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## Water Management Planning for the Oldman River Basin Encounters Ecological Reality

By Cheryl Bradley

I and other participants in planning the future of water management in the Oldman River Basin are faced with an immutable ecological reality – if the health of our rivers is to be sustained, we need to accept that limits to the amount of water that can be diverted from the Oldman River and its tributaries have been reached or exceeded. Recent modeling of water availability in the basin has led Alberta Environment to conclude - “any new licences issued would have a high risk of not obtaining water in drier years” and “there is no water available for new licences” in the southern tributaries to the Oldman River (St. Mary, Belly and Waterton Rivers). Modeling also shows minimum flows for the southern tributaries stipulated by the 1991 South Saskatchewan River Basin Water Allocation Regulation are “hardship flows for fish or drought condition flows”.

This ecological reality, made painfully clear during the last few years of drought, has had a sobering effect on those participating in the Oldman River Basin Advisory Committee. No one wants to see the death of our rivers. A variety of stakeholders, including rural and urban municipalities, irrigation districts, industry, agriculture and recreational interests and conservation organizations are currently grappling with how to restore water to already stressed rivers as well as how to meet the demand for water for future economic and population growth in the region.

According to an Alberta Environment report, population in the Oldman River Basin is predicted to grow between 40 percent and 80 percent over the next 50 years with a median projected increase of 58 percent or 240,500 people (Hydroconsult, 2001). In the same period, demand for water withdrawals is expected to rise about 80 percent in order to support expanding population as well as predicted expansion of intensive livestock operations, food processing, and light industry and services. Currently, about 90 percent of water licensed for withdrawal in the Oldman River Basin is for irrigation, most of this diverted from rivers into canals owned by irrigation districts. It is obvious that to maintain health of our rivers and to accommodate population growth and economic diversification, water conservation and reallocation of ‘saved’ water to purposes other than irrigation, including aquatic ecosystem protection, will be required.

Water allocation transfers can proceed once a water management plan is approved by an order of the Lieutenant Governor in Council. Phase 1 of the Water Management Plan for the South Saskatchewan River Basin is currently before Cabinet (May, 2002). The Phase 1 Plan defines the matters and factors that must be considered by the Director in considering applications for water allocation transfers. The *Water Act* provides that up to 10 percent of an allocation of water that is being transferred can be withheld if it is in the public interest to protect the aquatic environment or implement a water conservation objective. It has been recommended that the Director not accept any new applications for allocations from the southern tributaries of the Oldman River and that he exercise his authority to hold back 10% of any transfers.

Phase 2 of the South Saskatchewan River basin planning process is now underway. The next challenge for the Oldman River Basin Advisory Committee is to make recommendations to the Director for the establishment of water conservation objectives (WCO) in the Oldman River and its tributaries. A WCO is the amount and quality of water necessary for protection of the aquatic environment, for protection of tourism, recreational, transportation or waste assimilation uses or for management of fish or wildlife. This task will rely heavily on the current science regarding instream flow needs for fish, riparian vegetation,

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waste assimilation and channel maintenance. There will be opportunity for public input at various stages of the process. I welcome your comments and suggestions. You can reach me by phone (403) 328-1245 or e-mail [cbradley@telusplanet.net](mailto:cbradley@telusplanet.net).

*(Cheryl Bradley is a conservation biologist living in Lethbridge. She and Cheryl Fujikawa, also of Lethbridge, are representing the ecosystem protection interest on the Oldman River Basin Advisory Committee. Organizations included in the ecosystem protection interest are Alberta Wilderness Association, Bert Riggall Environmental Foundation, Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition, Crowsnest Environmental Action Society, Friends of the Oldman River, Lethbridge Naturalists Society, Southern Alberta Environmental Group and Trout Unlimited Canada-Alberta Chapter.)*

**On the web:**

*Guidebook to Water Management* by Alberta Environment in cooperation with the Bow River Basin Council: <http://www.brbc.ab.ca/pages/publicat.html>

Alberta's River Basins site: <http://www3.gov.ab.ca/env/water/basins/basinform.cfm>

Results from Water For Life Public Consultation: <http://www.waterforlife.gov.ab.ca>

