deadlines</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seven participants expressed the importance of deadlines for consensus building, as did two documents → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>
Negotiation Approach	<p><b>Argument:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Must have respectful, trusting and interest-based negotiations</li> </ul>	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eight participants indicated that having respectful and open discussions are crucial in consensus building, as did two documents → <b>Moderate</b></li> <li>Ten participants emphasized the importance of building trust among participants, as did two documents → <b>Strong</b></li> <li>Five participants expressed the importance of having interest-based negotiations, as did two documents → <b>Moderate</b></li> </ul>

### ***5.3 Results Summary***

The results provided in Sections 5.1 and 5.2 and summarized in Table 5 and Table 6 answer the two research questions that emerged from the evaluative framework on the use of consensus decision-making in collaborative water partnerships. The outcomes of consensus and process and structure components were evaluated, and the findings provide insights on the use of consensus as a decision-making objective.

With regard to outcomes, strong evidence was found that supported the argument that buy-in is created among participants, even though challenges exist for those who must gain approval from stakeholders or organizations they represent. Strong evidence also indicated that significant time and resources are used in consensus-seeking partnerships, although no evidence was found that these requirements should prevent the use of consensus decision-making.

Moderate evidence supported the argument that consensus decision-making increases the quality of decisions, while minimal evidence was found to indicate lowest common denominator solutions. Moderate evidence was also found that supported the claim that learning and changes in attitudes or behaviours occurs in participants, and that relationships and trust among participants are gained through the use of consensus-seeking partnerships. Minimal evidence was found that supported the argument that consensus decision-making increases fairness in collaborative partnerships.

When evaluating procedural and structural components, strong evidence was found to support the need for a broad, inclusive membership in partnerships, as well

as a strictly advisory capacity. Strong evidence was also found to support the need for good scientific information and sufficient financial resources, while moderate evidence was found to indicate the need for training on consensus processes. Furthermore, strong evidence indicated a need for commitment on the part of all participants, as well as acceptance of a looser definition of consensus than unanimous agreement.

Moderate evidence was found to support the importance of some process flexibility, although strong evidence was found to indicate a need for clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Moderate evidence also indicated that all relevant government bodies should be active and participating members of partnerships and in the consensus, and that equitable opportunity to participate and in participants' access to resources should exist. Furthermore, moderate evidence was found to support the importance of neutral facilitation, managing expectations, having realistic deadlines, and using a respectful, trusting and value-based negotiation approach. The implications of these results are discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

## ***CHAPTER SIX***

### ***DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS***

The purpose of this research was to evaluate consensus as a decision-making objective in collaborative advisory groups involved in water governance. This chapter discusses the results presented in Chapter Five, and explores their relevance in the landscape of environmental governance. A summary of the key findings is presented, followed by implications for governance. Case-specific recommendations for Alberta are offered, and scholarly and practical research contributions are highlighted. Finally, the limitations of the study are explored and future research opportunities are suggested.

#### ***6.1 Summary of Key Findings***

As collaborative approaches to managing natural resources become increasingly popular in the governance landscape, research investigating the tools used to facilitate collaboration is necessary. This study contributes to our growing understanding of effective governance by exploring in detail a case in which consensus-seeking partnerships are used to increase collaboration in water management in Alberta, Canada. The forthcoming sections will highlight key findings produced during this study.

##### **6.1.1 Outcomes of the Consensus Process**

The first research question, “To what extent are the outcomes of consensus as described in the literature encouraging or opposing the use of consensus as a decision-making objective in collaborative partnerships supported by a case study in

Southern Alberta?” was evaluated in order to provide a clearer picture of the outcomes arising from consensus-seeking partnerships. This evaluation produced a number of findings which clarify inconsistencies which arose from the reviewed literature. Key results are presented.

The fairness of consensus-based collaborative processes for the participants was evaluated. Although some authors indicated that consensus decision-making may level the playing field among participants (e.g., Davis 2008; Round Tables on the Environment and Economy in Canada 1993), minimal evidence was found to support this argument because of existing power, knowledge and resource imbalances. Although some participants indicated that they were encouraged to work cooperatively, minimal evidence was also found to support the argument that consensus ensures all participants will work together. The existence of power imbalances in consensus-seeking partnerships and the possibility of uncooperative participants are consistent with concerns expressed by Ansell and Gash (2008).

This finding is crucial because it indicates that organizers of partnerships cannot rely on a consensus process to necessarily be fair for all participants, despite the perception that everyone has an equal say in the outcome. The use of consensus as a decision-making objective does not level the playing field, as other factors – power, access to resources and training, and levels of knowledge – can affect the fairness of the process. This implies that additional steps must be taken to ensure fairness, presented in detail in Section 6.2.

Evidence from this study also supported the argument that consensus decision-making increases the quality of decisions, consistent with arguments made by

Cormick *et al.* (1996) and Innes and Booher (1999). The increase in decision quality is due primarily to the broader understanding created by pooled information and knowledge from participants, rather than to the fostering of innovative ideas. At the same time, the evidence did not support concerns relating to the production of lowest common denominator solutions voiced by Coglianesi (1999) and Gregory *et al.* (2001).

The strong evidence found to support the creation of broad understanding of the issue is important, as it highlights that policy-makers wishing to gather stronger and more extensive information on an issue would benefit from engaging stakeholders in a consensus-seeking partnership. Furthermore, evidence was found to support the argument that buy-in is created among participants, consistent with arguments made by Innes and Booher (1999), indicating that using consensus-seeking partnerships may produce action on recommendations without the use of regulation. However, the buy-in created through consensus did not extend to approval gained from decision-makers who were not present during consensus negotiations and sent a representative instead, implications from which will be discussed in Section 6.2.

