



Assessing the Needs of BC's Non-Profit Freshwater Community in Engaging with the Water Sustainability Act

Survey Highlights

Prepared by the Canadian Freshwater Alliance
June 2015

About the Canadian Freshwater Alliance

The Canadian Freshwater Alliance (a project of Tides Canada) is committed to serving the needs of Canada's diverse freshwater community. We believe that ALL of our home waters should be in good condition - this means they have healthy fish populations, provide access to clean drinking water and are safe for swimming.

Through service offerings and trainings in engagement organizing, messaging, base building, and social media we offer immediate solutions to strengthen the ability of non-profit groups across the country working on freshwater issues to engage people living in Canada in the beauty, value and inspiration of our waterways.

Keeping Water on the Agenda

"Keeping Water on the Agenda" is a new Freshwater Alliance initiative to support British Columbia's non-profit freshwater community with public engagement strategies around the province's new Water Sustainability Act (WSA), including effective communications with the public and with various media channels. This two-year initiative is divided into two phases. The first phase sought to conduct a needs assessment

of BC's freshwater community in engaging with the regulatory development phase of the WSA, identify key groups and regions to support through the initiative, cultivate media relationships and focus related to the WSA, and develop core communications resources to use through Phase 2. The first phase was supported by the BC Freshwater Fund at Tides Canada Foundation and MEC, and was completed in June 2015.

About the Survey

In January 2015, we developed a survey to provide anecdotal data on the experiences and needs of groups working directly on freshwater issues in the province in engaging with the Water Act Modernization process. The purpose of the survey was to help inform the design of a program to assist BC's freshwater community in engaging the media on the WSA, in order to amplify and "scale up" the impact of localized water stories across the province. A broader purpose was to get a sense of how grassroots groups engage in legislative processes, and to share the results with BC's freshwater community. The survey was divided into two parts: the first part asked questions specific to the WSA and the various public engagement opportunities provided by the provincial government. The second part asked

questions specific to media-related practices and activities undertaken by groups.

The electronic survey was distributed through the Freshwater Alliance newsletter, and posted on our social media channels for a period of 6 weeks between January and March 2015. Sixty-seven groups completed the survey, representing approximately one-third of the freshwater community¹ in BC. This summary document details the highlights from the electronic survey. Complete results can be made available upon request.

Response rate across groups and geographies

The groups that responded to the survey were diverse, represented 7 of 9 major watersheds in the province, and ranged from stewardship groups, hunting and fishing groups, First Nations communities and organizations, ENGOs, and provincial conservation and environmental organizations.

The survey had a low response rate from recreation groups and First Nations organizations compared to that from the broader stewardship community, as well as the northern region of the province. The lower response of these constituencies might indicate the need to provide tailored support to these different communities to engage with the WSA during the regulatory development phase. It may also reflect concerns by First Nations organizations around the lack of consultation with First Nations throughout the Water Act Modernization process.²

¹ “Freshwater community” here refers to NGOs, stewardship groups, and First Nations organizations that are specifically working on freshwater issues, totaling approximately 200 entities in BC.

