

# Why are we here?

## Why Water?

The facts about water these days are sobering. Nearly two billion people lack access to clean water for drinking or sanitation, yet many of the rivers and lakes that sustain us are polluted or running dry. Scientists know that many freshwater species are in serious decline or disappearing altogether. Current demand for water from cities, agriculture, and industry is already unsustainable in many regions, yet is projected to increase significantly in coming years.

For human society to continue to grow and prosper, we must dramatically improve our stewardship of the world's freshwater resources (i.e. how we handle and manage all of the aspects of our impacts on and use of water). The time has come to achieve a balance between meeting our needs today while preserving nature's ability to fulfill our water needs over the long term.

In the next few years, we must agree on action that will improve management of our water resources. We must drastically improve our stewardship of the world's freshwater resources.

## Why the Alliance for Water Stewardship?

Efforts to address the world's challenging water issues would benefit from the establishment of a common suite of water stewardship standard(s). Such standard(s) are needed to provide guidance for managing and using water in a way that enables social and economic development while ensuring environmental sustainability. The Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS) was formed in 2008 to help guide the development of international water stewardship standard(s). The AWS is a collaboration between diverse international organizations who share a common vision of water stewardship. The AWS and its founders recognize that any local or Regional Initiative to develop water stewardship standard(s) will be more effective when connected to a globally harmonized approach. The strength of the AWS's concept and vision for water stewardship comes through the creation of international standard(s) that will create a framework for assessing the performance of water users and managers worldwide.

The AWS, working with stakeholders from around the world, is providing a platform for the development of an international, voluntary water stewardship program. At the heart of this work is the development of standard(s) and a certification program. AWS intends to create a program that recognizes and rewards water users and managers who take major steps to minimize the negative impacts of their water use and management.

## Why a Roundtable Process and Why Regional Initiatives?

For water stewardship standard(s) to fully address the complex nature of water issues, it is essential that all stakeholders work together on the development of the water stewardship program. It is equally essential to build upon and harmonize existing regional standards development efforts. To this end, the AWS has established a sophisticated global participatory process to develop the standard(s): a multi-year Water Roundtable that is being launched in Brussels, Belgium in June of 2010. The Water Roundtable will work in close coordination with Regional Initiatives either established by or working with the AWS.

The roundtable process has been used successfully a number of times to engage diverse groups of stakeholders in the development of sustainability standards for various commodities, including palm oil, cotton, sugar and soy, as well as for a number of aquaculture species such as tilapia. To be credible, any roundtable process aimed at creating sustainability standard(s) must be multi-stakeholder, transparent, and open. The process also aims to be strategic, not exhaustive, focusing on the most important issues identified by stakeholders. The first step is developing consensus around key negative impacts to be addressed, which sets the foundation and focus for standard(s) development. The standard(s) will be focused on performance (not, specifically, on how to achieve performance) so that participants in the water stewardship program can benchmark themselves, regardless of where they are located in the world, and understand easily what needs to be improved.

The AWS is using a modified roundtable process that incorporates extensive regional engagement to meet the unique challenges of creating water stewardship standard(s). Water is global, but the impacts of water use and management are local. To engage stakeholders effectively and to ensure sufficient testing of the standard(s) in watersheds across the globe, AWS has partnered with or is establishing Regional Initiatives. These Regional Initiatives are integral to successful development and testing of the standard(s). The Water Roundtable will build upon existing regional standards work that has been led by the European Water Partnership and Water Stewardship Australia. Both entities were extensively involved in establishing AWS and their work furthers the mission of AWS. However, AWS now needs to take stakeholders in other regions on the same journey as those in Europe and Australia. To this end, new Regional Initiatives in Latin America and North America have been created by AWS to ensure proper and timely regional engagement during the development of the international standard(s). Similar Regional Initiatives will be established in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Together, the AWS, Water Roundtable, and the Regional Initiatives will create a powerful tool—an international water stewardship program--that will advance our collective vision of a sustainable water future.