Evidence was found to support the argument that consensus decision-making prompts learning in participants and changes in attitudes or behaviours, and the creation of relationships and building of trust, as argued by Connick and Innes (2003). Some participants from this study indicated that the relationships created benefitted them outside the partnership, drawing attention to the positive second order changes which may arise from the use of consensus-seeking partnerships. Evidence was also found to indicate that significant time and resources are used in a

collaborative consensus process, consistent with findings from Leach *et al.* (2002). However, no participants indicated that they felt that consensus should not be used due to the large resource requirements, a noteworthy finding given the resources required and amount of time donated by volunteers.

### **6.1.2 Process and Structure Components**

After an evaluation of the outcomes was completed, an evaluation of the process and structure components contributing to the success of consensus-seeking partnerships was conducted. This evaluation produced a number of findings which added clarity to inconsistencies in the reviewed literature and guidance on process and structure for consensus-seeking partnerships. Key results are presented.

One area where clarity was needed was with regard to the definition of consensus. While some literature and general recommendations on using the consensus model explain that unanimous agreement should be found before decisions go forward (e.g., Schuett, *et al.* 2001), other research suggests that this may not be reasonable in collaborative processes (Pratkanis and Turner 1996). In this study, strong evidence was found to support the argument that consensus-seeking partnerships should adhere to a looser definition of consensus than unanimous agreement. This finding is crucial, as participants indicated that although they believed in aiming for consensus as a decision-making objective, requiring complete agreement for decisions could paralyze a partnership.

Moreover, requiring complete consensus – a challenge on any policy question, especially contentious issues related to water – may prompt partnership participants to feel that they have not been successful if a unanimous decision has not been found.

This issue was highlighted by “*What We Heard*”: *Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops*: “several participants noted that if a consensus cannot be achieved that the partnership will have failed” (Alberta Water Council 2008a, 12). Especially when many, if not all, participants are volunteers, a feeling of failure may be detrimental to the continuation of the partnership, as participants may not wish to continue if they feel the partnership has not been successful. Hence, the finding that partnerships should adhere to a less rigid definition of consensus is particularly noteworthy, and the strength of the evidence found in this study resolves debate over an appropriate definition of consensus for collaborative partnerships.

A second issue where clarity was needed is the level of authority that should be awarded to the decisions made in consensus-seeking partnerships. Some researchers suggest that partnerships should have formal mechanisms for enforcing decisions (Brandes, *et al.* 2005; Hooper, *et al.* 1999), while others indicate they may not be necessary (Imperial and Hennessey 2000; Margerum 1999). In this study, evidence supports the latter: strong evidence was found to suggest that formal decision-making power should not be transferred to the partnership and that final decisions should lie with elected government. This result is notable; it highlights that although partnership members likely hope that their time, resources and effort are having an impact, policy-makers should not feel that they need to transfer formal decision-making authority to partnerships.

Given the strength of the evidence against transferring formal decision-making support to collaborative partnerships, this study provides additional weight to the

argument that consensus-seeking partnerships ought not to have formal mechanisms for enforcing action on decisions. However, moderate support was found to suggest that partnerships would benefit from having their role formally recognized, such as enshrined in legislation, as is the case for some partnerships (but not those in *Water for Life*). This would provide partnership participants with a more forceful indication that their work will have an impact, without providing decision-making authority.

Clarity was also produced on appropriate participation in collaborative partnerships, specifically in relation to the involvement of agencies. While some studies provide evidence to suggest that government should not be involved in partnerships (e.g., Davis 2008), moderate evidence was found to support the argument that relevant government bodies should be active and participating members of partnerships. This finding is important because it indicates that employees of agencies should participate in the collaborative partnerships when they are a stakeholder in the outcomes. As explained by one of the documents supporting this argument, “Relevant government bodies must be involved and consistent in their representation and participation” (Water Matters 2008, 5).

This study also found evidence to support the importance of resources in consensus-seeking partnerships, consistent with findings from other authors (e.g., Leach and Pelkey 2001). Participants in this study discussed not only the importance of financial resources, but also resources related to capacity-building for consensus. Consensus-building is not a decision-making objective that can be easily achieved without first providing training on consensus to participants, and interview subjects indicated that challenges arise when this training is not provided. One participant

explained that without training on consensus, partnership members may revert to a majority vote because it is what they are used to. Hence, both financial resources and training on consensus are necessary in consensus-seeking partnerships.

### **6.1.3 Summary**

Evaluating the outcomes and factors which contribute to successful consensus-seeking partnerships produced a number of results, implications of which will be highlighted in Section 6.2. A number of findings which are particularly relevant for the partnership model in Alberta were also revealed.

Evidence was found to indicate challenges engaging First Nations. This was most notable in the case of the BRBC, where supporting data was found in interviews, documents, and personal observations. Results also suggested that the roles and mandates of *Water for Life* partnerships, particularly those of WPACs, are not clear. As was shown in Section 5.2, defined roles and mandates for collaborative partnerships are crucial.

Evidence was found to suggest that the roles and mandates of *Water for Life* partnerships should be enshrined in the legislation, which would add to the needed mandate clarity. No legislation exists to provide *Water for Life* partnerships with a clear elucidation of their responsibilities. However, the mandate should not include authority to enforce the decisions made by the partnerships, due to the overwhelming evidence from participants in this study that final decisions should always lie with government.

Concerns were expressed over waning commitment by the provincial government to *Water for Life* partnerships, highlighted by a lack of action on the part of the province to producing a new wetlands policy. This is noteworthy given the importance of government commitment highlighted during the interviews. Evidence was also found to indicate that power, knowledge and resource imbalances exist in partnerships, drawing attention to a lack of fairness on the BRBC and the AWC.

