

Model Sustainability Policy: Discussion Notes

Co-ops have asked for advice on drafting sustainability policies.

Sustainability can touch on almost all aspects of a co-op's operations. More than with most policies, a sustainability policy sets out **how** a co-op's concern about the environment and the broader community can impact and guide co-op decision-making.

CHF BC's model allows an interested co-op to build on a foundation that offers broad principles and a general approach. You can tailor the language to suit your co-op's needs and capacities. You can list more specific actions, or maintain flexibility, while embedding a consideration of the environment into all the things that you do.

Sustainability Principles

The policy begins with a statement of why the environment matters and that your co-op and your members care about it. It connects the international co-operative principles to action on sustainability.

Sustainability is not a new idea, and cultures and communities across the world offer many viewpoints, practices, and possible solutions. Your co-op may already be working on issues around reconciliation and working on better understanding various Indigenous perspectives. We have included a reference to the concept of seven generation stewardship (see Resources). In a sense, this is placeholder text, and its usefulness will depend on your co-op's progress in contemplating its interactions with First Nations.

We encourage you to reflect on whether it is appropriate for your community to include or expand on this; or to include a similar statement in your sustainability policy, perhaps more directly tied to the specific First Nations that consider your co-op's location within their traditional territories. Perhaps you have had, or plan on, discussions about reconciliation, decolonization, and racial justice as they pertain to sustainability and environmental stewardship.

The last paragraph in the principles section directly acknowledges the seriousness of climate change as a motivator for action.

Throughout the document, [options] are indicated with square brackets and are shown in green.

The Policy: Primary Commitment and list of Actions

There is an opening statement indicating that the policy will impact co-op operations and planning, as well as relationships with other parties and general members. In addition to acknowledging the importance of **environmental sustainability**, there is an **option** to also stress the importance of fairness and inclusion. (The United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals](#) include multiple kinds of sustainability. We indirectly reference some of these, as options, throughout the model policy.)

Co-ops thinking about this policy may wish to concentrate on environmental sustainability, but we encourage consideration of the close ties between the environment, equity, and human health.

After the opening statement, there is a list of secondary commitments.

1. First is a general promise to consider the environment (and, optionally, also human health) in decision-making. Some potential consequences and actions include:
 - Taking into account the longer-term when thinking about products and their lifecycles. For example, during the transition from incandescent lighting to energy-efficient lighting, incandescent bulbs were often cheaper to purchase and may have seemed more affordable. When considered in terms of frequent replacements and higher operating costs, however, the newer compact fluorescents and LED lights were the real cost-savers over time.
 - Evaluating purchases not just by dollar pricing. The environment and interests of the broader community might still steer your co-operative to more expensive items if that choice avoids negative outcomes.
 - Factoring in how goods reach the co-op. Transportation distance and method can play a significant role in the environmental footprint of goods, and potentially services, as well.
 - Reviewing the impact of how your co-op distributes information: can digital methods help reduce the amount of paper used at the co-op? Can email and the internet be used? Can meetings use projectors and screens rather than printouts?
 - When seeking services and products outside the co-op, adding sustainability requirements to tender packages.
 - Allowing, and even encouraging, working from home (where that makes sense and is permitted by law) to reduce commuting or other activities that create pollution.
 - Consider promoting on-site daycare options at the co-op which could also reduce the need for energy-intensive transportation.

 - The decisions having the largest and longest impacts will usually be associated with capital planning. Co-ops can spend extra attention on these matters and invest in studies (e.g. energy audits) that may help in making informed decisions. These studies may also open avenues for more funding from outside sources (e.g. government grants and low-interest loan programs).

Sometimes implementation will require revisiting existing policies and possibly even your Rules or Occupancy Agreement.

2. This is a general commitment to reduce energy use. Your co-op may want to fine tune the language to better describe the kind of reductions it has in mind as a goal.

This commitment applies both to daily operations and to capital planning. Your co-op can work to reduce energy use in numerous ways:

- Keep unused lights off (or put them on motion-activated switches or timers).
- Use power bars to make (fully) turning off computers, monitors and charging equipment easier and eliminating standby power draws.

- Limit heating and cooling; and consider installation of smart thermostats.
 - Use blinds (or awnings) to limit heating (from unwanted solar gain)
 - Review insulation and add more where practical.
 - Consider tree selection and maintenance in ways that maximize summer cooling.
 - Consider on-site energy production (such as solar heating or electricity, or geothermal heating).
3. This bullet targets the use of non-renewable resources. The co-op can again choose to add more detail about preferred levels of, or timelines for, reductions.
- Consider switching from fossil fuel heating (e.g. natural gas) to cleaner electricity.
 - Heat pumps are a very efficient way to heat homes, but they also can provide cooling (which may be a needed adaptation as climate change creates more dangerous summer heat conditions). Not all households may have money to afford independent air conditioning, so this may arise as an issue of fairness as well.
 - Consider options to promote electric vehicles (EVs) over those burning fossil fuels. This could include assisting with the installation of EV charging stations: there may be incentive programs offered by government or utilities.
4. This section on certification for environmentally sustainable products also includes an **option** for *fair trade* certification programs. Certification programs may help guide plans, but not all are equally rigorous or comprehensive. There is little harm in exceeding minimum standards!

