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Business as Usual as ERCB OKs Kananaskis Sour Gas Pipeline

A twenty-month-long hearing process held by the Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) into a major new sour gas development proposal in Kananaskis Country resulted in little more than a rubber stamp, and business as usual. ERCB's June 6 Decision 2010-022 gives the go-ahead for Petro Canada (now Suncor) to drill 11 new sour gas wells, and build a 37-kilometer pipeline through land recently recognized by the Alberta government as *Nationally Significant*. Approval comes despite considerable opposition to the proposal from local landowners, environmentalists and First Nations.

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) will continue to work to ensure that future government planning in the region takes account of all of the multiple activities – including sour gas development, motorized access, and Spray Lake Sawmills' nearby clearcut logging plans – which have a direct effect on water quality and wildlife habitat.

"ERCB's decision flies in the face of the principles espoused in the province's much-trumpeted Land-Use Framework," says Nigel Douglas, conservation specialist with Alberta Wilderness Association. "The LUF recognized that there is a pressing need to change the way that multiple activities on the landscape are planned in Alberta. By concentrating on this one application and ignoring all of the other activities taking place on the same landscape, this decision undermines everything the government's new planning process is trying to achieve."

The decision also goes against the grain of the Alberta government's recent decision to designate the grizzly bear a *threatened* species in the province. Although Petro Canada's own Environmental Assessment of the project concluded that "effects on grizzly bear mortality risk are predicted to be high in magnitude, regional in extent and long-term in duration," ERCB's decision does little more than "direct Petro-Canada to assist in any monitoring programs that may be initiated in the area by SRD to evaluate grizzly bear mortality."

"So at least the company will be there to count the dead grizzlies," observes Douglas, wryly.

While the provincial Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan points the finger of blame squarely at access into grizzly bear habitat, ERCB's decision does little more than suggest that Petro Canada staff might assist under-funded government staff in trying to prevent unauthorized motorized access to the development.

ERCB is nominally charged with deciding whether or not a particular development is in the public interest. "For reasons of its own, ERCB has chosen to interpret this as meaning whether or not a development will put cash in the provincial coffers," says Douglas. "This is Kananaskis Country. The fact that this is a landscape which provides us with clean drinking water, critical wildlife habitat and a cherished natural recreation area seems to have been entirely ignored. If they claim to be acting in the public interest, would it not be a good idea to ask the public what it thinks the public interest is?"

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