A lack of resources available to the partnerships was also highlighted. Nine participants indicated that there were insufficient resources and access to capacity building for consensus, the latter of which is surprising given the requirement that the partnerships use consensus as a decision-making objective in order to receive support from the Government of Alberta (Alberta Environment 2005). The BRBC appears to have secured stable funding through its Glacier Legacy Fund, although it is the first of the WPACs to have done so.

In summary, an in-depth examination of collaborative partnerships in Southern Alberta has provided results to two research questions, and highlighted a number of issues particularly relevant to the Alberta case. The results of Research Question 1 and 2 have implications for environmental governance, which will be described in detail in the forthcoming section. This will be followed by case-specific recommendations for Alberta.

## ***6.2 Implications for Governance***

The partnership model is an increasingly common tool in the landscape of water management. Hundreds of water partnerships exist in the United States, Canada and

Australia, most of which are consensus-based (Leach and Pelkey 2001). As was highlighted in Chapter Two, conflicting research on the consensus model and its use as a collaborative decision-making tool indicates that greater exploration of the consensus-seeking partnership and its underlying assumptions is warranted.

This study uses a detailed case study approach to evaluate consensus as a decision-making objective, thereby providing additional clarity on these assumptions. A number of outcomes and process and structure components contributing to successful consensus-seeking partnerships have been identified and explained. This section explores the implications of these findings for consensus-seeking partnerships.

### **6.2.1 Willingness of Participants to Cooperate**

When creating consensus-seeking partnerships, one assumption made is that a collaborative group of participants will be willing to interact, to cooperate and to work together as equals to forge decisions for the greater good. This is a key assumption underlying the guidelines prepared by the National Round Table on the Environment and Economy (1993). Particularly when animosities exist between participants, or where participating groups have a history of disagreement, Ansell and Gash (2008) suggest that all participants may not be willing to work together for a greater good, calling into question the validity of this assumption.

Clarity on this issue is crucial for gaining a greater understanding of consensus-seeking partnerships; if parties are not willing to cooperate, then attempting to organize participants to produce collaborative decisions may exacerbate animosities and ultimately lead to failed collaborative efforts. On its face this seems entirely

obvious. However, the fact that collaborative water governance mechanisms are being created based on this assumption – without necessarily addressing the problem in their design – is evidence that this is a serious issue.

Some study participants indicated that the consensus process encouraged them to work together and to consider the greater good. However, the evidence also showed that some participants may not cooperate meaningfully. This may be particularly relevant when participants feel they have nothing to gain from the process or more to gain from not cooperating, as suggested by participants during the interviews. While such parties may participate in the collaborative process (e.g., by attending meetings), they may be unwilling to support the final decision if vested interests are compromised or if they feel their sectors have little to gain from implementation of the agreement. This issue was highlighted by Davis (2008).

Thus, while some parties may be willing to participate in partnerships, meaningful interest in working together to forge a mutual agreement may be unrealistic to those for whom moving forward on an issue (for instance, the creation of a new wetlands policy) does not offer benefits. This implies that incentives must be provided, consistent with recommendations from Davis (2008) and Ansell and Gash (2008). One incentive strategy that was suggested during the interviews is to guarantee to participants that the regulatory body to which they are providing advice is going to make a decision by a certain time, and to put measures in place to uphold that guarantee. This approach would assure partnership participants that change is going to occur, and that participating in a process to provide advice on the direction of that change would afford an incentive for meaningful participation.

This incentive would be provided if there was a guarantee that policy-makers cannot simply ignore the advice provided, requiring them to provide reasoning for the final decision if the recommendations were not followed. Although only three participants from the interviews discussed the need for policy-makers to follow-up with partnerships and to justify their reasoning if they do not accept recommendations, it is possible that participants' experience with advice being converted (or not) into policy decisions is still limited. However, some participants' disappointment with the lack of a new provincial wetlands policy, despite recommendations having been provided from the Alberta Water Council in September 2008, demonstrates the possible frustration that can arise when no guarantees are in place to ensure, at minimum, acknowledgement of, or response to, the advice provided.

This issue was highlighted in relation to the development of Water Sharing Plans (WSPs) in New South Wales, Australia. WSPs are used to set the rules relating to the sharing of water between users. When a WSP was being developed for the Namoi Valley, some irrigators who had been involved in creating a plan found no evidence that their views had been considered by the Minister when the final plan was revealed (Kuehne and Bjornlund 2006); this was a source of considerable frustration for the people who had been involved in preparing the plan. This problem could have been avoided, or reduced, if the Minister had been obliged to provide reasons for the final decision relative to the advice provided. It is important to note that the suggestion that a more forceful commitment to the recommendations provided in partnerships does not necessarily conflict with democratic theory.

Although democratic theory emphasizes accountability in decision-making (Ferree, *et al.* 2002), providing a stronger commitment to considering the recommendations produced in partnerships without transferring actual decision-making authority allows accountability to remain in the hands of democratically elected leaders. As shown in the results, strong evidence was found to indicate that partnerships should not be given authority to enforce the decisions reached, indicating that accountability for policy-making should remain with government.

However, a stronger commitment on the part of policy-makers to taking account of the recommendations produced may result in greater contestation of the final result produced in the collaborative process. If participants believe that the decision produced in consensus-seeking partnerships will meaningfully influence decisions made by authorities, then the greater stakes may make the process less likely to produce 100% agreement. This highlights a second crucial but dubious assumption of consensus-based collaborations: namely that the members of the group will be able to come to a unanimous decision based on consensus processes.

