

Water research at risk, experts warn

HANNEKE BROOYMANS
Journal Environment Writer
EDMONTON

Independent institute will be directed by Alberta Innovates agency

Water research in Alberta was dealt a blow this week when an important institute received news its work will now be directed by a board with energy industry priorities, water experts say.

The experts fear this means some basic research about the health, maintenance and reclamation of wetlands, rivers, lakes and watersheds won't get done.

The Alberta Water Research Institute is headed by Lorne Taylor, a former Conservative environment minister. Taylor, who spearheaded the province's Water for Life strategy, built the institute into a highly regarded organization that garnered praise for its independent international panel.

He was too upset Wednesday to talk about what was happening. But several highly regarded water experts who sit on the institute's advisory boards didn't mince words.

"In other countries, I think it's fair to say you'd have a popular revolt on your hands if you attempted to (assimilate) water research, which is so important to so many things, under energy," said Bob Sandford, an Alberta water expert and author who chairs Canada's participation in the United Nations Water for Life Decade. "And by making (the institute) lose its independence, that's exactly what you've done."

"I think everybody in Alberta ought to be deeply concerned by how this has been quietly, under the radar, pushed as the only solution for managing our water research in the province," he said.

But Minister of Advanced Education and Technology Greg Weadick said it has always been part of the plan to move water under the Alberta Innovates umbrella.

In late 2008, Weadick's predecessor announced plans to consolidate all public research money and agencies

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into one body called Alberta Innovates, with four divisions, including one called energy and environment solutions.

Weadick said he thinks water is so integral that he wants to ensure he has water expertise and focus in each of the four pillar groups under Alberta Innovates.

"When I looked at some of the things in energy and the environ-

ment I felt there may have been too large a focus on energy," he said. "And we need to make sure that water, water and the environment, become as important a focus so we can continue to do work in those areas."

The decision to do away with the advisory boards that steer the institute will reflect badly on the province, said Henry Vaux Jr., a resource economics emeritus professor from the University of California and chair of the Rosenberg International Forum on Water Policy.

The board that will now make decisions on water research is chaired by former Synkrude CEO Eric Newell, and includes a former senior vice-president for Petro-Canada, a senior director with Agrium, the former CEO for Nexen, and a senior vice-president for Capital Power.

David Schindler, a University of Alberta aquatics ecologist who sits on one of the water research institute

boards, called the decision "politically stupid" considering how much criticism Alberta faces in the area of environmental management.

Alberta Liberal environment critic Laurie Blakeman said she thinks water is the most important issue facing Albertans other than health care, and she finds it troubling to hear that water will become even more of a political football than it already is.

Blakeman faced off against Taylor when he was environment minister, but she said she respects him for his role as a water pioneer in the province. "I share the queasy feeling that I'm sure he's got right now."

Eddy Isaacs, CEO of the Alberta Innovates energy and environment solutions branch, said the adjustments are intended to ensure water research is a priority and that the good work done until now is enhanced. "From my point of view, I think this is very much an opportunity. In fact, I would call it a huge opportunity."

hbrooymans@edmontonjournal.com