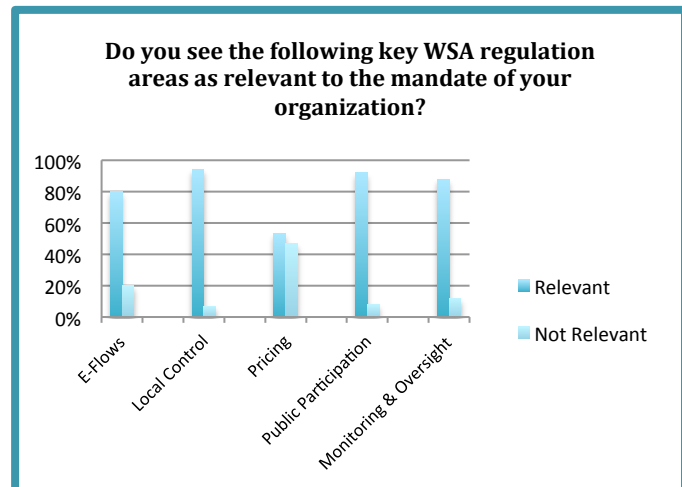
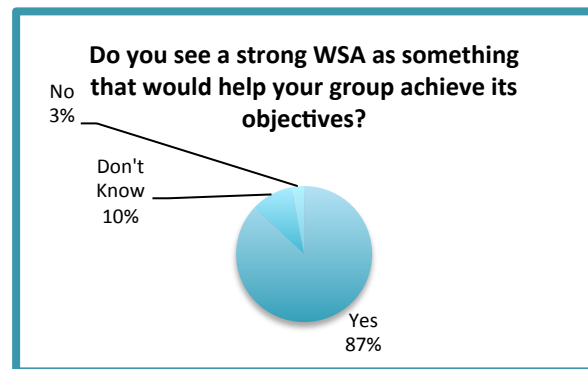
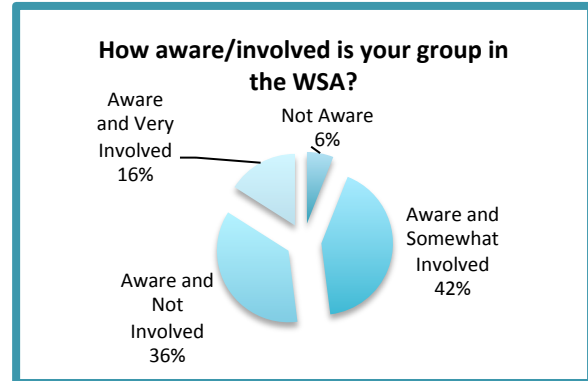
² See for example *Open Letter: First Nations Leadership Council Concerns on Water Act Modernization* (March 2011)

The survey had a proportionally high response rate from groups in the Okanagan, Kootenay regions and Vancouver Island.