### **6.2.2 Definition of Consensus**

The use of consensus as a decision-making objective in collaborative partnerships is commonly recommended in the literature (e.g., Innes and Booher 1999). However, this recommendation assumes that partnerships members from a variety of sectors and backgrounds will be able to reach consensus. This assumption is particularly notable in light of the literature on consensus recommending that parties negotiate until 100% agreement is achieved (e.g., Schuett, *et al.* 2001).

Contrary to the reports indicating that unanimous agreement should be found before decisions should move forward, this study found strong evidence to suggest that waiting to arrive at unanimous agreement can fracture the process and lead to paralysis. As discussed in Section 6.1, requiring complete consensus may prompt partnership members to feel that they have not been successful if a unanimous decision has not been found, which could be detrimental to the continuation of the partnership. Furthermore, not requiring complete consensus would avoid stalemate in cases where there are participants who feel that they would be better served by stalling on an issue, as a minority opinion would not prevent decisions from moving forward.

This result highlights the importance of designing strategies to accommodate non-consensus, such as writing non-consensus (or minority) reports, consistent with Pratkanis and Turner (1996). As was noted by one study participant, an inability to reach consensus should not be seen as a failure; it may be more realistic to acknowledge that there are dissenting views. Furthermore, agreeing to proceed without unanimous agreement and to provide both the final decision and the non-consensus reports to decision-makers avoids a common concern of consensus-based processes: lowest common denominator decisions.

### **6.2.3 Decision Quality**

The concern over the production of lowest common denominator decisions highlights a third assumption of consensus-seeking partnerships: its use to provide advice or make policy decisions assumes that the decisions produced in consensus-seeking partnerships are of good quality. Some literature suggests that this may not be the

case (e.g., Coglianesi 1999; Gregory, *et al.* 2001). However, findings from this study provide no reason to believe that lowest common denominator outcomes will result from consensus-seeking partnerships. This was verified with evidence from the interviews and document review. If membership on partnerships is broadly inclusive and if all major stakeholders are represented, then there is no indication to believe that the expertise will not generate thoughtful strong outcomes.

This finding implies that confidence can be had in the quality of the decisions produced through consensus-seeking partnerships. This result is particularly notable as it is relevant for both partnerships designed to provide advice, such as those in *Water for Life*, as well as partnerships with greater decision-making authority, such as Washington State's watershed planning groups (Ryan and Klug 2005).

The concern over lowest-common denominator decisions can be further reduced when processes adhere to a looser definition of consensus. If parties are required to negotiate until unanimous agreement is found, then the decision produced may need to be diluted or weakened to gain acceptance from those for whom high strong action does not offer benefits. This implies that the decisions may have been reduced to a lowest common denominator for the sake of reaching consensus. However, when 100% agreement is not required, higher standards can be maintained, as was suggested by multiple interviewees. Hence, evidence from this study indicates that decisions produced in consensus-seeking partnerships will avoid the lowest common denominator, pending participation from all necessary parties and adherence to a looser definition of consensus.

#### **6.2.4 Fairness**

Consensus-seeking partnerships are grounded in a fourth assumption: the consensus process and the decision will be fair for all participants. Some suggest that the use of a consensus as a decision-making objective creates fair processes because consensus renders every participant an equal and avoids tyranny of the majority (e.g., Blomquist and Schlager 2005). However, this study reveals that little evidence exists to support the argument that the use of a consensus model guarantees fairness. This is consistent with arguments from Ansell and Gash (2008) and others.

As was highlighted in Chapter Five, power, resource and knowledge imbalances can affect the fairness collaborative process, even if consensus decision-making is used. The reality of power imbalances can affect both partnerships used to provide advice and those that have greater decision-making authority. The inability of a consensus process to ensure fairness implies that authorities convening partnerships must take additional steps to rectify any existing inequities among participants.

One step towards addressing this concern involves ensuring that sufficient funding is available to participants, particularly to those who are not on salary or who must take time off from work to participate in the collaborative process. The research suggests that this funding should cover not only expenses to attend and compensation for time spent at meetings, but also funding to compensate for any lost income due to participation in partnerships and compensation to allow for adequate preparation time. Providing funding on a per diem basis, does not take into consideration the time spent by partnership participants preparing for meetings. For those whose participation is not associated with their employment, participation and preparation

must take place either during unpaid time off work or during participants' personal time after work. Hence, organizers of partnerships must understand the true costs of participation and take steps to ensure that all participants are adequately compensated. This is consistent with findings from Leach and Pelkey (2001), who revealed that the necessity of sufficient funding is the most frequently occurring theme in studies of watershed partnerships.

Furthermore, steps must be taken to ensure equitable access to knowledge and training for participants. Similar to inequities faced with regard to funding, parties whose participation in partnerships is associated with their employment are more likely to have access to training in negotiation or collaborative processes. In comparison, other parties may not have had any such training or experience, and will be at a disadvantage during consensus-building. Hence, training opportunities must be available to participants, and facilitators should be aware of any lack of experience on the part of different participants, and take steps to ensure that such parties are given ample opportunity to voice their opinion.

Power imbalances among participations, while challenging to rectify, should be acknowledged and accounted for. The role of facilitators in contributing to balanced participation was highlighted during the research; facilitators can take steps to compensate for power inequities that may exist between participants and their respective sectors. Importantly, facilitators need to be aware of histories of disagreement or animosity that may affect the fairness of the process so that they can act appropriately. This may include ensuring that all parties are given equal

opportunity to speak and make suggestions and all contributions and ideas are given equal consideration.

