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Can We Solve Drought in Southern Alberta by Throwing Money at it?

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The proposed Special Areas Water Supply Project (SAWSP), which plans to divert water from the Red Deer River at a cost of almost \$200 million to the Alberta tax-payer, modestly claims to be a "solution to recurring droughts" in the area.

The project, southeast of Stettler, would remove up to 7.08 cubic metres of raw water per second from the river principally for irrigation purposes, as well as wetland creation, stock-watering and some municipal and domestic use.

Economically, the plan makes little sense. For that \$200 million price tag, the benefits of the project are estimated to be 70 cents on every dollar invested over 50 years: at a cost of \$67 for every single Albertan, that isn't much of a return on our money.

Inter-Basin transfer

The proposed project isn't even legal under current legislation: the 1999 Water Act does not allow for "inter-basin transfers," and this project would remove water from the Red Deer River Basin and transfer it to the North Saskatchewan Basin. New legislation would be required to allow the project to go ahead, which raises the question of why the Water Act banned such transfers in the first place. Even Alberta's Water for Life strategy confirms, "Alberta's water resources must be managed within the capacity of individual watersheds."

This is the first ever proposed transfer of "raw" water between basins. Although the diversion to the North Saskatchewan Basin would result in a dead-end, with no surface water making it to the river, there are still serious implications for groundwater. Groundwater makes up the huge majority of water flow, an estimated 97%, and yet we know incredibly little about these sub-surface flows.

People to Water, Water to People

Increasingly, people are beginning to question the wisdom of expensive, large-scale engineering programs to solve problems of low water flow in a dry climate. A recent discussion paper from the Alberta Institute of Agrologists (AIA), "People to Water, Water to People," highlights the problem that "the vast majority of Alberta's population resides in the part of the province that has the least amount of water."

The paper goes on to question the wisdom of major engineering projects to deal with this problem. "With the imminent potential for water shortages, the question currently facing elected officials and water managers is whether to take the engineering approach of moving water to people or to encourage the public and industry to migrate to areas where adequate supplies of water are available."

There is no doubt that the communities in the area have been struggling for a number of years, particularly after several years of drought. AWA does not oppose measures to improve municipal and domestic supplies of water, and would certainly support economic measures to alleviate some of the problems which affect people in the area.

"We are not opposed to improvement of municipal and domestic water supplies," says Heinz Unger, AWA Director. "But there are better, cheaper and more efficient ways to achieve this."





Environmental Concerns

AWA is calling for a full environmental assessment of the project. The project review itself points to a number of knowledge gaps: "The original environmental overview of 1992 is out of date since much of the biophysical information was based on review of existing literature from the 1980's..."

Loss of sensitive natural grasslands would be minimized, according to the project review, but the likelihood of some of the remaining fragments of native prairie being ploughed under is increased. Less than 1% of Alberta's Grassland Natural Region is protected, and this will be one more added stress to this fragile and under-appreciated habitat.

Water for Life

The government's 2003 Water for Life strategy seemed to signal the beginning of a new way of thinking on how we deal with water in the province: "The Government of Alberta is committed to the wise management of Alberta's water quantity and quality for the benefit of Albertans now and in the future."

The strategy then notes, "During all stages of the consultation on the water strategy, Albertans stated again and again that water conservation... is a fundamental component of any provincial water strategy."

But the SAWSP project shows that the old ways die hard. Drought is not a problem that can be "solved." Alberta's climate is clearly becoming warmer and drier, and where old water-expensive practices are no longer appropriate, it is crucial that we look at developing alternative uses of the land, as opposed to propping up outdated operations using hugely expensive technological fixes.

Send your comments to:

- *Your MLA (contact information for all MLA's can be found by calling the government toll-free number 310-0000)*
- *The Hon. Guy Boutilier, Minister of Environment, #423 Legislature Building, 10800 - 97 Avenue, Edmonton T5K 2B6*

For more information, see "Why are They Giving Away Our Water," WLA October 2004 and "Reckoning Hidden Costs of River Diversions," WLA February 2005.

