

KANANASKIS GRIZZLIES – WHEN ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

Although the desperate plight of Alberta's grizzly population is well known on a provincial scale, it was put into a more localized context at the recent Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) Sullivan hearing in High River. The hearing into Petro-Canada's plans to drill 11 new sour gas wells and build 51 km of pipeline in southern Kananaskis began in November 2008 and has continued on into February 2009.

Grizzly bears took centre stage at the hearing on Day 15, when wildlife biologist Grant MacHutchon presented to the panel. MacHutchon, working for the Foothills Research Institute, was field coordinator for the Alberta government's grizzly bear population studies between 2005 and 2007. He began his submission by confirming the perilous state of the province's grizzly bear population: "It's likely that when the whole area that grizzly bears occupy is surveyed, the actual population in Alberta will be less than 500 bears, whereas back in 2000 it was thought to be a thousand bears." The 2006 study estimated that the area between Highways 1 and 3 (which includes the Petro-Canada project area) held "about 90" bears.

Although Petro-Canada's environmental assessment (EA) found that "effects on grizzly bear mortality risk are predicted to be high in magnitude, regional in extent and long-term in duration," it went on to conclude that this would be of "moderate environmental consequence." MacHutchon disagreed with this conclusion.

Given a regional grizzly population of 90 bears, said MacHutchon, current mortality rates – 3.5 to 4 bears per year since the spring hunt suspension – are at the very limit of what grizzly bear populations can sustain, if not above that limit; any additional mortality risk "is potentially not sustainable." MacHutchon stated that Petro-Canada's EA represents "an understatement ... of what the potential mortality risks are on grizzly bears," adding that the cumulative effects "would add up to more mortality than the population can really sustain long



"Bears and humans can coexist on the same landscape if there is a willingness to conduct human activities in ways that are conducive to grizzly bear conservation."
(Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan 2008-2013)

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term. "Extra mortality risk could come partly from unauthorized motorized access, he explained, even with a gated pipeline route. MacHutchon commented on the ineffectiveness of access controls: "No matter how good a job you do at it, there's going to be increased human access and, therefore, increased risk to grizzly bears in the area."

But increased access of any sort would likely have an impact on grizzlies: "It's not just motorized use we're talking about here.... Any time there's more people coming into what was otherwise secure grizzly bear habitat, bears tend to die." Increased foot access for hunters, which would increase the likelihood of encounters between bears and armed humans, is one of the most significant sources of bear mortality. As MacHutchon pointed out, the risk is "increasing the quality of habitat to the point it brings a bear in, but then it's therefore potentially more likely to die at human hands."

MacHutchon also alluded to the fact that it would be inappropriate to consider in isolation this one individual project while ignoring the cumulative effects of other activities that have an impact

on the same landscape, a suggestion supported by landscape ecologist Dr. Brad Stelfox when he presented to the hearing four days later. Stelfox pointed out that all land uses in the region have a "growth mandate," but the Sullivan proposal only represents "one company and one of its projects at one particular time." He suggested that it makes more sense to allow the province's Land-Use Framework process to unfold first, before we limit future choices. "There is a role for regional planning," he said, "but it shouldn't come at the end; it should come at the beginning."

At the end of his submission, MacHutchon concluded that, if approved, Petro-Canada's project would lead to a "significant adverse impact on the sustainability of the Livingstone grizzly bear population." Stelfox took things a stage further. Referring to the conclusions of his 2005 Southern Foothills Study, which looked at the long-term cumulative effects of numerous different activities on the landscape, he confirmed the dire predictions for grizzly bears: "If something doesn't change, this species will be lost from this regional landscape." 🐾