### **6.2.5 Gaining Buy-in**

Lastly, the use of consensus-seeking partnerships to provide advice is dependent on the assumption that providing advice will be effective in gaining buy-in and ensuring action on voluntary plans or recommendations. As described in Chapter Four, although some policy-makers may be directly involved with the development of recommendations (such as municipal decision-makers who are members of the WPAC), the plans are still advisory. Hence, the use of consensus-seeking partnerships to provide advice is dependent on gaining buy-in from participants with authority to act on recommendations, as well as buy-in from policy-makers who are not directly involved in the creation of the plan but to whom various recommendations are directed (such as the provincial government).

Although Imperial and Hennessey (2000) indicate that a partnership with an advisory capacity can gain buy-in on recommendations, other researchers recommend that formal methods of enforcing decisions are necessary (e.g., Brandes, *et al.* 2005; Hooper, *et al.* 1999). If an advisory capacity is not sufficient to gain buy-in from policy-makers and action on recommendations does not occur, participants may consider the process to have been unsuccessful. Hence, evaluating the level of buy-in created by consensus-seeking partnerships is crucial.

The assumption that buy-in is created was substantiated by this study's findings: strong evidence was found to support the argument that commitment to action on recommendations generated through the consensus process is created

among participants who have authority to act on the recommendations. This result is consistent with findings from Imperial and Hennessey (2000). It also reinforces the finding that partnerships should not be given formal decision-making authority, since buy-in is created through consensus and action may be gained on recommendations without the use of regulation.

However, moderate evidence was also found to indicate that challenges exist for those who must gain approval from stakeholders or organizations they represent, but which are not present at negotiations. This challenge has implications for collaborative processes because it indicates that partnerships that are dependent on participants convincing higher powers to buy-in to the decisions made may face challenges ensuring action on voluntary plans or recommendations. This issue was not addressed in any of the literature reviewed, but should be noted for its implications on the use of partnerships to provide advice.

The challenge of gaining buy-in from decision-makers who are not present at consensus negotiations highlights the importance of involving as many participants as possible who have authority to produce the changes recommended in the collaborative process. One can posit that if the participants in partnerships hold high-ranking or senior positions and can influence decision-making, then the likelihood that action on partnership decisions will occur is greater, given the buy-in created amongst participants at the table. Given the buy-in created during consensus negotiations, partnerships would benefit if industries, irrigation districts, municipalities and other levels of government sent senior employees to represent

their interests in collaborative partnerships. This also sends a message that that party is committed to the partnership.

In cases where partnership participants do not have authority to implement the decisions produced through the collaborative process, decision-makers must be aware that learning and change occur during these processes – a key outcome suggested by Connick and Innes (2003) and supported by evidence from this study. Other parties will present issues that will influence the final outcome, and a presentation to stakeholders made by a representative is unlikely to capture the complexity of the consensus process and negotiations – a point that was noted by multiple interviewees. Hence, this research suggests that decision-makers who are not present at negotiations must trust that the outcomes of collaborative processes are a product of a number of values, including their own. Concern that a stakeholder's interests are not being satisfactorily represented could be minimized by selecting senior or high-level representatives for participation in collaborative processes, who may also have greater experience voicing the stakeholders' interests and negotiating on their behalf. Hence, while consensus-seeking partnerships build buy-in amongst participants, the challenges faced by parties who must gain approval from stakeholders implies that partnerships will benefit from involving as many participants as possible with authority to effect the changes recommended through the collaborative partnership.

### ***6.3 Case-specific Recommendations***

The research has a number of important implications for *Water for Life* partnerships. Several recommendations for improvement emerge. First, the members of water partnerships must continue to engage First Nations. Although struggles have been documented, First Nations are an important stakeholder, and their involvement is crucial in light of the emerging landscape of First Nations rights (Phare 2009). Improvement on this issue is particularly crucial in the case of the Bow River Basin Council, as none of the four First Nations that lie within the basin are represented on the Board of Directors. While jurisdictional challenges were noted during the interviews (First Nations are considered federal jurisdictions and may not be willing to collaborate with provincial or regional partnerships), this is an area where continued and meaningful efforts are recommended.

Second, additional clarity must be provided to *Water for Life* partnerships on roles and mandates, which should be outlined in legislation. This would elucidate precisely the mandate of WPACs and demonstrate a forceful commitment to the partnerships. This is particularly important given the waning or lack of meaningful commitment a number of interviewees suspect from the province to *Water for Life*. A powerful message that the provincial government is committed to the partnership model would reinvigorate participants who are concerned about commitment to *Water for Life* and provide additional incentives to meaningfully participate in the process.

Furthermore, a demonstrated commitment to *Water for Life* and a clearer elucidation of mandates would give greater credibility to the partnerships,

encouraging industries and other stakeholders to send senior representatives to participate – a key condition for successful partnerships. This would also clarify the connection between the planning done by WPACs and that of the province’s newly created Regional Advisory Councils (RACs), which are mandated through legislation to create regional plans.

Third, steps need to be taken to ensure greater fairness amongst participants in *Water for Life* partnerships. Funding must be increased, most notably to those who are not on salary or who must take a day off from work to participate in the processes. While funding for participants in WPACs or the AWC may range from no compensation to an honoraria and/or reimbursement of expenses, funding should be increased to compensate for any lost income due to participation in partnerships, as well as compensation to allow for meeting preparation time. Similarly, given the province’s emphasis on the consensus process, the Government of Alberta should provide greater opportunities for training in consensus building and negotiation, particularly for participants who may not have had previous collaborative experience.

Fourth, facilitators in Alberta should be aware of the persistent power imbalances among groups, such as the imbalances between energy industries and environmental groups noted by multiple interviewees. Facilitators should ensure that all parties are given equal opportunity during the process, and that all ideas are given equal consideration. Power imbalances among partnership participants may be reduced if a neutral facilitator states outright that the voices of all parties will be given equal weight.

