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AWA Gains Voice in Rumsey's Future

The coalbed methane well licence granted to Pioneer Natural Resources in 2007 in Rumsey Natural Area expired a year after it was granted, and was cancelled on February 28, 2008 by the Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB; formerly the EUB). This is good news for this internationally significant protected area and for all who have worked strenuously to keep Rumsey free of industrial activity.

Although the EUB's Information Letter 90-21 (1990) says AWA will be advised of well licence applications in Rumsey, we received no notification until after the Pioneer licence had been granted in February 2007. In March 2007 AWA and the Alberta Native Plant Council (ANPC) jointly requested that the EUB review its decision. Accompanying the request was a submission documenting the historical interest of both organizations in Rumsey and providing reasons for objecting to the licence. The EUB responded in August with a denial of our request, stating that neither organization had advanced a legal right or interest in relation to the proposed well.

Despite the denial, however, the intervention resulted in several important changes that may mark the beginning of true protection for Rumsey. First, Pioneer Natural Resources allowed the well licence to expire, choosing not to proceed with drilling in the protected area. Second, on February 20, an ERCB representative informed AWA that Rumsey Natural Area and Ecological Reserve is now flagged so that any application within Rumsey will immediately trigger contact with AWA. Third, the ERCB has committed to inviting AWA to participate in consultations with Sustainable Resource Development should any applications be submitted.

AWA believes that licences with surface access should not be considered for the Rumsey Natural Area, nor should any new oil and gas dispositions be posted. Until Alberta Energy makes that commitment, it is essential that system failures such as occurred with Pioneer's well licence be averted through effective process. This includes early consultation with all interests regarding any applications for surface access approval.

AWA is also seeking leadership from Alberta Parks in developing a new management plan for the Rumsey Ecological Reserve and Natural Area that recognizes the area's ecological significance, the need to restore past disturbances to native condition, and the need to prevent cumulative adverse effects in future.

– Joyce Hildebrand