



“DIRTY GAS” IN RUMSEY NATURAL AREA

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

Q: When is a protected area not a protected area?

A: When it is in Alberta and it sits on top of gas reserves.

Although many protected areas in Alberta allow activities that one would not usually associate with protection, few have experienced the industrial deprivations that Rumsey Natural Area has suffered – and continues to suffer. If Alberta’s oil sands have become the poster child definition of “dirty oil,” then maybe Rumsey is the perfect example of “dirty gas.”

It is difficult to over-emphasize Rumsey’s international importance. It is the largest area of aspen parkland in the world and one of only two sizeable representatives of the Parkland Natural Region in Alberta’s protected areas network. The fact that less than 1 percent of the Parkland Region is protected in Alberta only increases its significance, and this makes Rumsey’s brutal treatment in recent years doubly puzzling.

Latest in a long line of abuses of this protected area is a two-km pipeline quietly constructed by Paramount Resources in November 2008. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) and Alberta Native Plant Council (ANPC) have had an established interest in Rumsey for many years. At a June 3 meeting with Paramount and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (ASRD), both organizations requested an opportunity to review the environmental assessment for the future pipeline project and to be kept informed of future project planning. Nevertheless, neither was informed of the construction of the pipeline until after the event.

After the pipeline construction was completed, AWA and ANPC were provided with copies of Paramount’s short and perfunctory environmental assessment (EA). In a professional review of the EA, the two organizations concluded: “The environmental



The Rumsey area is a mosaic of aspen woodland, grassland, and wetland habitats – a hummocky, knob-and-kettle landscape that is nearly extinct. PHOTO: L. FITCH

assessment struggles to meet minimal requirements and guidelines. It fails many of the tests for acceptable practice, especially for a protected area.”

The review pointed out a number of deficiencies in the environmental assessment, including the following:

- No breeding bird surveys were carried out.
- Despite there being no survey for amphibians, the EA concluded: “Its proximity to wetlands in the vicinity of this proposed project should not affect potential amphibian habitat.” No explanation or evidence was given for this conclusion.
- Despite stating that wetland surveys were carried out “to insure compliance with ASRD guidelines requiring a 100 m setback from ephemeral and permanent wetlands,” the project violated those guidelines by being constructed within four ephemeral wetlands.
- Rare plant surveys were carried out only in July, thus increasing the possibility of missing early-flowering rare plants.
- The potential for invasion of non-native species into native plant communities as a result of the project was not considered.

- No cumulative effects assessment was carried out.

The cumulative effects of so many developments would be of concern in any area, but in one of the province’s flagship protected areas, it is a disgrace.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Rumsey’s management – or mismanagement – is that nobody within the Alberta government is willing to stand up for this protected area. The decision to allow this development with such a minimal environmental assessment and without consulting with other interested parties shows a distressing lack of commitment to the area. As the EA review points out, “The environmental assessment fails in most aspects as a credible framework to guide development in a sensitive way, in a sensitive area, with sensitive species. It is troubling that government managers accepted this EA as satisfying the condition for pipeline construction.”

AWA and ANPC want a new management plan for the Rumsey area, one that truly honours the previous commitment to “ongoing and meaningful public involvement.” 🌱