#### ***6.4 Scholarly and Practical Contributions***

The purpose of this research was to evaluate consensus as a decision-making objective in partnerships with mandates to provide advice on water management to policy makers. To accomplish this goal, the experiences of those involved in water partnerships in Southern Alberta were used as a case study. The study was designed to provide both scholarly and practical contributions.

Most notably, the findings have implications for governance, as was detailed in Section 6.2. After conducting an in-depth study of this form of consensus-seeking partnerships, assumptions inherent in the use of this collaborative model were discussed. The results of this study demonstrate that while some of these assumptions can be supported, others cannot. This highlighted additional steps that must be taken to ensure cooperation, strong decision outcomes, fairness, and action on recommendations.

This study also adds weight to one side of various debates in the literature on collaborative partnerships, such as a workable definition of consensus and appropriate levels of authority for partnerships. The strength of the evidence for both of these topics was significant, resolving any uncertainties on the issues. Furthermore, additional clarity was added to the creation of fairness in consensus processes and concerns over lowest common denominator decision-making, as well as suggested process and structural factors, such as the involvement of agencies in partnerships. Conflicting positions can be found in the literature on each of these topics.

The clarification of conflicting arguments in the literature also provides guidance on recommended structure and process to those considering or convening a similar form of collaborative governance. Agencies and other groups employing or considering the consensus-seeking partnership will find a number of recommendations for successful use of the model. Furthermore, the implications of the results detailed in Section 6.2 provide lessons to those organizing or participating in consensus-seeking partnerships.

Results of this study also demonstrate support for several arguments from the literature. Important factors which are predicted in the reviewed literature as being important for collaboration were verified, such as the importance of information, commitment from involved parties and equitable processes, as were the arguments that consensus-seeking partnerships produce learning and change in participants and that social capital can be built.

Contributions are also made in the form of case-specific recommendations. As this research was based on a study in Southern Alberta, a number of case-specific challenges emerged. These were highlighted in Section 5.3 and recommendations were discussed in Section 6.3. The findings and recommendations can contribute to the long term success of *Water for Life* partnerships and their use of consensus as a decision-making objective.

Finally, this study highlights the important of case-study research. In preparing for the data collection period, various reports were found suggesting considerable problems with the use of consensus as a decision-making objective. However, after conducting an in-depth study, it was revealed that the vast majority of participants

were content with the use of consensus as a decision-making objective in partnerships. This did not come across in preparation for the data collection period, and would not have emerged without a detailed, in-depth case study analysis. This contribution is important in light of the recommendations by Sabatier *et al.* (2005) that studies of one or two cases are not appropriate for research on collaborative water management. Conducting in-depth case studies clearly is needed to gain deep understanding of the issues explored in the thesis.

### ***6.5 Limitations and Research Opportunities***

Interpretation of the results and recommendations made in this study should be done in light of several limitations. Furthermore, understanding the limitations of the study highlighted opportunities for further research.

Although attempts were made to include a diversity of interests, backgrounds and sectors in this study, the representation could have been broadened to include representatives from municipalities outside Calgary in order to gain a broader understanding of municipal views in the Bow River Basin. As well, interviewing members of First Nations communities may have provided insight into barriers to participation. However, the length and timing of the field visit, as well as informant availability, limited the scope of participation. In particular, the lack of First Nations perspective is notable, given the challenges of engaging First Nations in water partnerships. However, because there is little participation from First Nations on the Bow River Basin Council, the lack of First Nations perspective does not reduce the validity of the study's findings.

The timing of the study limited an evaluation of the extent to which the consensus-seeking partnership encourages action on voluntary recommendations. The BRBC was chosen as a focus of the study primarily due to its position as the only WPAC to have completed and released a Watershed Management Plan. However, as the plan was released in September 2008 and the field visit was in summer 2009, many participants felt that it was too early to evaluate the degree of action taken on the recommendations as an outcome of the partnership. Hence, this study evaluated the perception of buy-in created through the process. While this is an important contribution and can indicate likely action, an evaluation of the specific extent to which participants acted on the recommendations of the *Bow Basin Watershed Management Plan Phase One: Water Quality* would make a valuable future contribution.

This limitation offers a key opportunity for further study. It would be useful to return to Alberta at a later date to measure the success of the Bow River Basin Watershed Management Plan in gaining action on the recommendations produced in the report. This would be a litmus test of the effectiveness of partnership model, illuminating the ability of an advisory partnership to affect policy decisions.

Evaluating the decision-making processes in Alberta's newly created Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) would offer insights on collaborative partnerships in a case where greater authority has been allocated. As membership to the councils is made by government appointment and the mandate is enacted in legislation, a comparison between the outcomes and process of WPACs and RACs would produce insights on the partnership model with varying levels of legality and authority. As

well, an opportunity exists to explore the interrelationships between WPACs and RACs.

Given the growing demand for collaborative approaches to environmental governance, studies examining the tools and processes used to increase collaboration are warranted. The consensus-seeking partnership is utilized in a variety of social, economic and environmental contexts, and a complete picture of its use and outcomes has yet to be painted. However, this research contributes to a greater understanding of the approach, and intends to encourage further study promoting collaborative and innovative decision-making in the pursuit of effective governance.

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## ***APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS***

This list presents the questions considered during the interview portion of this research. A number of interview guides were created, so as to ensure that the questions posed were specific to the informant's expertise. The questions were tailored depending on the interviewee's involvement or familiarity with the Bow River Basin Council, Alberta Water Council or other water partnership, although overlap in questions existed between the various interview guides.

