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Water for Life renewal – is it too little too late?

In Alberta, after six years of hoping the Water for Life strategy would make a difference, we are still a long way from achieving “healthy aquatic ecosystems.” While Alberta Wilderness Association welcomes today’s release of the *Water for Life Renewal Action Plan*, we are disappointed that despite years of consultation and work there is no urgency to meet healthy aquatic ecosystem goals.

Healthy aquatic ecosystems is one of the three pillars of the Water for Life strategy along with *Safe secure drinking water* and *Reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy*. Independent reviews have determined that progress on the ecosystem goal has lagged well behind the other two. Degraded aquatic ecosystems mean greater vulnerability to droughts, floods and water pollution. The new timelines appear to delay by 5 to 8 years on-the-ground actions to address these risks.

“Action on aquatic ecosystems is overdue, and we urge the Government of Alberta to move faster on this goal which is essential to a secure, clean water supply for Albertans,” states Carolyn Campbell, Conservation Specialist with Alberta Wilderness Association.

The original Water for Life strategy committed to set aquatic ecosystem priorities and goals in regional watershed plans by 2010. But now revised targets set a 2012 date for even identifying “critical and significantly impacted” aquatic ecosystems. Maintaining or improving the health of critical and impacted aquatic ecosystems through laws and plans is delayed until 2015.

Progress on managing for healthy wetlands is also overdue. In 2003, the government committed by 2007 to “develop a wetland policy and supporting action plan to achieve sustainable wetlands,” but no provincial wetland policy has yet been announced or implemented. This policy is critical in the oilsands region of northeast Alberta, where wetlands cover half the natural landscape, but where no protective policy is in place.

“We urgently need a policy today that at least maintains current wetland benefits across the province,” says Campbell. “To make it work, creating a wetlands inventory and indicators of wetland health needs to be well underway by 2010, not by 2015.”

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