With water resources around the world becoming increasingly stressed because of overuse, pollution, climate change, and other factors, virtually everyone within the water field recognizes that we must develop effective new tools to address our water challenges. What is also clear is that there is no panacea for the myriad and complex issues surrounding water in the twenty-first century. We must develop a number of new approaches aimed at creating water sustainability in the decades ahead—approaches that embrace environmental, economic, and social goals equally with regard to water.

One such effort involves the Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS), an international collaborative of business, environmental, and social equity organizations building a voluntary “water certification program” for participants from the private and water service provider sectors. Current collaborators within the AWS—the organizations planning, facilitating, and leading the fundraising efforts for the stakeholder processes through which a global water certification program is being built—include The Nature Conservancy, International Water Management Institute, Water Environment Federation, Pacific Institute, European Water Partnership, Water Stewardship Australia, Water Witness International, and World Wildlife Fund.

Analogs to the water certification program being developed by the AWS and its stakeholders are some of the other sustainable standards programs of the past 20 years: the US Green Building Council’s leadership in energy and environmental design program, Forest Stewardship Council, Marine Stewardship Council, and Better Cotton Initiative, among others.

The AWS has adopted the International Standardization of Environmental and Accreditation Labeling’s Code of Good Practice for creating its water certification program. This code calls for open, continuous engagement of diverse stakeholders in the development of standards, and has a compliance mechanism associated with it.

The goal of the AWS is to create a framework of global sustainability standards for water, housed in a permanent nonprofit organization, that can be implemented in each region of the world with the regional variability needed to make them regionally relevant. The AWS posits that a well-conceived and well-run water certification program will promote healthy ecosystems (and ecosystem improvement where necessary), foster beneficial economic use, and ensure that critical social goals in regard to water access—water supply and for sanitary purposes—are achieved.

During the past 18–24 months, the AWS has been developing the infrastructure for a global water certification program. Outreach to and engagement of stakeholders has been paramount, and the AWS has planned a global water roundtable and regional initiatives that will interact during the next several years to build global water sustainability standards while developing the regional aspects of these standards. The goal is to have a global water certification program functioning by the end of 2012—with work continuing after that time to further grow the program as it adapts to and incorporates information and experiences about water stewardship from around the world.
Efforts to develop water certification began with independent initiatives in the United States (see “Water Stewardship Certification: Promoting Social Responsibility and Environmental Sustainability” in the December 2008 JOURNAL), Europe, and Australia. In 2009, these nascent regional programs formed the AWS as a means of sharing their knowledge and experiences and with the recognition that establishing a unified global water certification program was the best way to proceed, as opposed to creating separate regional (and potentially competing and conflicting) programs. Since that time, two new regional initiatives have been formed under the AWS umbrella: the AWS Latin American Regional Initiative (based at the Water Center for Latin America and the Caribbean in Monterey, Mexico), which has already hired a regional program coordinator; and the North American Regional Initiative, based at the Milwaukee (Wis.) Water Council, which is close to hiring its regional program coordinator. The AWS expects to have regional initiatives launched in Asia and Africa by the end of 2010 as well.

June 2010 marked the launch of the AWS’s global water roundtable in Brussels, Belgium, which was attended by 90 stakeholders from six continents. Scientists from several of the AWS collaborating organizations first shared their views on the ecological and social impacts needing to be addressed by standards within a global water certification program, then the stakeholders got to work. What did stakeholders think of the “business case” for water certification developed by the AWS? What did they think of the model “standards” that the Europeans and Australians had arrived at independently? Did they think the AWS could build a global water certification program that works equally well in rural Africa or India and Sao Paolo, Brazil? As the multiyear, substantive work of hundreds of global stakeholders begins in earnest, these are just a few of the important and complex issues that the AWS and its stakeholders and supporters must resolve satisfactorily. To view documents and presentations from the Brussels meeting, visit AWS online at www.allianceforwaterstewardship.org.

The AWS has high aspirations for a global water certification program. Such a program should help build a greatly needed new global ethic for water and will be a program that both stands beside other important new water tools and complements existing regulatory authorities governing water in many parts of the world.

Global “knowledge sharing” about practices that fall within the definition of water stewardship is already occurring through the AWS’s water roundtable and regional initiative stakeholder work—and it is truly exciting to witness. Just as exciting is the unity of purpose bringing vastly diverse stakeholders into the AWS stakeholder engagement processes. To date, AWS stakeholders include some of the largest corporations and cities in the world as well as rural pastoralists from developing countries and academics from all walks of life. All involved want to see one thing happen: the successful development and implementation of a global water certification program—one that takes into account regional variability (and is implemented at the regional level) and allows for a new ethic about water to take root and blossom everywhere. Join us in making this a reality.

—Jonathan C. Kaledin is director of The Nature Conservancy’s Water Global Program and is a member of the AWS Secretariat. He can be reached at jkaledin@tnc.org.

Schlumberger Water Services offers a complete range of technologies and services designed to assess and manage groundwater resources.

- Groundwater exploration and development
- Water use and supply auditing (balancing and conservation)
- Water quality evaluation and management
- Local, basin, and regional flow investigation and modeling
- Aquifer recharge, storage, and recovery modeling and design
- Advanced geophysical logging and interpretation

© 2010 Schlumberger