### **BRBC Members**

- In what capacity are you involved with the Bow River Basin Council?
- Have you ever participated in consensus-building with the Bow River Basin Council?
- Does the Bow River Basin Council have a pre-determined process that they follow in consensus-building exercises?
- How are issues of conflict or non-consensus usually resolved (if they get resolved)?
- Would you say that all stakeholders are represented by the Bow River Basin Council Board of Directors?
- Does the Bow River Basin Council determine deadlines for consensus building negotiations? If so, how is this done and by whom?
- Are moderators available for the consensus-building process?

- A report prepared by the Alberta Water Council documents that “even though there is general support for the concept of a partnership model, inherent difficulties were mentioned. [These included] the difficulty of achieving consensus when working with multiple stakeholder interests”. In your experience, would you say that this has been the case with the Bow River Basin Council?
- [If no to previous question]: What do you believe differentiates the Bow River Basin Council from other collaborative organizations that have experienced difficulty working with multiple stakeholder interests?
- Does the requirement to make decisions using consensus hinder the Bow River Basin Council’s ability to provide timely advice?
- If the use of consensus decision-making was not a recommendation laid out in *Water for Life*, thereby allowing Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils the liberty to design their own decision making strategies, would you recommend that consensus-based processes be used?
- Would your opinion differ on which decision-making process is most appropriate for Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils if the recommendations made in Watershed Management Plans were final and not used in an advisory capacity?
- What kinds of outcomes are reasonable to expect from consensus-based decision-making processes? What kinds of outcomes are not reasonable to expect?

- Under what conditions do you believe that consensus-based processes are most likely to be successful?
- There is a concern among some researchers and practitioners that when consensus decision-making procedures are used, proactive policy making on contentious issues may be hindered. Has this been the case in your experience?
- Do you believe that the Bow River Basin Council is an effective tool for ensuring that all of its members' needs, interests and opinions are considered when plans, policies and programs are being designed?
- I am aware that there is no legislative commitment to implementation of the recommendations put forth by the Bow River Basin Council and other Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils on the part of the province. How does this affect the operation of Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils?
- Have the recommendations made by the Bow River Basin Council in its Watershed Management Plan on Water Quality been implemented?
- Do you feel that Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils should have some legal founding or legislated link to decision-making by the government?
- How can volunteer burnout be minimized or avoided?
- What do you believe is the greatest challenge for Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils right now in terms of allowing them to fulfill their mandates?

- The Bow River Basin Council has produced two major documents in the past few years – the State of the Watershed Report and the Watershed Management Plan on Water Quality. Reflecting back, is there any aspect of the process used to produce these documents that you might have changed?
- What do you think of the Land-use Framework?
- Do you see the role of Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils changing in the future given the new Land-use Framework?
- Can we translate anything we've learned from the experience with Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils to the Regional Advisory Councils?
- Do you believe that the partnership model has or will translate into an actual change in the way that significant decisions are made at the provincial or regional level? Why or why not?
- If you had to provide advice to another provincial, regional or other level of government's effort to establish a partnership or collaborative model for water management, what advice would you give based on your experience with *Water for Life*?
- Do you feel that the partnership model is an effective model for governance? How could the partnership model become more effective?

**Alberta Water Council Members**

- In what capacity are you involved with the Alberta Water Council?

- Have you ever participated in consensus-building with the Alberta Water Council?
- Does the Alberta Water Council have a pre-determined process that they follow in consensus-building exercises?
- How are issues of conflict or non-consensus usually resolved (if they get resolved)?
- Would you say that all stakeholders are represented by the Alberta Water Council Directors?
- Does the Alberta Water Council determine deadlines for consensus building negotiations? If so, how is this done and by whom?
- Are moderators available for the consensus-building process?
- A report prepared by the Alberta Water Council documents that “even though there is general support for the concept of a partnership model, inherent difficulties were mentioned. These included the difficulty of achieving consensus when working with multiple stakeholder interests”. Would you say that this has been your experience?
- Does the requirement to make decisions using consensus hinder the Alberta Water Council’s ability to provide timely advice?
- If the use of consensus decision making was not a recommendation laid out in *Water for Life*, thereby allowing the Alberta Water Council the liberty to design

their own decision making strategies, would you recommend that consensus-based processes be used?

- Would your opinion differ on which decision-making process is most appropriate if the recommendations made by the Alberta Water Council were final and not used in an advisory capacity?
- What kinds of outcomes are reasonable to expect from consensus-based decision-making processes? What kinds of outcomes are not reasonable to expect?
- Under what conditions do you believe that consensus-based processes are most likely to be successful?
- There is a concern among some researchers and practitioners that when consensus decision-making procedures are used, proactive policy making on contentious issues may be hindered. Has this been the case in your experience?
- I am aware that there is no legislative commitment to implementation of the recommendations put forth by the Alberta Water Council on the part of the province. How does this affect the operation of the Alberta Water Council?
- Do you feel that the Alberta Water Council should have some legal founding or legislated link to decision-making by the government?
- How can volunteer burnout be minimized or avoided?
- What do you think of the Land-use Framework?

- Do you believe that the partnership model has or will translate into an actual change in the way that significant decisions are made at the provincial or regional level? Why or why not?
- If you had to provide advice to another provincial, regional or other level of government's effort to establish a partnership or collaborative model for water management, what advice would you give based on your experience with *Water for Life*?
- Do you feel that the partnership model is an effective model for governance? How could the partnership model become more effective?

**Other WPAC members/Familiarity or other experience with *Water for Life***

- In what capacity are you involved with *Water for Life*?
- Have you ever participated in consensus-building with a partnership?
- A report prepared by the Alberta Water Council documents that “even though there is general support for the concept of a partnership model, inherent difficulties were mentioned. These included the difficulty of achieving consensus when working with multiple stakeholder interests”. In your experience, would you say that this has been the case?
- [If no to previous question]: What do you believe differentiates your experience from that of other collaborative organizations that have experienced difficulty working with multiple stakeholder interests?
- Does making decisions using consensus hinder the ability to provide timely advice?

