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### **AWA Joins Lower Athabasca River Withdrawal Framework Process**

Water withdrawals by oilsands operators from the lower Athabasca River and their potential impacts on the aquatic ecosystem have been issues of concern for several years. In February 2007, Alberta Environment and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) released an interim (Phase 1) water management regulatory system for lower Athabasca water withdrawals. In September 2008, AWA joined the committee working to develop the long-term, or Phase 2, management framework.

According to Alberta Environment and DFO, the framework's goal is to achieve a high level of environmental protection while balancing aquatic ecosystem needs with those of community and industry. With greater water withdrawals expected as more tar sands projects are permitted, Phase 2 will examine expanded research on the lower Athabasca River's instream flow needs, particularly in sensitive periods such as low winter flow times. It will also consider industry water management options and socio-economic objectives.

This is a multi-stakeholder process with a regulatory backstop date of January 2011. The committee will recommend a plan by December 2009, with review and formal consultation occurring in 2010. The same structured decision-making process will be followed as that used by B.C. Hydro to work through contentious watershed management issues in B.C.

AWA's interest in participating is to help achieve healthy aquatic ecosystem outcomes in the lower Athabasca and Delta regions. AWA has a longstanding interest in protecting key wilderness areas along the Athabasca River and has long advocated for ecosystem-based watershed management of all of Alberta's watersheds.

*– Carolyn Campbell*

