Work Plan for the International St. Mary and Milk Rivers Study

Fact Sheet
October 14, 2022

Canada and the United States share the waters of the St. Mary and Milk rivers. Under the Boundary Waters Treaty, the International Joint Commission (IJC) provides direction on how the waters are apportioned between the two countries.

In light of increased water demands, water scarcity and the risks posed by climate change, the IJC has appointed a Study Board to recommend options for improving access to each country's apportioned share of the water. The Study Board has three members from Canada and three from the United States.

This fact sheet highlights how the Study Board will integrate various considerations and perspectives as it develops recommendations for the IJC's consideration at the study's conclusion in 2025. A more detailed description is provided in the Work Plan for the International St. Mary and Milk Rivers Study.

Develop Options

The Study Board has set up a technical working group to consider structural options such as new or improved reservoirs, as well as canals and other water conveyance alternatives.

Examples of Structural Options to be considered (new or improved infrastructure)

- St. Mary Canal improvement
- Lower St. Mary Lake storage improvement
- Canadian Milk River storage
- Canadian Conveyance alternative

Another technical working group will consider non-structural options, such as changes to the procedures and accounting methods used to administer the apportionment of water.

Examples of Non-structural Options to be considered (administrative changes)

- Modified balancing periods
- Deficit trading
- Capped credit system
- 1921 Order revisited

Evaluate and Refine the Options

Under the direction of an Options Formulation and Evaluation Group, other technical teams will analyze how the options, and combinations of options, would affect water availability, social and economic systems, and aquatic ecosystems.

One technical working group work will build an integrated river and watershed model to simulate streamflow and how they would be affected by different options and climate conditions.

Another group will investigate how the options would affect agricultural, municipal and industrial water uses, Indigenous Nations, and cultural values related to water use, protection and management. Responses to historical drought conditions and potential adaptations to future conditions will also be examined.

The potential effects of changes in water availability on aquatic ecosystems will be assessed by another group. The group will rely on existing biological information as much as possible, but some field assessments may be needed to fill critical knowledge gaps.

The Options Formulation and Evaluation Group will work with the other technical teams to refine the options and identify the ones that are most feasible for further consideration by the Study Board.

Seek Feedback, Engagement and Review

The Study Board has established a Public Advisory Group and an Indigenous Advisory Group to help disseminate study findings and provide ongoing feedback throughout the process. In its work plan, the Study Board has also committed to provide access to study information and to meet with Indigenous Peoples and the public at strategic junctures during the study.

The Study Board will oversee all study activities and conduct a preliminary review of study products. Some products developed by technical working group members may also require the review and approval of their agencies. In addition, the IJC has appointed an Independent Review Group that will operate outside of the control of the IJC and Study Board. The Independent Review Group will provide interim reviews of study methods and assumptions, as well as final reviews of the documents that support the Study Board's recommendations to the IJC.

A more detailed discussion of the topics highlighted in this fact sheet can be found in the Work Plan for the International St. Mary and Milk Rivers Study. Updated information and planned activities pertaining to this study can be found on the Study Board website (https://ijc.org/en/smmr).