

A Provincial Strategy for Irrigation Development

Comprehensive irrigation development has not happened over the forty year period since the completion of the Gardiner Dam. The irrigated land represents little more than one sixth the potential of the region, irrigation districts are small and fragmented and government programs are no longer in place. Today, there remains an urgent need for an effective framework for irrigation development. The policies, practices and programs of the past have not worked. It is time for new, more effective, approaches to realize the potential of Saskatchewan irrigation. It is anticipated that an effective provincial irrigation strategy would have four essential elements:

1. A Federal Provincial Framework for Expanded Irrigation Development
2. New Public Private Partnerships to Plan and Manage the Development Process
3. Strengthened Framework of Irrigation Districts
4. A Stable Public Policy and Institutional Framework for Irrigation

A Federal Provincial Framework for, and Commitment to, Expanded Irrigation Development

Irrigation development in Canada has normally been undertaken with a high level of federal and provincial support for both capital investments in regional water supply and on farm irrigation equipment and for elements in the related value chains. Alberta's rehabilitation of their regional water supplies in the 1980s was undertaken with strong provincial support. Federal and provincial support for agricultural value added investments were provided through the Canada Alberta Nutritive Processing Agreement. The rationale for federal and provincial interest in irrigation development is clearly based on:

1. The distribution of irrigation benefits that extend well beyond the farm gate.
2. The returns to government in the form of taxes and savings from drought proofing.
3. The wider transformation benefits associated with rural revitalisation.

The long term nature of irrigation development means that the short term ad hoc programs that have been provided by governments in the past in Saskatchewan have not been an effective framework for development. Longer term arrangements are be required.

Due to the national and provincial agricultural, rural development and economic benefits that could be expected from the irrigation development it would be appropriate to create a federal – provincial agreement framework for the planning and financing of the early stages of the opportunity. Specifically the agreement would provide for a development framework to commence the planning and implementation of the project by:

1. Establish a long term institutional framework for comprehensive irrigation development in both Saskatchewan and each region of the province.
2. Completing the regional planning required for irrigation, municipal and environmental water supply requirements for each of the irrigation development areas in the province.
3. Attracting value added processing to each region.
4. Expanding irrigation research, demonstration and water conservation initiatives.
5. Structuring investment, marketing and immigration initiatives.
6. Proceeding with regional water supply investments on both the east and the west side of Lake Diefenbaker and in the other irrigation development areas.

Any such agreement should be structured with a life related to the duration of the project development requirement, rather than the electoral timetables of governments. Ten year development agreements can provide an appropriate level of sustainable support that can precipitate the required private sector investments. Shorter agreements will themselves become barriers to development of the projects and were a part of the underlying cause for abandoned public infrastructure in the past.

New Public Private Partnerships

It is clear that a coordinated regional and economic development plan will be required to coordinate, organize and plan the expansion of irrigation in each of Saskatchewan's irrigation development areas. New regional institutions will be required with mandates to coordinate the planning, investment, marketing and promotion on behalf of producers, processors, governments and other stakeholders. Together these groups would represent a comprehensive irrigation value chain in Saskatchewan and plan to capture the widespread benefits that have been identified. These can be seen as public private regional irrigation development partnerships with a clear mandate to develop the irrigation development potential of each region.

Irrigated agriculture water projects are multi-purpose projects with capacity to engage in a wide range of economic development activities. It is therefore appropriate that more broadly based irrigation and water development partnerships be developed to champion the extended development aspects of water. Recent developments to create Watershed Planning Groups are certainly multi-disciplinary in nature, but created by the regulator with the ultimate objective of protecting rather than developing the resource. There are many operational models of such multi-purpose water based development. The most widely known is probably the Tennessee Valley Authority, created to address the poverty of the area following the Great Depression in the 1930s. Established as a federal agency, the TVA developed the area's water resources through hydro and nuclear power development and related spin-off industries. Initially established through federal funding, the Authority has in recent years successfully developed private financing and operates as a multi-faceted development and regional planning utility. Comprehensive irrigation development that includes the full range of value added components will require a similarly wide mandate.

For example, a Lake Diefenbaker Irrigation Development Agency as a public private partnership would represent such an institutional focus to turn the irrigation value chain from a concept to reality working with SIPA, local municipalities, irrigation districts, the provincial and federal governments and domestic and offshore investors. The clear focus of the organization would be to develop and manage the local water resource to create a regional water supply system as the foundation of a diversified irrigation value chain around Lake Diefenbaker.

Larger individual irrigation districts could be expected to take over the developments for the ongoing management and distribution of the water resource.

Strengthened Framework of Irrigation Districts.

Around the world irrigation districts are at the core of successful irrigation development. In Saskatchewan, irrigation districts have been small and with a limited capacity to develop and implement some of the larger irrigation development opportunities. For many years, the law that established the districts also limited their scope of operation. There remains a requirement therefore to reform and strengthen irrigation districts and provide them with the resources to manage and develop the opportunity at the local level.

In Southern Alberta the Alberta Irrigation Projects Association was financed and mandated to perform much of this role on behalf of thirteen irrigation districts. In Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Irrigation Projects Association to date has neither the structure nor the financing base to perform this role.

A Stable Public Policy and Institutional Framework in Government for Irrigation

The institutional framework for irrigation development in Saskatchewan has not been consistent or stable over the years. Points of responsibility for irrigation have regularly been moved from Department to Department and back and forth to Crown Corporations. Irrigation districts remain small and have extremely limited capacities to develop their own small acreages let alone plan for a transformation of the regional economy. Many municipalities, particularly in the dryland areas have been in decline.

Major irrigation institutions like the Canada Saskatchewan Irrigation Diversification Centre will require growth and continuity to support expanded irrigation activities in the province. The demands for demonstration, outreach and research will expand around the province and global warming will bring new cultural challenges and opportunities. The success of irrigation requires the continuity of these services through the first years for each of the new irrigation projects.

The long term planning for irrigation development has fallen between institutional cracks. Expansion and growth of the sector requires clearer administrative accountability and integration into a new framework for irrigation development in the province.