As an example, [Energy Star](#) is a well-known certification for energy efficiency applicable to products and buildings.

5. This commitment relates to waste reduction. There is an additional **option** to clarify your co-op's preferences on disposal routes: re-use versus recycling versus landfill or burning.
- Organic waste can often be composted on site, creating useful soil amendments (saving the co-op from having to purchase something similar), which reduces waste and the need to transport that waste (or incoming new materials).
 - Consider second-hand office equipment, furniture, etc.
 - Find new homes for items the co-op and its members no longer need. This could involve community exchanges, creating a library or games room, or working together with charities.
 - Avoid, where possible, single-use products (e.g., toner/ink cartridges that can't be refilled, throw-away coffee pods, individually packaged laundry soaps, disposable coffee cups, etc.). Sometimes, health and safety or accessibility concerns will favour retaining single-use products, but, even in those situations, there may be alternatives to explore.
6. This element deals with freshwater. You may also want to consider water issues more broadly.
- To help reduce water use, check for plumbing leaks regularly and encourage members to do the same.
 - Install low-flow toilets and modern showerheads and faucets.

- Consider the [Energy Conservation Assistance Program](#), which can help members access some of the products mentioned above *at no cost*.
 - Co-ops might also look at their landscaping choices. Lawns can take a lot of water, but other groundcovers may be more tolerant of dry conditions. Xerophytes (plants adapted to dry conditions) can be good choices in other locations as well.
 - Rainwater collection and drip irrigation can also be helpful.
7. Here is an information element that includes a commitment to learn. Your co-op can make a list of questions it wants answered – in general or in dealing with specific challenges – to ensure that sustainability is included in decision-making.
- Check in with CHF BC, CHF Canada, and other education providers. See what information is on offer and encourage them (us!) to provide more.
 - Don't forget CHF BC's [sustainability newsletter](#).

8. This sets out the need for an action plan. There are multiple options about the scope of those plans. We believe policy review is essential (at least one-time, but **optionally** on a schedule).

Energy audit(s) and the specific tracking of water use, waste production, and energy use are all worth pursuing. These give greater meaning to reports, as progress can be better monitored.

- Consider/enable individual metering/monitoring. If members better understand their use of resources and where savings are possible, change may be more likely.
9. Reporting follows plan creation. Co-ops can, as an **option**, define how frequently such reports are presented to members. (Consider offering information on how to manage energy and water use and how to reduce waste.)
10. The sustainability policy itself should also be reviewed for effectiveness and whether it meets member needs and aligns with the co-op's mission. There is an **option** to specify how often the co-op will review this policy.
11. Commit the co-op in its interactions with partners to raise sustainability issues. This includes a couple of **optional** suggestions on product selection based on toxicity and chemistry, and on factoring in the impact of transportation.

- Looking at transportation may help favour buying locally or choosing particular delivery methods: some suppliers will use electric vehicles, for instance; others use gasoline-powered fleets. A few may even use public transportation or bicycles.
- Consider flexible schedules when dealing with staff or management companies. Slightly shifting start and stop times may reduce traffic congestion and see lower emissions when commuting.
- Consider also offering secure bicycle storage or transit passes, whether for staff or management co-ordinators, or members doing co-op business. Secure bicycle storage is a benefit to potentially all members.

Policy: Setting an Example, and Responsibilities

The remaining elements are straightforward. #15 can be adapted to your co-op's needs to reflect which management option you have taken up (volunteer-led, staff, or management company).

Final Thoughts

Each co-op will find its own way to use its sustainability policy, but adoption should encourage members and boards to ask questions and include consideration of the environment in decision-making. Please let us know how you adapt this sample policy for your co-op!

CHF BC looks forward to sharing your successes to inspire others.

Resources

- The United Nations, in its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, set out [17 Sustainability Goals](#)
- The International Co-operative Alliance (ica.coop) provides information about [co-operative identity, values, and principles](#)
- CHF Canada offers resources on [co-op principles](#) in the context of co-op housing
- CHF BC's [Environmental Sustainability](#) webpage includes resources about [decolonizing environmentalism](#)

- On the **Seventh Generation** philosophy:

This concept involves thinking about the future and the longer-term consequences of our actions. It asks the current generation to think seven generations ahead and to make decisions that will benefit their descendants. While often referenced in connection with environmental stewardship or sustainability, the principle itself tends to be broader and also encompasses welfare, well-being, community, and more.

This is an old idea and was part of the [Haudenosaunee](#) ("People of the Longhouse") Great Law (Kayanerenkó:wa). The Haudenosaunee (which include the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca) inhabit territories around and south of the Great Lakes. Although the Great Law includes one of the most well-known formulations of the concept, the idea of long-term stewardship is a common feature of Indigenous perspectives.

Acknowledgement

CHF BC's model/template Sustainability Policy was inspired by and incorporates ideas from [CHF Canada](#)'s 2016 environmental sustainability policy.

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