Key findings

About the Water Sustainability Act

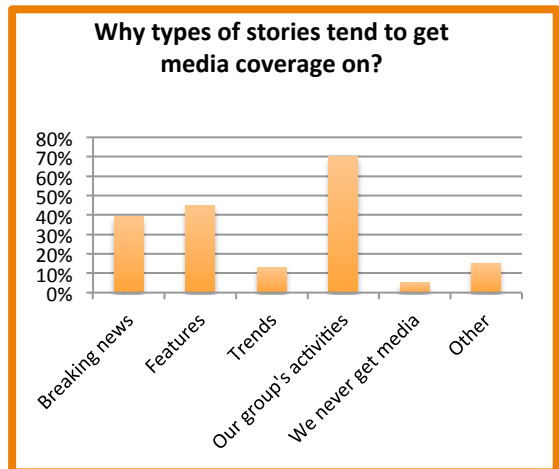
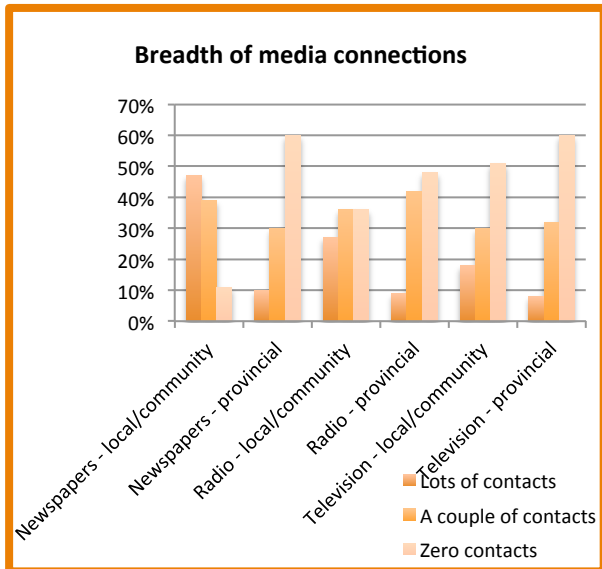
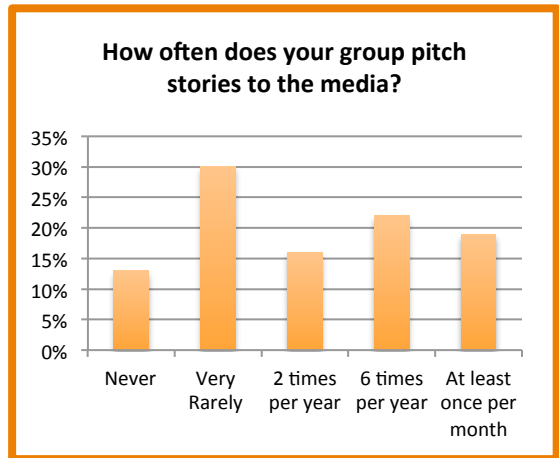
- Over 90% of respondents were aware that BC has a new Water Sustainability Act. Just over half of respondents (54%) participated in one or more of the BC government engagement periods over the past six years, and roughly the same percentage (55%) said they encouraged their supporters to participate. Of those groups that did not engage directly or encourage their supporters to do so, 25% said it was because they did not have the capacity to prepare a submission. A small proportion (16%) said they were not aware there were opportunities to provide public input into the WSA.
- 87% of respondents viewed a strong Water Sustainability Act as something that would be helpful to their organization in achieving its mission.
- The majority of groups view key WSA regulation areas of environmental flows, local control over watersheds, monitoring and oversight, and public participation in water use decisions as relevant to their mandate. Interestingly, only half of respondents viewed “high enough” water pricing as relevant to the mandate of their organization.
- Nearly one half of respondents responded unprompted that an aspect of the new WSA that was important to them is addressing aboriginal rights and jurisdiction over water. Comments included “we’d like to see active and fair involvement of local First Nations in any discussions relating to water use in the Territory”, “meaningful and effective First Nations engagement in development of regulations is really important, and especially, groundwater regulations”, and “defining and working with FN to establish management strategies.”



About Media Practices

- Half of responding groups do not have a communications staff or plan in place.
- Over half of responding groups (56%) pitch stories or op-eds to the media *less than twice a year*.
- Overwhelmingly, the types of stories that groups get the most media coverage on are those related to their own events and activities.

- Groups reported their strongest media connection as being with local newspapers. In general, groups tended to have stronger connections with local and community media (newspapers, television, and radio), and less with provincial and regional outlets. Groups reported having fewer contacts with television than other media.



Conclusions

The survey reveals a number of important opportunities for strengthening the engagement of BC's non-profit freshwater community in freshwater protection in the province:

1. Increasing public engagement in WSA implementation

BC's non-profit freshwater community is aware of the Water Sustainability Act and groups generally understand its impact on their work as water stewards, advocates and activists. However, there is a capacity gap in terms of groups being able to fully participate in public engagement opportunities around the WSA and in turn, in encouraging their supporters to participate.

2. Greater recognition of the importance of water pricing for WSA implementation

The link between water pricing and its impact on the ability of the province to fully implement of the Act needs to be made clearer for groups.

3. Cultivating NGO support for recognition of aboriginal rights and jurisdiction

The high unprompted response of aboriginal water rights and jurisdiction as an area that needs to be addressed by the WSA indicates a proportionately higher level of awareness by BC's freshwater community of issues of aboriginal rights when it comes to water, and perhaps how these concerns have not been adequately dealt with to date by the BC government during the Water Act Modernization process.

4. Developing media relationships and connecting local water stories with regional issues and policy opportunities

The survey highlighted a weakness in groups' capacity both to pitch stories to the media and in creating relationships with local and regional media. Low pitching rates indicate an opportunity for increased media coverage and capacity building this area, including supporting groups to be more proactive about working and developing relationships with media, and in connecting localized water stories to regional issues.