- If the use of consensus decision-making was not a recommendation laid out in *Water for Life*, thereby allowing Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils the liberty to design their own decision making strategies, would you recommend that consensus-based processes be used?
- Would your opinion differ on which decision-making process is most appropriate for Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils if the recommendations made in Watershed Management Plans were final and not used in an advisory capacity?
- What kinds of outcomes are reasonable to expect from consensus-based decision-making processes? What kinds of outcomes are not reasonable to expect?
- Under what conditions do you believe that consensus-based processes are most likely to be successful?
- There is a concern among some researchers and practitioners that when consensus decision-making procedures are used, proactive policy making on contentious issues may be hindered. Has this been the case in your experience?
- I am aware that there is no legislative commitment to implementation of the recommendations put forth by Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils on the part of the province. How does this affect the operation of Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils?
- Do you feel that Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils should have some legal founding or legislated link to decision-making by the government?

- How can volunteer burnout be minimized or avoided?
- What do you believe is the greatest challenge for Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils right now in terms of allowing them to fulfill their mandates?
- What do you think of the Land-use Framework?
- Do you see the role of Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils changing in the future given the new Land-use Framework?
- Can we translate anything we've learned from the experience with Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils to the regional advisory councils?
- Do you believe that the partnership model has or will translate into an actual change in the way that significant decisions are made at the provincial or regional level? Why or why not?
- If you had to provide advice to another provincial, regional or other level of government's effort to establish a partnership or collaborative model for water management, what advice would you give based on your experience with *Water for Life*?
- Do you feel that the partnership model is an effective model for governance? How could the partnership model become more effective?

## ***APPENDIX B: DOCUMENTS REVIEWED***

The following forty-eight documents were reviewed as part of the data analysis of this research. They include government documents, non-governmental reports, newsletters, meeting minutes, annual reports and press releases.

1. Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. 2002. *Irrigation in Alberta*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development.
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3. Alberta Environment. 2005. *Enabling Partnerships: A Framework in Support of Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Environment.
4. Alberta Environment. 2007a. *Highlights of the Approved South Saskatchewan River Basin Management Plan*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Environment.
5. Alberta Environment. 2007b. *Towards Environmental Sustainability: Proposed Regulatory Framework for Managing Environmental Cumulative Effects*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Environment.
6. Alberta Environment. 2008. *Water for Life: A Renewal*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Environment.
7. Alberta Water Council. 2005. *Wetland Policy Project Team Terms of Reference*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
8. Alberta Water Council. 2006. *2006-2009 Business Plan*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
9. Alberta Water Council. 2007a. *Alberta's Water Management Policy Issues and Gaps*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.

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11. Alberta Water Council. 2008a. *"What We Heard": Summary Findings of the Shared Governance-Watershed Management Planning Workshops*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
12. Alberta Water Council. 2008b. *Alberta Water Council 2008 Annual Report*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
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15. Alberta Water Council. 2008e. *Strengthening Partnerships: A Shared Governance Framework for Water for Life Collaborative Partnerships*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
16. Alberta Water Council. 2008f. *Talking With Albertans about a New Wetland Policy and Implementation Plan: What We Heard Summary*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
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18. Alberta Water Council. 2008h. *Water for Life: Recommendations for Renewal*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
19. Alberta Water Council. 2008i. *Wetland Policy Project Team Executive Director Letter*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
20. Alberta Water Council. 2008j. *Wetland Policy Project Team Letter of Transmittal*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
21. Alberta Water Council. 2008k. *Wetland Policy Project Team Non-consensus Letters*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.

22. Alberta Water Council. 2008l. *Wetland Policy Project Team Response Letter*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
23. Alberta Water Council. 2009a. *Alberta Water Council Process Guidelines*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
24. Alberta Water Council. 2009b. *Handout A (Pilot): Consensus Decision Making*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
25. Alberta Water Council. 2009c. *Handout B (Pilot): Project Management Template for Multi-Stakeholder Decision-Making*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
26. Alberta Water Council. 2009d. *Handout C (Pilot): Principles for Consensus Decision Making*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
27. Alberta Water Council. 2009e. *Review of Implementation Progress of Water for Life, 2006-2008*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Water Council.
28. Alberta Wilderness Association, Bow RiverKeeper, Bragg Creek Environmental Coalition, Canadian Federation of University Women AB Council, CFUW Lethbridge, The Pembina Institute, Sierra Club of Canada, Prairie Chapter, Southern Alberta Group for the Environment, and Toxics Watch Society. 2007. *Recommendations for Renewal of Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability*. Canmore, Alberta: Bow Riverkeeper.
29. Bow River Basin Council. 2002. *Guidebook to Water Management: Background Information on Organizations, Policies, Legislation, Programs, and Projects in the Bow River Basin*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Environment.
30. Bow River Basin Council. 2007. *Preserving Our Lifeline: Bow River Basin Council Annual Report 2006-2007*. Calgary, Alberta: Bow River Basin Council.
31. Bow River Basin Council. 2008a. *Bow Basin Watershed Management Plan Phase One: Water Quality*. Calgary, Alberta: Bow River Basin Council.
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42. Bow River Basin Council. 2009h. *Preserving Our Lifeline: Quarterly Newsletter September 2009*. Calgary, Alberta: Bow River Basin Council.
43. Droitsch, D., Kennet, S.A., and Woynillowicz, D. 2008. *Curing Environmental Dis-integration: A Prescription for Integrating the Government of Alberta's Strategic Initiatives*. Drayton Valley and Canmore, Alberta: Pembina Institute and Water Matters.
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