

October 15, 2008

Overview

‘Protecting Our Water’:

An original learning program to engage local people in protecting residential drinking water sources and to develop community knowledge and capacity

The Ausable Bayfield Maitland Valley Drinking Water Source Protection project had the challenge of building a high level of community participation in a highly-technical, science-based planning process. The Source Protection Region consequently developed, between 2005 and 2008, an adult education program and Drinking Water Source Protection curriculum and manual for public engagement and instruction. Since the beginning of 2008 the project has been successfully delivering the 15-module program to close to 100 members of local, multi-stakeholder community working groups.

Project summary

The active learning program for working groups was developed with in-house education expertise combined with the work of professional curriculum and technical writers. The final product was a 15-module program incorporating diverse media, speakers and resources, and best-practice education and assessment techniques.

Each module of the program included three sections:

- 1) Educational expectations and learning activities.
- 2) Priming the Pump – reading material and images to provide the ‘content’ piece of the educational puzzle.
- 3) Additional reading, listening and viewing resources.

Content, activities, resources and additional materials and activities (such as field trips to pending well head protection areas and intake protection zones) worked together to provide residents from many different economic areas and backgrounds with the knowledge they would need to discuss the concerns and issues of the planning process.

Each session of the program is about three hours each in duration. More than 100 citizens of the two member watersheds have joined the seven working groups and about 75 members attend sessions regularly.

The program is a unique hybrid in the Province of Ontario, combining technical education (about such topics as chemicals and pathogens, watershed features and water budgets, vulnerable areas and planning and monitoring strategies) with opportunities to provide frank discussion and sharing of opinions and perspectives.

The working groups link theory with action: local people come up with advice for how the Source Protection Committee should create plans protective of water.

The groups' strengths are in their diversity: a municipal water manager sits across the table from a service station owner who sits across the table from a farmer who sits across the table from an intake representative – a farmer sits across the table from a planner who sits across the table from a Ministry staff person who sits across the table from a high school student. There are often divergent views – but there are also often consensus recommendations brought forward to the Source Protection Committee.

The program also combined technical knowledge with team-building so that open discussion from diverse perspectives could take place in the context of a mutually-respectful environment. To this end, each working group developed its own guidelines for respectful discussion.

The program includes a great deal of technical knowledge – but uses cooperative learning and other best-practice educational strategies to bridge the different knowledge foundations members brought with them to the first day. The program also valued not only technical knowledge but local knowledge and attempts to combine them for the soundest recommendations possible for the Source Protection Committee.

The program also uses a Snyder evaluation model so the program can be revised and improved according to participant feedback. In fact, participant feedback calling for more practical, purposeful tasks resulted in the creation of a new Source Protection Planning workbook ('Adopt a Vulnerable Area') so working group members could directly tackle threats and risks tasks that will inform the Source Protection Planning process in the region.

A facilitator was hired and trained to deliver the program to members and uses multiple educational techniques and engagement and consultation tools to translate discussion into concrete recommendations.

The local project operates as a project of the Ontario Ministry of the Environment (MOE) and under rules and regulations of the *Clean Water Act, 2006*. The learning program was created using funds within the operational envelope of that project. However, an educational program of this scope, involving this depth of study and this number of local community members as working group members, is unique in the province.

Background

The Province of Ontario, through the Ministries of the Environment and Natural Resources, provided funding for source protection planning in watershed-based Source Protection Areas and Source Protection Regions across Ontario under the *Clean Water Act, 2006* and the creation of source protection plans by Source Protection Committees. Source Protection Authorities, which in most parts of the province mirror the composition of local Conservation Authorities, work with municipalities, provincial government, watershed residents and community groups to coordinate the development of the source protection plans.

Drinking water source protection means protecting water resources such as lakes, rivers and groundwater, from contamination or overuse. Water sources are managed by human and natural influences on them. The less contamination or overuse of our water resources, the more we will have now and in the future.

Technical data and other source material was edited into concise, easy-to-understand language and the program designed lessons, learning activities and resources to benefit adult discussion groups and aid discussion and learning.