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MILK RIVER RECOMMENDED IN “ENDANGERED RIVERS” PROGRAM

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For the second year, BC-based environmental group Earthwild International is working with communities and conservation groups across Canada to create a list of Canada's most endangered rivers. In 2003, WildCanada.net will work with Earthwild to develop online education and outreach programs for the most endangered river in each of Canada's 13 provinces and territories.

Alberta Wilderness Association has nominated the Milk River as the ideal river to represent Alberta in the Endangered Rivers program. Rising in western Montana, the Milk River meanders through 160 km of southern Alberta, then loops back into the United States, eventually flowing into the Gulf of Mexico, the only Canadian river to do so.

The Milk River has been in the news a lot recently (see *Wild Lands Advocate*, February 2003) with a prefeasibility study being carried out on a major dam that would severely impact the recently protected Twin Rivers Heritage Rangeland, and indeed the entire river ecosystem, but this is by no means the only threat that the river is facing. The Milk River passes entirely through the Grassland Region of Alberta (including the Foothills Fescue, Mixedgrass and Dry Mixedgrass Subregions). The Grassland Region is severely under-represented in Alberta's protected areas network, with less than two per cent having any form of protection.

Over the years, Alberta's grasslands have been profoundly altered by roadways, towns and cities, cultivation, livestock grazing, energy development, mining, irrigation and off-highway vehicle use. This direct loss and fragmentation has changed species' distributions and numbers and transformed entire landscapes and the natural ecological processes of the grasslands. It is considered one of the most endangered natural habitats in North America.

The Milk River is also likely to come under increasing pressure in the coming years as the climate in southern Alberta becomes warmer and drier. The river has virtually run dry several times during the last two decades, and this situation is only likely to get worse in the future.

AWA is campaigning against the proposed Milk River dam, while at the same time working toward increased protection of natural grassland ecosystems alongside the river. As the climate in southern Alberta becomes drier, it is more important to look at how we can change the way we use water to maximize efficiency than it is to try to cling to our old outdated and water-wasteful practices.

