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Participating in Water Politics

Jason Unger, AWA Conservation Specialist

With the recent news that Alberta is debt free, one must wonder if we can all retire, comfortable with the knowledge that everything must be hunky-dory if the books are in such great shape. Of course, no one who has concern for Alberta's wilderness and environment will take this as a sign to sit on one's laurels.

Alberta's political parties should take heed as well, with the possibility of a fall election on the horizon. The fiscal balance has done little to resolve one of the most dominant topics in the last year, both in media headlines and in the minds of Albertans – that is, water.

As much of Alberta enjoys what appears to be a wet spring and early summer, water issues remain. The past few years of drought, the receding of glaciers, and the battle over enhanced oil recovery using freshwater all point to water being a primary concern for Albertans in the years, if not generations, to come.

The recent Environmental Appeal Board decision regarding the Alberta Environment approval of Capstone Energy's water withdrawal from the Red Deer River for enhanced oil recovery is a case in point. The idea of taking potable (or near potable) water and pumping it into the ground is a use of a vital resource that is contrary to the public interest, not to mention ideas of living sustainably. The argument that the amounts being diverted from surface waters (and effectively from the hydrological cycle) are inconsequential appears to be a non-starter in this province.

Overallocation (with the Oldman River basin being a prime example) and environmental degradation in some of Alberta's rivers is already at a point where wilderness values are being irrevocably threatened. The unprecedented growth in Alberta is bound to continue, and with it the increased stress on much of the province's resource.

The realization that must be made among the public and politicians alike is that managing water use is only part of the issue. Planning for protection of the water source is of equal import. The ongoing receding of glaciers makes protecting source waters that much more relevant for years and generations to come.

The Rockies and the Eastern Slopes are the wellspring of life in Alberta, and proper planning, management, and protection of these headwaters is required if the quality and quantity is to meet our evergrowing needs. This requires public participation in the process.

For some the political process in Alberta may indeed feel like hitting one's head against a brick wall; however, the importance of water to our individual health and well-being and the health of our wilderness demands that we participate and hold the decision makers to account.

At the end of May, the government announced the new Alberta Water Council, consisting of 24 Albertans and representing various sectors and interests. According to the government news release, the Council will provide direction and guidance on the implementation of the water strategy. For more information on the roles and members of the Council see the Alberta government news release for May 31, 2004.

