

NWT Water Strategy Framework

Hon. J. Michael Miltenberger

June 18, 2008

Statement to the Legislative Assembly

Mr. Speaker, as Northerners we value and rely on clean waters and healthy aquatic ecosystems for our spiritual, cultural and physical well-being. It is one of our most valuable resources and will only increase in value and importance as sources diminish.

As we all know, wetlands, deltas and water flows throughout northern Alberta and the southern Northwest Territories are changing. We know these changes may be affecting the fish, moose and other life in the aquatic ecosystems. One of the major issues relates to the pace and scale of development within the Mackenzie River Basin and the potential for this development to impact the waters. We know that the effects of activities outside our boundaries are putting pressures on the basin and are far reaching. The increased demand for energy in hydro, and oil sands development in particular, could compromise the Mackenzie River Basin if not properly managed.

A significant priority of the 16th Legislative Assembly is an environment that will sustain present and future generations. The protection of our water supply and quality is listed as an action item to ensure this priority is successful. As a result, the Government of the Northwest Territories continues to take a lead role on partnerships to protect the waters of the Northwest Territories, fulfilling our political and moral responsibilities.

As Members of this House are aware, the Government of Canada is legally responsible for the management of water and the regulation of water use in the Northwest Territories. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources in collaboration with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has developed a framework document on a NWT water strategy. At the appropriate time today, Mr. Speaker, I will be tabling this document.

The paper Northern Voices, Northern Waters¹ is presented in the form of an outline and identifies the issues, challenges and opportunities in this area. The document also presents goals and principles to facilitate sound water management and policy in public water, transboundary waters and aquatic ecosystems.

Aboriginal traditional knowledge is a vital and essential source of information about the natural environment and its resources, including water; the use of natural resources; and the relationship of people to the land and each other.

The framework will ensure traditional knowledge plays a significant role in ensuring development is sustainable and compatible with protecting aquatic ecosystems.

It is important to recognize and respect aboriginal and treaty rights, land claim agreements and self-government agreements. Water rights and interests are

entrenched in land claims and legislation, and the Government of the Northwest Territories is working to ensure that these rights and interests are recognized and respected.

The framework for developing a water strategy will be shaped by the advice and expectations of Northerners. Aboriginal leadership and northern communities have often emphasized the importance of water in the Northwest Territories. Input from NWT residents, aboriginal governments and organizations and interested stakeholders will ensure that all those who have water interests have an opportunity to contribute to the development of a strategy and that it addresses their needs and concerns with a strong northern voice. It is our intention to have the water strategy finalized by March 2009.

Mr. Speaker, our government, together with our partners, intends to do all it can to keep our water resources abundant and healthy. The interests of Aboriginal governments and organizations and people across the Territory need to be reflected in the development and implementation of the strategy. Northern Voices, Northern Waters will help move us towards these goals and towards the protection of this resource for current and future generations. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.